African American Fathers' Involvement in their Children's School-based Lives

Yolanda Abel   **Johns Hopkins University**

This research investigated African American fathers' involvement in the school-based lives of their elementary-aged children using the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parent involvement and Epstein's framework of involvement. Questionnaires were administered to 101 African American males in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Multiple regression analyses found predictive relationships between attitudes and behaviors that influence African American fathers' decisions to be involved and the types of involvement related to the child's schooling. Results revealed significant findings for (a) Invitations from Others and home-school communication, (b) Fathers' Life Context and school-based parent involvement, and (c) Fathers' Life Context and Invitations from Others and the overall parent involvement score. Implications for the field of family involvement are discussed.

Keywords: father involvement, parent involvement, home-based involvement, school-based involvement

INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement is one of the most widely recognized factors that impact a child's learning and development. Parent involvement, however, is a complex and multidimensional concept (Epstein, 1995). Levels and types of parent involvement vary for myriad reasons, including socioeconomic status, educational background, residential status, and sex of parent (U.S Department of Education, 2003). Fathers, in general, tend to be less involved than mothers. Nonetheless, the limited research that has been conducted suggests that fathers' involvement has a significant relationship on a variety of academic outcomes for children and adolescents (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Dunn, 2004; Fagan, 2000; Nord, 1998a). More research is needed, therefore, to better understand factors affecting fathers' decisions to become involved in their children's learning and how they choose to be involved. This need is particularly significant for African American fathers, who are more likely to be classified as non-residential (U.S. Department of Education, 1998), and have lower levels of educational attainment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007) than fathers in other ethnic groups. Consequently, they may face greater challenges to being involved with their children.

This article presents findings from a study investigating African American fathers' involvement in their children's education. The study investigated whether there is a predictive relationship between attitudes and behaviors that influence African American fathers' decisions to be involved in their children's school-based lives and their types of parental involvement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Support for Family Involvement

Although the current legislative issues focus on student achievement and giving parents means or methods to redress academic preparation in schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP), the factors that impact student achievement are myriad in their sources and manifestations.

Building on the work of theorist in education, psychology, ad sociology (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Epstein (1995) developed a seminal theory of parental involvement. She encouraged educators to view "students" as children thereby allowing themselves to incorporate and engage information from the various strands of the children's lives versus the single domain of school. This includes families and communities since children interact and are affected by each of these groups. Within her theory of "overlapping spheres of influence," families become "school-like," and schools and communities become "family-like," settings that promote children's learning, and healthy development.

According to Epstein (1995) there are three major contexts in which students learn and develop: (a) the family, (b) the school, and (c) the community. These structures, found in Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, have the potential to overlap in the mesosystem and be impacted by the exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Epstein's theory (1995) posits that there are some actions that are unique and germane to a given sphere, the family, the school, or the community and some that are best carried out through collaboration between and among the spheres. Key stakeholders within each structure influence the focus, extent, and quality of collaboration. This can be aligned with Bronfenbrenner's concept of the macrosystem; that is, collaboration is influenced by similarities and differences in the customs, values, and cultural beliefs of the school, the family, and the community. These interactions influence one another and the child's academic achievement, which is a primary focus of family involvement.

Within Epstein's theory, the child is at the center of the three overlapping spheres and the degree of overlap also depends on time. The element of time links to the chronosystem in Bronfenbrenner's model of ecological systems theory. Time in Epstein's theory also refers to individual and historical time. How old is the child? In what grade is the child? What social conditions are prevalent? According to Epstein (1995), research about partnerships shows that they tend to decline as students' progress through school unless the school, family, and community proactively seek to maintain ties.

Epstein's framework of six types of involvement is a template for the various parties to determine how to interact with each other and gauge their level of connectedness. Her framework of involvement, developed through examination, of the literature provides the user with a comprehensive array of ways that schools, families, and the community can interact and support student learning and achievement. *Type One* refers to parenting or helping families establish home environments that support children as students. *Type Two* refers to communicating or designing effective forms of school-to home and home-to-school communications about school initiatives and students' progress. *Type Three* refers to volunteering or recruiting and organizing parents to help and support with school initiatives. *Type Four* refers to learning at home or providing information and ideas to families about ways they can help their children at home with their homework and other curriculum-related endeavors. *Type Five* refers to decision- making or including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives. *Type Six* refers to collaborating with the community or identifying and integrating resources from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student development and success. Epstein's work and that of Bronfenbrenner have provided the theoretical foundation on which much of the empirical research on parent and community involvement in schools is based.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of the Parent Involvement Process

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) proposed a model for investigating how parent's become involved in their children's education. Part of their on-going work has been the testing of this model and the domains they hypothesized as influences on the parental involvement process.

Level one of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) revised Model of the Parental Involvement Process focuses on three domains believed to positively influence a parent's decision to become involved in his child's formal education. The first domain is *personal*

motivation comprised of parental role construction, how a parent defines his or her parental role based on role activity beliefs and attitudes toward school, as well as *parental efficacy*, or how a parent perceives her or his ability to assist the child with academic-related tasks. The second domain, *invitations*, deals with what demands or requests for participation are made of the parent from the school, both general and specific, and the child. The third concept is *life context* composed of parental knowledge and skills, and time and energy. This is the only level used in this study since the researcher was most interested in these domains and the interactions with Epstein's (1995) framework. At the time of the study no literature was investigated that focused on using one component of a module or one question for a larger questionnaire. Although in the larger study each of the instruments were validated for use in this study, those results are not included.

