The Urban Review, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2000

Parents' Management of Their Children's Education Within the Home, at School, and in the Community: An Examination of African-American Families Living in Poverty

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Using parents' answers to open-ended questions, we examine variation in parents' management of their children's education within the home, at school, and in the community as a function of whether their children were experiencing academic success or academic problems. Within the home, parents of high achievers used more specific strategies to help their children with their schoolwork and had more supportive conversations with their children than parents of low achievers. At their children's school, parents of high achievers not only were more involved but had different reasons for their involvement than parents of low achievers. In the community, more parents of high achievers explicitly engaged their children in activities to support their achievement than parents of low achievers. Implications for parents, schools, and communities are discussed.

Roberta Williams[1] (mother of Caryn, fifth-grade African-American student):

I want her to be a lawyer, like she says, that what she wants to be and she will be one. She's, um, very articulate. She's argumentative sometimes, especially when she thinks she's right and, um, I'm positive that what she's gonna be. That's what she's gonna be. And, um, like my job, I wait on tables. I made a mistake in having a baby early in life, she knows it. She knows how hard it's been for me, you know, to take care of them, to give them what they want, you know, and they need and she sees that. She understands that, too. . . . I just show her, well, you can't have this when we

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> are around with boys, you can't have that not doing what your work in school and stuff, she understands that. And that's what I want her to do. I'm positive that's what she's is going to be, a lawyer when she grows up.

Janice Green (mother of Shawna, fifth-grade African-American student):

> I just like, tell my kids different, I say I don't want you to be come up like I was, I want you to be better. I don't want you to have no kids, I want you to finish school, graduate from high school, go to college, and maintain good grades. I don't want them to have a baby. I say sometimes I have to choose your friends for you. You know, as parents, we do, you know.

These two families live in similar worlds. Both families are among the 33% of African-Americans who live below the U.S. poverty threshold (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1997). As with many single-parent families, they rely on public assistance to make ends meet. Both families also live in the same neighborhood, and their children attend the same school. Their economically distressed neighborhood is besieged by joblessness, crime, and violence. In addition to these demographic characteristics, the mothers share similar aspirations for their children's future. Both hope their children will learn from their mothers' mistakes. Instead of having a baby early in life as these mothers did, both mothers hope their children will perform well academically, attend college, and have a professional career.

Despite these similar environments, Caryn and Shawna appear to be experiencing very different academic careers. As an honors student with a grade point average of 11.75 (on a 13-point scale), Caryn seems to be fulfilling her mother's expectations. Caryn is very motivated and involved in many different school activities. According to Caryn's mother, "They [her teachers] were giving her extra work, . . . she was editor of the newspaper, and then she was captain of cheerleading, and then she was in the choir, and then she was in DARE and she wanted to play basketball." In contrast, Shawna is on academic probation with a grade point average of 3.25 (on a 13-point scale) and does not put forth much effort in school. According to Shawna's mother, "She won't try none, because her teacher told me she's very smart. I guess she won't try a lot. . . . She [the teacher] says she's a very smart student, but seems like she don't try hard enough."

Previous research documents a challenging academic path for poor African-American children like Caryn and Shawna. African-American children living in poverty are at a substantially higher risk of experiencing an array of academic difficulties including low performance on cognitive tests, low school performance, and higher rates of school dropout than their nonpoor European-American peers (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, and Duncan, 1996; McLoyd, 1990, 1998; Steele, 1992). However, demographic circumstances are not an absolute predic-

tor of individual success or failure. There are poor African-American children like Caryn, who experience academic success despite these tremendous odds. Although poor African-American youth often live in dangerous, violent neighborhoods (Wilson, 1987) and confront stark inequalities in terms of the quality of their school environments and educational opportunities (Kozol, 1990), other factors in their lives may help sustain and nurture their academic development. In order to understand the factors that contribute to their academic success, we must direct more attention to the ecological or environmental contexts that occur naturally in the lives of these children.

The family context is especially important given that the home is the major ecological setting for children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Luster and McAdoo, 1994; McAdoo, 1991). Research on the family life of poor African-American children, however, is minuscule. Most of these studies have examined differences between African-American and European-American families rather than variation within African-American families. Even fewer studies of African-American families have looked beyond family and sociological demographics to examine how other family processes contribute to the successful development of poor African-American children and adolescents (Ford, 1993; Huston, McLoyd, and Coll, 1994). Yet, a few notable accounts of poor African-American families demonstrate that processes within these families differ substantially, and that these differences are related to their children's school achievement (Clark, 1983).

In addition to family processes within the home, interactions between African-American families and their communities also deserve more attention. According to Clark (1990), achievement is best understood in the environmental contexts of children's everyday lives, which include the home as well as community settings like schools, churches, and recreation centers. Parents, as managers of their children's environments, not only create learning environments within the home but also encourage, organize, and supervise their children's educational opportunities in the community. Moreover, parents interact with community institutions such as the school on their children's behalf. Although these interactions are probably no less consequential for children's academic achievement than more direct parenting practices within the home, rarely have studies of poor African-American youth examined how parents manage (or fail to manage) their children's education outside the household (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, and Sameroff, 1998).

This study of poor African-American families expands this area of inquiry by examining how parents' management of their children's education within the home, at school, and in the community relates to their children's academic achievement. In particular, our study examined variation in parents' encouragement of educational activities within the home, parents' involvement in their children's school, and parents' management of their children's activities in the community as a function of whether their children were experiencing academic

success (i.e., in the top quartile) or academic problems (i.e., in the bottom quartile).

PARENTS' ENCOURAGEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE HOME

Studies of poor African-American families have found that families of high achievers manage their children's education within the home in very different ways than families of low achievers. For example, in his qualitative study comparing the family life of poor African-American high-achieving and low-achieving students, Clark (1983) found that parents of high achievers, more than parents of low achievers, engaged their children in deliberate educational activities within the home such as monitoring their homework and engaging them in pedagogical discussions and problem-solving tasks.

Another study of low-income minority adolescents revealed, however, that some educational activities within the home may be more beneficial to children's achievement than others. In this study, Tienda and Kao (1994) found that students whose parents provided more help on their homework were less likely to exhibit academic success than their peers whose parents did not. This effect was still evident even after controlling for their achievement test scores. Yet, students whose parents discussed post-high-school plans had more positive scholastic orientations and better grade performance than their counterparts whose parents did not. Taken together, these studies suggest that we need to take a closer look at which specific educational activities within the home are beneficial to the achievement of poor African-American children and why the effectiveness of these various educational activities may differ between families of high-achieving and low-achieving students.

PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOL

Parents also manage their children's educational environments through involvement in their children's school. Parents' school involvement is a critical factor for children's education at all grade levels (Clark, 1983; Comer, 1980; Epstein, 1987, 1990; Eccles and Harold, 1993; Reynolds and Gill, 1994; Reynolds, Weissberg, and Kasprow, 1992; Stevenson and Baker, 1987; Tienda and Kao, 1994). The family-school connection is especially important in those minority and low-income communities where parents may feel less efficacious about being involved (Comer, 1980). Such attitudes are likely to have negative consequences for school learning and achievement. For example, Clark (1983) found that parents of low achievers were less involved in their children's school than parents of high achievers. In addition, parents of high-achieving and low-achieving students had very different reasons for family-school contact. While

parents of high achievers frequently initiated contact with their children's school to check on their children's progress, parents of low achievers only visited their children's school in response to the school's request precipitated by their children's misbehavior or poor work (Clark, 1983).

Another study of low-income minority families revealed similar results. In this study, Tienda and Kao (1994) found that parents' membership in the Parent-Teacher Association was positively associated with positive educational outcomes, whereas attending parent-teacher meetings was negatively associated with academic success for eighth-grade students. The authors suggested that parents who attend PTA meetings may do so to provide time and attention to their children's academic progress, whereas parents who attend meetings with teachers may do so largely to resolve their children's academic problems. Taken together, these studies indicate that we not only need to give a closer examination to the frequency of parents' interactions with their children's school, but also to parents' reasons for these interactions.

PARENTS' MANAGEMENT OF CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

In addition to involvement in their children's school, parents manage their children's educational opportunities through their children's involvement in community settings such as recreation centers and religious institutions. Involvement in these community institutions may be especially crucial for poor families as an adaptive strategy for dealing with difficult economic and social circumstances. Yet, the scarcity of community resources in poor neighborhoods puts a high premium on parents who are effectively able to access sources of social capital for their children (Furstenberg et al., 1998). According to Furstenberg and his colleagues, parents in poor neighborhoods must be supermotivated and exceptionally competent in seeking out community resources for their children in order to help prevent negative outcomes such as school failure and dropout. Resourceful parents in disadvantaged communities often maintain links to external sources of support such as religious institutions and manage their children's environment by keeping their children busy in neighborhood recreational programs.

Research has suggested for families living in economically depressed neighborhoods that parents' management of their children's involvement in community activities has important consequences for children's achievement. For example, Tienda and Kao (1994) found that low-income minority students whose parents enrolled them in extracurricular activities (such as music or dance lessons and foreign language classes) were more likely to exhibit academic success than their peers whose parents did not. In his qualitative study of poor African-American families, Scheinfeld (1983) also found that parents of high-achieving, in contrast to low-achieving, students actively engaged their children

in the outside environment. These parents emphasized the importance of their children gaining competence in activities that endorsed their interests as well as met their social and emotional needs. Parents of low-achieving students, on the other hand, emphasized isolating their children from the outside environment to avoid negative outcomes.

Although other researchers have stressed the importance of children's involvement in community activities and institutions (Clark, 1990; Furstenberg et al., 1998), we need more information on the specific activities, such as recreational programs and religious involvement, that are associated with the academic achievement of poor African-American children. We also need to take a closer look at the reasons why parents manage (or fail to manage) these opportunities for their children. Parents who engage their children in outside sources of support may be more committed to enriching their children's environment, whereas parents who fail to create such interactions may emphasize isolation and feel a sense of limited control over their environment.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Using parents' answers to open-ended questions, we examined parents' management of their children's education within the home, at school, and in the community. First, we examined how parents' encouragement of educational activities within the home differs between high-achieving and low-achieving students. We also explored the reasons why the effectiveness of these activities may differ.

Second, we investigated whether the frequency of parents' school involvement differs between high-achieving and low-achieving students. We also explored differences in the reasons for their involvement.

Third, we examined whether the frequency of children's extracurricular and religious involvement differs between high-achieving and low-achieving students. We also explored the reasons why parents manage (or fail to manage) these activities for their children.

Method

The Larger Study

The participants were drawn from a larger longitudinal study of early adolescence conducted in southeastern Michigan. The sample included 22 elementary schools and 10 middle schools in four school districts. Student data were collected using surveys administered at the schools during the last year of elementary school (n = 901) and then again during the first year of middle school (n = 738). The response rate for the larger study was 82%.

Study Participants

For this study, we collected additional data from families of participating students in one school district. This school district was selected because it included a large percentage of African-American students (42%) and economically disadvantaged families as indicated by the proportion of students receiving reduced-fee and free lunch (84%). Information from the school principals also indicated that the majority of families whose children attended school in this district were poor and had very low incomes.

The participating students in this district attended one of seven elementary schools (prekindergarten to fifth grade) and one of four middle schools (sixth to eighth grade). The director of research for this school district chose these schools as representative of the community as a whole. The response rate for this school district was 81%, with 257 students participating during the last year of elementary school and 218 students participating in the first year of middle school.

In the summer prior to the sixth-grade year, letters were sent to the parents of all participating African-American students ($n = 97$) in the designated school district. The letters informed the families that the purpose of the study was to examine the roles of the family and school in supporting children's achievement. The letter requested their participation, offered $10 as a token of appreciation for their involvement in the study, and informed them that they would be contacted in the next few weeks. Families were then either called or visited by a trained interviewer.[2] The interviewer answered any questions about the study and asked if the primary caregiver of the student participating in the larger study would agree to be interviewed.

Only those families who were living at or below the 1995 U.S. poverty threshold[3] and who remained in the school district for both the fifth- and sixth-grade years were included in this study. Of the 97 African-American families, 62 families participated and were below the U.S. poverty threshold, 12 families participated but were not below the U.S. poverty threshold (1995), 12 families moved to another district during the sixth-grade year, 9 families did not reply to the letters and phone messages, 1 family missed the appointment and was unable to reschedule, and 1 family refused to participate in the study.

In order to select a subsample of high-achieving and low-achieving students from the 62 participating families who lived at or below the U.S. poverty threshold (1995), children's grades were collected from school records at the end of both their fifth- and sixth-grade years. Grade point averages for the fifth- and sixth-grade years were calculated by computing the average of each student's grades in the core subjects (social studies, language arts, math, and science) for that year. Grades were coded using a 13-point scale (1 = E (i.e., failure), 13 = A+). Quartiles for both the fifth- and sixth-grade years were

determined using the grade point average of all of the students from the designated school district who participated in the larger study. High-achieving students were defined as those students who were in the top quartile and had a grade point average of B+ or more for both their fifth- and sixth-grade years. Low-achieving students were defined as those students who were in the bottom quartile and had a grade point average of D+ or less for both their fifth- and sixth-grade years. There were 17 high-achieving students (5 boys and 12 girls) and 17 low-achieving students (12 boys and 5 girls). None of these students lived in the same household.

Family Characteristics

Although the majority of primary caregivers interviewed were the child's mother (n = 29), primary caregivers also included fathers (n = 3), an aunt (n = 1), and a grandmother (n = 1).[4] In the families of the high-achieving students, 8 of the parents were married, 6 had never been married, and 3 were divorced. In the families of the low-achieving students, 3 of the parents were married, 10 had never been married, 1 was separated, 2 were divorced, and 1 was widowed. Families of both the high-achieving and low-achieving students had a median family income (1995) of $12,365, with a range of less than $3,500 to $24,999 and had an average educational level of a high school degree.

Procedure

Interviews with parents were conducted by two African-American interviewers during the summer prior to and the early fall of the child's sixth-grade year (1995). Both interviewers were adult females who had lived in the community most of their lives. All of the interviews occurred in the participants' homes. Before the interview began, the parent was informed that the interview was confidential and participation was voluntary. The parent was also told that she or he could decline to answer any questions, stop talking, or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Parents who agreed to participate signed the consent form.

The interviewers first asked the parents a series of open-ended questions. In order not to bias the parents' responses, only general questions about parents' strategies for encouraging their children's educational goals were asked. For example, parents were first asked, "What do you think are the most important goals for your child to reach in school?" Parents were then asked, "Are there things you or your family are doing now, or plan on doing in the future, to help your child achieve those goals?" In their responses, parents discussed the spe-

cific strategies they employed within the home, at school, and in the community to support their children's educational endeavors.

In order to gain more insight into the family-school connection, parents were then asked, "What do you think the school should do to help your child achieve these goals?" In their responses, parents discussed their reasons for their being involved (or not being involved) in their children's school. Parents also elaborated on their relationships with their children's teachers and principal.

In order to examine the frequency of children's activity involvement, parents were asked specific questions about the types of activities in which their children were involved. For example, parents were asked:

During the past school year, was your child involved in any sports?
During the past school year, was your child involved in any art, music, or drama lessons?
During the past school year, was your child involved in academic programs?
What activities was your child involved in this past summer?

Although not elicited, parents often elaborated on the reasons that their children were (or were not) involved in these activities. These open-ended questions were audiotaped and later transcribed.

Data Analyses

The analyses of the open-ended questions followed several stages. First, the open-ended questions were transcribed. Next, summaries of the open-ended questions for each interview were developed. Then, a list of codes were created. These codes focused on parents' management of their children's educational activities within the home (e.g., helping with homework, engaging in parent-child discussions), at their children's school (e.g., attending PTA meetings, volunteering in the classroom), and in the community (e.g., engaging their children in extracurricular activities, encouraging attendance at church activities).

The open-ended questions were then coded separately by two trained upper-level undergraduate students. Next, the coding was compared and reliability was computed. Reliability was high (over 80%), and any discrepancies were discussed with the first author. The coding was then rechecked twice by the first author and one of the two upper-level undergraduate students.

Next, codes were entered using HyperResearch (Hesse-Biber, Kinder, Dupis, and Tornabene, 1994), a computer program designed for coding qualitative research. Using this program, codes were designated to specific passages in the interview text for each family. These passages were then organized according to particular codes for families of both high-achieving and low-achieving students. For example, all of the passages related to parents' help with homework were

organized into separate documents for parents of both high-achieving and low-achieving students.

In the final stage of analysis, the similarities and differences between the codes of parents of both high-achieving and low-achieving students were compared. The frequencies of the specific codes as well as the interview text attached to these codes were examined. For example, we compared not only the number of parents of high-achieving and low-achieving students who reported helping their children with homework but also the specific ways they assisted their children such as supervising their homework schedule, checking their homework problems, or tutoring them in specific areas.

RESULTS

Overview

Parents of both high-achieving and low-achieving students discussed using similar strategies to support their children's academic goals. Both reported helping their children with their schoolwork and having discussions with their children. However, parents of high achievers reported using more specific strategies to assist their children and had more supportive conversations with their children than parents of low achievers.

Parents of high achievers frequently initiated contact with their children's school in order to check on their children's progress and to maintain positive relationships with the school officials. In contrast, parents of low achievers rarely visited their children's school except in response to the school's requests precipitated by their children's poor work or misbehavior.

High achievers were involved in more extracurricular and religious activities than low achievers. More parents of high achievers explicitly engaged their children in these community activities to support their children's academic goals than parents of low achievers. In contrast, more parents of low achievers discussed barriers to the management of their children's activities than parents of high achievers.

Parents' Encouragement of Educational Activities Within the Home

Parents of both high-achieving and low-achieving students discussed encouraging similar educational activities within the home. Parents of high-achieving ($n = 8$) and low-achieving students ($n = 8$) reported helping their children with their schoolwork. However, more parents of high achievers ($n = 6$) reported using specific strategies for assisting their children with their schoolwork than parents of low achievers ($n = 2$). For example, parents of high achievers frequently helped their children by tutoring them with practice lessons and problems. One parent of a high achiever explained her family's strategies for

helping her daughter to improve her academic skills during the summer vacation:

> She will spend time with her sister in Tampa, Florida. But she has something in mind. Matter of fact, she want to plan something around her to help with that so when she goes to Tampa she will be, not just for play, she will be like in class at all times.

Another common strategy for parents of high achievers was supervising their children's homework schedule. For example, one parent of a high achiever explained, "First and foremost, the project for the first week [of school] is to see how your classes are, your homework, and getting your homework done at a certain time."

Most parents of low achievers, on the other hand, did not articulate using specific strategies to assist their children with their schoolwork. For example, one parent of a low achiever explained, "I spend a lot of time with them doing their homework." However, this mother, along with the five other parents of low achievers, did not discuss any of the specific ways in which she assisted her children. In another example, in this conversation with the interviewer, a parent of a low achiever explained:

> Parent: Yes, we've done a lot to help him [with his schoolwork].
> Interviewer: You want to give me some of them?
> Parent: We help him do his homework. Help him to do his lesson, period.

Of the two parents who mentioned using specific strategies to help their children with their schoolwork, both discussed other factors in their lives that often hindered their assistance. For example, one parent of a low achiever explained how her late work schedule often hampered her supervision of her son's homework schedule:

> Seeing he does his homework and stuff. Only I have to stay on him to do it. By me working sometimes I'm not home until 7 P.M. and by the end of the day, getting ready to go to bed, they didn't do their homework, he's good for that.

The other parent of a low achiever who also mentioned using specific strategies discussed how her hectic life often made her assistance more difficult:

> I'm trying to help him more as far as sitting down and have him read to me and everything like that, helping him with his homework. I need to do better because sometimes I'm tired and I don't get to look over his things as much as I should, but I'm going to do better this year.

In addition to helping their children with their schoolwork, parents of both high-achieving (n = 11) and low-achieving students (n = 8) reported having

discussions with their children. Although parents of both high-achieving (n = 4) and low-achieving students (n = 3) reported having general types of discussions with their children, for the most part, they had very different conversations with their children. Parents of high achievers (n = 7) used communication to encourage, support, and praise their children's academic endeavors. For example, parents of high achievers often focused their conversations on encouraging their children to set and pursue goals. As one parent of a high achiever explained, "Me and my husband . . . talk positive to her. And she can set her goals and she could do whatever she feels she can do. We stand behind her."

Although parents of high achievers discussed giving their children praise for doing well in school, they also talked about supporting their children even when they did not succeed. For example, one parent of a high achiever described, "I speak to her in a way that I feel helps boost her confidence. To praise her when she does well and tell her it's okay when she doesn't do so well." In their discussions, parents of high achievers focused on "doing your best" and "being yourself" rather than simply making high grades. As one parent of a high achiever explained, "I encourage her to do her best in whatever it is she would like to do." In a similar vein, another parent of a high achiever stated, "Whatever she becomes I'll be right there by her side. I wouldn't doubt her or nothing like that."

Parents of the low achievers (n = 5), in contrast, focused their discussions on their children's behavior. For example, parents of low achievers often used communication as a way of changing their children's behavior. As one parent of a low achiever explained to the interviewer:

> Parent: He has an attitude. You can tell him something, people talk to him, he has an attitude problem, a straight-up attitude problem.
> Interviewer: So what are you doing?
> Parent: I talk to him and I just basically talk to him about his attitude.

In another example, a parent of a low achiever described how she used communication to improve her son's behavior: "I'll make him tell me how he should have done them better."

Parents of low achievers not only focused on their children's existing difficulties but also emphasized their children's potential problems. Parents of low achievers often used discussions with their children as a way of preventing possible worries such as school dropout and membership in neighborhood gangs. For example, one parent of a low achiever described her conversations with her son:

> I try to teach him what he needs to know here at home. . . . Conduct himself like a young man and not to always be around, being in gangs and hanging out with the wrong crowd. Peer pressure is my greatest concern in that aspect.

In another example, a parent of a low achiever explained her attempts at preventing potential problems with her son, "I always talk to him and tell him what's right from wrong, and even his older brother do try to tell him that the street ain't the right way to go and to continue onto school."

Parents' Involvement in Their Children's School

More parents of high achievers (n = 10) than parents of low achievers (n = 5) reported being involved in their children's school. Although there were parents of both high achievers (n = 3) and low achievers (n = 1) who did not elaborate on why they were involved in their children's school, most parents of high achievers and low achievers discussed very different reasons for their involvement. Parents of high achievers (n = 7) frequently initiated contact with their children's teachers, counselors, and principals on their children's behalf. For parents of high achievers, these visits were not only to maintain positive relationships with school officials but also to ensure their children's successful progress in school. For example, one parent of a high achiever explained:

> I don't like to wait for the report cards to come out; every so often I make periodic checks at my children's school; I ask the teacher for a progress report in private to see how they are doing and just keeping in touch with the teacher, the counselor, and the principal on a monthly basis.

For parents of high achievers, meeting with their children's teachers and participating in parent committees were a way of demonstrating their commitment and dedication to their children's education. For example, one parent of a high achiever said:

> We all have a busy life schedule but I feel that education is foremost important with our children and everything. I'm a firm believer in keeping in contact with the teachers and the teachers keeping in contact with me because I don't have a problem with them calling me on my job if situations arise. I feel that if you're getting involved with the child, you're getting involved with the teacher, the principal, and the counselor. Well, something good should come out of that.

In contrast, parents of low achievers ($n = 4$) were involved due to requests by their children's school officials precipitated by their children's poor work or misbehavior. For example, one parent of a low achiever explained her contact with the school:

> Interviewer: And you said he has an appointment with the behavior . . .
> Parent: Right, we're going to that with him, the program; I'm also attending, too. I'll attend, too. And math, he has the lady come; she's a

> counselor, but she helps with certain problems with the child. Well, she helped my oldest daughter to get through the math problem so I'm quite sure when she sees Michael is lacking a bit, she'll call me about him, too. So I sign papers and say that you're willing.

Another parent of a low achiever also explained the extent of her involvement with her children's school: "The school, they mostly be telling me she has the problem; the school, they be like, we got to talk to you, different things like I have to go to the school and sit in her class."

Despite the differences in their reasons for involvement in their children's school, parents of both high-achieving ($n = 5$) and low-achieving students ($n = 4$) emphasized the importance of having teachers and school officials initiate contact with them when their children experienced problems. These parents wanted school officials to keep them informed of their children's progress so they could intervene before their children experienced extreme difficulties in school. However, they had very different views of the school's role in helping their children. Parents of high achievers saw both themselves and the school as responsible parties in their children's education. As one parent of a high achiever said, "I talk to them, they talk to me, because there are so many children who are having problems . . . and then, it is like, what can we do together to get this rectified?"

Parents of low achievers, on the other hand, seemed more wary of the school's actions on their children's behalf. For example, one parent of a low achiever explained that she did not want the school to discipline her son. She stated, "You know, if he is acting up, I want to know about it. I don't want them taking no action; I want them to call me." In another example, a parent explained, "It's up to the child and their parents to do the rest. If he have any problem, I prefer the school to contact me and let me know; therefore I can help him ."

Parents of low achievers also discussed having previous negative interactions with the school. In some of these interactions, parents of low achievers explained the problems they had with their children's teachers. For example, in one interview, a parent of a low achiever reported:

> Parent: Academically, they are not professional to me.
> Interviewer: The teachers or the secretaries?
> Parent: The teachers are not. They take their personal lives and bring it; instead of teaching the child, they take it more personal; they put more personal views into it. . . . I think they [the teachers] should concentrate more on teaching, not wondering what they parents are doing and stuff.

In other cases, when parents of low achievers sought the school's help on behalf of their children, the school officials were ineffective and not responsive to

their requests. For example, a grandmother of a low achiever explained to the interviewer:

> Parent: [She] couldn't fit in; the kids fight all the time; my granddaughter . . . got kicked out for a whole semester. . . . Cause the girl picked on her all the time and she finally fought. And we picked her up early and she said, 'Mamie I don't want to be kicked out.' . . . Then, the [other] girl got back in school in two weeks. She [the other girl] went in and put on airs. I went to the principal, you know, we went before him, he said . . . he was going to write me a letter [to get her back in school] and he never did.
> Interviewer: And he kept her out of school all that time.
> Parent: Uh-huh.

Parents' Management in the Community

High achievers were also involved in more extracurricular activities than low achievers. While high achievers were involved in an average of two activities, low achievers were involved in an average of one activity. High-achieving and low-achieving students were also involved in different types of extracurricular activities. While high achievers ($n = 11$) and low achievers ($n = 10$) were involved in a similar number of sports activities, high achievers were involved in more art and music classes ($n = 4$) than low achievers ($n = 1$). High achievers ($n = 8$) were also involved in more religious activities such as choir and Bible study than low-achievers ($n = 0$). Not surprisingly, high achievers ($n = 8$) were also involved in more academic programs than low achievers ($n = 3$).

More parents of high achievers ($n = 12$) than parents of low achievers ($n = 2$) explicitly discussed engaging their children in these extracurricular activities as a strategy to encourage their children's development. These parents viewed their children's participation as a way to develop positive peer relationships and learn social values. For example, one parent of a high achiever explained the reason why she enrolled her daughter in a specific program in her community:

> That's [the program] a social and academic thing. She do a lot of things in the community for older people. Just to get them ready, you know, social things, and their manners, and etiquette.

Parents also used their children's participation as a way to encourage their children to try their best and to achieve their goals. As one parent of a high achiever described, "All her goals are mainly she wants to be a cheerleader and she wants to play the flute next year so anything she tries and tells me, I'm like

go for it." Other parents also encouraged their children's involvement in community activities in order to enhance their academic development. For example, one parent of a low achiever explained her reasons for her son's involvement in a reading program at the local library:

> He likes sports so, therefore, I took him to the library to improve his reading, you know to help his grades and everything. And got him books on sports so he reads something that interests him.

Compared to parents of low achievers ($n = 0$), more parents of high achievers ($n = 8$) also explicitly discussed engaging their children in religious activities as a way of encouraging their children's successful development. For these parents, religious involvement was a way to teach their children the moral and behavioral standards necessary to achieve success and avoid negative outcomes. For example, one parent of a high achiever explained how her daughter would achieve her goals: "Her to have the Lord in her life, that is what she should put first, the Lord in her life and He will direct her path for her." Through religious involvement, these parents demonstrated the moral and behavioral codes necessary to succeed. For example, one parent of a high achiever explained her strategy for encouraging her daughter to work harder in school and become more involved in school activities:

> We're really involved in our local church, and so I'm trying to install moral values in her that way, and I like to keep busy myself [in church], so I try to get involved in a lot of things and then that way it will motivate her, too.

For these parents, religion was a way to encourage their children to pursue their goals even though the outside environment was hostile to achieving success. According to these parents, their children's religious involvement gave their children the faith to overcome these tremendous odds and achieve their goals. As a parent of a high achiever explained:

> I've introduced Christ to my children, so they know they have a choice and the choice is up to them. I teach them with Christ they have their life, they have, the world is theirs if that is what they choose. It is up to them. The choice is theirs.

In contrast, more parents of low-achieving ($n = 5$) than high-achieving students ($n = 1$) discussed reasons for *not* enrolling their children in extracurricular and religious activities. For these parents, their hectic lives often hindered their management of their children's outside activities. Other obligations such as "trying to get a job" and "having the kids" were often barriers to being involved in their children's daily activities. As one parent of a high achiever explained, "Right now, I ain't doing nothing cause "I'm going to school." Other

parents were often unaware of extracurricular activities available unless initiated by their children's school. For example, one parent of a low achiever said, "They [the school] didn't send no letters or forms home so he didn't go [to any of the summer programs]."

DISCUSSION

Families of both high-achieving and low-achieving students in this study emphasized the importance of their children's education and recognized their role in helping their children succeed in school. As one mother of a low achiever said, "I know how important education is and that for me to help as much as I can, you know, to help him do good in school." Families of both high achievers and low achievers also acknowledged that their children's academic success might be hindered by their financial problems. As one mother of a high achiever explained, "She wants to go to Harvard law school. And from the looks of things around here, I won't be able to afford it, but I'm hoping that she'll continue to do what she do and get a scholarship and go [to college]." However, despite their similarities, these families discussed very different strategies for helping their children overcome these economic difficulties and achieve their educational goals.

Parents' Encouragement of Educational Activities Within the Home

Parents of both high-achieving and low-achieving students reported helping with their children's schoolwork. However, parents of high achievers discussed using more specific strategies to help with their children's schoolwork than parents of low achievers. For example, parents of high achievers organized homework schedules, created math problems, and assigned extra reading and writing lessons for their children. In contrast, more parents of low achievers than parents of high-achievers discussed barriers to their assistance such as hectic lives and work schedules.

These differences indicate that parents of high achievers may have more effective strategies for helping with their children's schoolwork than parents of low achievers. For example, since parents of high achievers provided additional academic work for their children, high achievers may have had greater ease with the basic skill areas than low achievers. Moreover, as parents of high achievers closely monitored their children's schoolwork, they may have been more aware of their children's academic weaknesses. This is supported in the open-ended data as twice as many parents of high-achieving ($n = 10$) as low-achieving students ($n = 5$) mentioned their children's specific academic weaknesses. As a result, parents of high-achievers may have been more apt to circumvent their children's possible academic difficulties with effective preventive

measures than parents of low achievers. Such differences may explain why qualitative (Clark, 1983) and quantitative studies (Tienda and Kao, 1994) have found seemingly contradictory results on the effectiveness of parents' help with homework.

Parents of both high-achieving and low-achieving students used communication as another strategy to encourage their children's academic goals. However, parents of high-achieving and low-achieving students seemed to have very different conversations with their children. Through their praise and encouragement, parents of high achievers demonstrated their high expectations of their children's current performance as well as supported their children's future academic endeavors. Through their criticism and doubt, parents of low achievers, in contrast, demonstrated their disappointment in their children's current behavior as well as their negative expectations of their future performance.

Although these differences in parent-child communication may not be unexpected considering the differences in their children's achievement, such communication patterns may serve to reinforce their children's present behaviors. According to Clark (1983), regular communication rituals such as praise and verbal comforting not only maintain parent-child affection but also help parents enlist their children's voluntary adherence to standards and expectations of responsible academic behavior. In contrast, while rejecting behaviors such as criticism and ridicule may be seen by parents as "helping" their children, they often have the opposite effect. Since these children may view their parents as neither understanding nor supportive, they often proceed to repeat the undesirable behavior (Clark, 1983). As a result, while high achievers may persevere to fulfill their parents' high academic expectations, low achievers may continue to fail in response to their parents' criticism.

Parents' Involvement in Their Children's School

More parents of high achievers reported being involved in their children's school than parents of low achievers. They were also involved in very different ways. Parents of high achievers frequently visited the school to check on their children's progress as well as to maintain contact with the school personnel. Parents of low achievers, on the other hand, were involved mostly due to requests by the teachers as a result of their children's misbehavior or poor work.

These differences in family-school contact have an important impact on children's school achievement. According to Clark (1983), students often perceive their parents' school involvement as evidence of continued parental expectation of their successful school performance and of parental acceptance of some responsibility for that performance. Parent-initiated contacts with the school may also reinforce the students' identification with the teachers and their acceptance of the student role. However, as these data suggest, parents of low-achieving students rarely make such unsolicited impromptu visits to see how school per-

sonnel are performing on their children's behalf, and as a result, this positive, reinforcing pattern of school-home encouragement for student achievement may be absent.

Parents of both high-achieving and low-achieving students also emphasized the importance of having school personnel immediately contact them when problems with their children arose. However, although both were concerned with rectifying their children's school problems, their solutions to such hypothetical difficulties seemed very distinct. Parents of high achievers saw both themselves and the school as working together to solve any such difficulties. In fact, parents of high achievers frequently initiated contact with their children's school in order to maintain this type of partnership with the school personnel. Parents of low achievers, on the other hand, expressly did not want the school to intervene on behalf of their children, and many discussed previous negative interactions with the school.

This contrary disposition may offer some insight into the difference in school involvement between parents of high-achieving and low-achieving students. Parents' attitudes about their children's school are important factors in their level of school involvement (Eccles and Harold, 1983). Parents who have had positive experiences at their children's school and who believe that school personnel want to work with them in order to help their children succeed in school are more likely to initiate contact with their children's school. In contrast, parents who have had negative interactions with the school and believe that teachers only contact them in order to give them bad news about their children or to blame them for their children's school problems may be suspicious of, and disaffected from, their children's school. As a result, these parents are less likely to initiate contact with, and be involved in, their children's school. Therefore, as these data suggest, parents of high-achieving and low-achieving students may experience very different interactions with their children's school, and these interactions may influence their willingness to initiate (or not to initiate) family-school contact on their children's behalf.

Parents' Management in the Community

High-achieving students were not only involved in more extracurricular and religious activities than low-achieving students but also involved in different types of activities. High achievers were involved in more art, music, academic, and religious activities than low achievers, whereas both high achievers and low achievers were involved in a similar number of sports activities. Since achievement is often a requirement for academic programs, it is not surprising that high achievers were involved in more academic programs than low achievers. Other differences between the high-achieving and low-achieving students may be a result of parents' management of their children's activities. Parents often enroll their children in art or music lessons and religious activities

such as Sunday school, whereas sports activities are most often associated with the school. As a result, children whose parents are more active in managing their children's activities may be more likely to be enrolled in these types of activities. Furthermore, since parents of high achievers explicitly discussed engaging their children in these activities, they may be more effective and conscientious managers of their children's activity involvement than parents of low achievers.

Parents of high-achieving and low-achieving students also discussed very different reasons concerning why they managed (or failed to manage) their children's involvement in these outside activities. Parents of high achievers viewed their children's involvement as a necessary part of their children's social, academic, and moral development. Through their children's involvement in extracurricular activities, parents of high achievers encouraged their children to pursue their interests as well as to set and attain their future goals. Parents of high achievers also saw their children's involvement, particularly in religious activities, as a way of providing a pathway to a successful life. Although parents of low achievers did not discourage their children's involvement in outside activities, they did not create such opportunities for them. For parents of low achievers, other responsibilities, such as their employment and child care responsibilities, often impeded their management of their children's activities. As Clark (1983) noted, these parents seemed overcome by the circumstances in their lives. They appeared to be overburdened by their stressful living and hectic working conditions and, as a result, may not have had the time or energy to mange their children's involvement in activities outside the home.

These findings support the contention that parents living in disadvantaged communities must be supermotivated in order to get their children involved in extracurricular activities (Furstenberg et al., 1998). According to Furstenberg and his colleagues, parents who have a greater capacity to cope with stress may often be more efficacious in managing their children's environment outside the home. These parents may not only be more resourceful in finding positive outside activities for their children but may also be more effective in dealing with the formal and informal institutions in which their children participate. In contrast, parents who are overwhelmed by the stressful economic conditions in their lives may be less imaginative and persistent in securing safe, positive avenues of involvement for their children. Therefore, as this study suggests, parents of high achievers may not only be more resourceful in engaging their children in the outside community, but may also be more resilient to stressful economic conditions than parents of low achievers.

Implications for Parents, Schools, and Communities

Although "there is no such thing as a best way to raise children" (Baumrind, 1972), this study highlights several important ways that poor African-American

families can help support their children's academic achievement. Within the home, parents can help with their children's schoolwork with such effective strategies as supervising their children's homework schedule and providing extra tutorial lessons in their children's weak skill areas. Other strategies within the home include using encouragement rather than criticism to help their children's academic endeavors. At their children's school, parents can initiate contact with the school to check on their children's progress as well as to maintain friendly working relationships with their children's teachers. Within the community, parents can encourage their children's academic, social, and moral development by engaging their children in extracurricular and religious activities.

Schools and communities can support poor African-American families in numerous ways. Schools can help parents assist their children with their schoolwork by organizing practical training programs that give parents the necessary tools to prepare their children for specific classroom lessons (Clark, 1983). To encourage parental involvement in the school, teachers can frequently contact parents to report their children's academic progress including positive developments as well as problem areas. Teachers can also promote positive interactions with parents through recognition of their involvement as a valuable resource for children's achievement (Comer, 1980; Eccles and Harold, 1993)

Schools and communities can also organize recreational and educational programs for both high-achieving and low-achieving students. This study suggests low-achieving students, in particular, may benefit from being involved in such activities. Policies that exclude children from participating in extracurricular activities because of their low grades may serve to hamper rather than support their academic achievement. Schools and communities could also help make these programs accessible to parents with hectic lives. For example, whenever possible, programs may not rely on parental participation or permission for children's involvement.

Finally, religious institutions in the community can encourage family involvement as well as reach out to those children whose parents do not regularly attend religious activities. Religious institutions can also provide well-conceptualized support programs to buffer the tremendous daily stress experienced by many of poor families.

Limitations

The findings of this study need to be considered in light of the following limitations. First, since the selection criteria were based solely on grade point average, there was an unequal distribution of boys and girls in the high-achieving and low-achieving groups. There was a greater number of girls in the high-achieving group and a greater number of boys in the low-achieving group. Consequently, some findings may be influenced by gender differences. This

may be particularly relevant to the different types of extracurricular activities in which high-achieving and low-achieving students were involved. However, we examined the proportion of boys and girls who participated in different types of extracurricular activities, and a similar percentage of high-achieving (60%) and low-achieving (67%) boys were involved in sports activities. A higher percentage of high-achieving girls (67%), however, were involved in sports activities than low-achieving girls (40%). Contrary to traditional opinions about involvement in sports, this finding suggests that such involvement may be beneficial for girls as well as boys.

In addition to possible gender differences, the unequal distribution of boys and girls in the high-achieving and low-achieving groups has important implications for future research. The results of this study support previous research highlighting the tremendous risks facing African-American boys. African-American boys are not only at greater risk for academic difficulties and school failure but also more likely to engage in violence, use drugs, and commit suicide than African-American girls (Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development, 1995). Future research needs to examine the specific risks facing African-American boys and the factors that encourage them to follow positive rather than negative trajectories.

Second, this study failed to consider factors other than the family context that may be associated with academic achievement. Differences between high-achieving and low-achieving students may also lie in their interactions with school personnel and their peer group. For example, research has suggested that characteristics of schools (e.g., teachers' attitudes and school climate) and peer groups (e.g., peer support) also contribute to differential achievement levels in African-American youth (Goodenow and Grady, 1994; Rist, 1970; Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown, 1992).

Third, since the high-achieving and low-achieving groups were selected based on their grade point averages, we cannot assume that differences in parental behavior caused, rather than resulted from, the differences in their children's achievement levels. For example, since the low achievers may have experienced more behavioral problems than the high achievers, it is not surprising that the parents of low achievers focused on improving their children's behavior rather than encouraging their children's academic goals.

Nevertheless, this study provides important information regarding the family processes associated with high-achieving and low-achieving African-American students living in poverty. In particular, this study (1) highlighted the parenting behaviors that may covary in poor African-American families of high-achieving and low-achieving students; (2) described how seemingly similar parenting behaviors may differ depending on the context in which they occur; and (3) provided insight into the processes that may hinder parents' management of their children's education in poor African-American families.

Acknowledgments. The funding for this research was provided through fellowships and grants from the Spencer Foundation and University of Michigan. We would like to thank Natasha Scheible, Faiza Shirazi, and Michelle Gordon for their help in transcribing and coding the open-ended interview questions.

NOTES

1. All the names used in this manuscript have been changed to protect the participants' confidentiality.
2. As many of the families did not own a phone, interviewers had to contact these families in person.
3. The measurements of the U.S. poverty threshold were developed in the 1960s and are adjusted each year for changes in the cost of living using the Consumer Price Index. In 1995, U.S. poverty thresholds for families of three, four, five, six, seven, and eight persons were $12,158; $15,569; $18,408; $20,804; $23,552; and $26,237, respectively (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1997). Families with annual cash incomes, before taxes, that fell below these thresholds were considered "poor."
4. Although some of the primary caregivers were not the students' parents, that term is used henceforth.

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