LIMITATIONS IN FAMILY INVOLVEMENT RESEARCH

African American Families

Parental involvement research has made great strides over the past two decades; however, there remain several gaps within the research. One of these is the limited research focused on African American families. Much of the early research was designed to show the deficits of the Black family (Peters, 2007). Livingston and McAdoo (2007) contend that much of the research done on or with the Black family continues to be matricentric in perspective obscuring the role of African American fathers. Livingston and McAdoo also contend that rather than limiting themselves to the role of sole breadwinner, Black men are involved in their children's lives and participate in some of the day-to-day child-rearing activities. This supports a broader perspective of fatherhood, which allows for more latitude and involvement than that of breadwinner.

Paternal Involvement

In addition to the limited research on African American families, traditionally parent involvement research has tended to focus on females rather than males. However, a body of evidence (Gadsden, 1995; Nord, Brimhall & West, 1997; U.S Department of Education, 1998) suggests that paternal involvement has a positive and independent effect on a variety of student outcomes.

While the literature on paternal involvement is growing, more research is needed to understand factors that influence paternal involvement and the form that this involvement takes. Furthermore, as noted by Fagan (2000) and Livingston and McAdoo (2007), studies that deepen the understanding of diverse families are also needed. This study focused on the involvement of African American fathers' in their children's school-based lives and sought to deepen and broaden our understanding of the African American family as well as paternal involvement.

METHOD

This research study investigated the impact of African American fathers in their children's school-based lives. In particular, the question being examined is whether or not there was a predictive relationship between behaviors and attitudes that influence African American fathers' decision to be active in their children's school-based lives and the types of parental involvement activities in which they engage.

Participants

A total of 101 volunteers participated in this study. No participants were excluded from the study. Eligibility for this study was based on self-identification as an African American male with a child enrolled in elementary school. There were no other criteria for participation.

Volunteer participants were African American fathers, including father figures (stepfathers, uncles, and grandfathers). The participants did not include anyone who did not fit one of the aforementioned categories. The mean age for participants was 38, with a range between 20 and 65.

Generally, participants were biological fathers (86%), earning over $40,000 a year (42%), employed full-time (60%), having at least a high school diploma or equivalency (84%), and still romantically involved with the child's mother (52%). This category included fathers who identified themselves as married or living with the mother of the focus child. The percentage of male and female children was 56% and 44%, respectively. The majority of these children attended public schools (78%) and resided in the city of Baltimore (Maryland, 59%).

Instruments

The survey protocol included three instruments. Each is described in the following section.

Demographic form. The demographic form was created by the researcher and field-tested during the pilot phase of the research project. Since the possibility existed that research participants would have multiple children, questions were modified to include the phrase "focus child" to help them remember to answer the surveys in relation to the one child who fit the specified criteria of being in elementary school. Collected data included information such as, participant age, number of children, income range, education level, type of relationship with the mother of the focus child, employment status, and grade level of the focus child.

Revised Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of the Parental Involvement Process. The focus of this study is the first level of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) Model of the Parental Involvement Process examining the constructs that influence parental involvement. While the full model has five levels with a total of 22 scales, this study used only the 8 scales associated with level one of the model. This level parental involvement is influenced by the domain of parents' motivational beliefs comprised of parental role construction (role activity beliefs and attitudes toward school) and parental sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school. The next domain is parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement from others defined as perceptions of general school invitations, perceptions of specific child invitations, and perceptions of specific teacher invitations. The final level one domain is parents' perceived life context defined as self-perceived knowledge and skills and self-perceived time and energy.

Epstein and Clark Salinas' Questionnaires for Teachers and Parents in Elementary and Middle Grades. This study focused on parent involvement types identified in Epstein's theoretical framework. Only question three on Epstein and Clark Salinas' (1993) Questionnaires for Teachers and Parents in Elementary and Middle Grades was of interest to this study. It solicited information about how families get involved at home or school. (For example, Families get involved in different ways at school or home. Which of the following have you done *this year*? Remember you are focusing in a particular child.)The other questions were more specifically focused on how a school might do things related to parent engagement and that was not the focus of this study.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a variety of sites, such as local elementary schools, fatherhood agencies, and churches. This resulted in successful contacts at a number of locations within Baltimore City, Howard County, and Baltimore County for places that had agreed to allow the researcher to recruit at their facility. Approximately fourteen venues were used for recruitment and resulted in participant groups that ranged from 3-12 fathers depending on location. Fathers

had to agree to participate therefore the sample was comprised of fathers who volunteered to take part in the study. Each participant received a Wal-Mart gift card as a token of appreciation.

Design and Analysis

The overall study design is causal-comparative. Through examination of the variables and how they differ in relation to one another a researcher can determine if a relationship exists between the variables. Ex post facto research cannot establish causation, however it does allow for comparisons and suggestions for relationships among the variables. This research investigated the relationship between two existing models. The three constructs of level one of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) model were examined for any relationship with Epstein's (1995) types of parent involvement. The models were selected because they provided well-conceived researched structures to examine factors that influence parents' decisions to become involved in their children's learning and the types of parental involvement activities in which they engaged.

EQS software was used to perform a multiple group path analysis (Kline, 1991) to examine behaviors and attitudes of African American fathers' involvement in their children's school-based lives (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model) as they relate to the six types of parent involvement identified by Epstein (1995).

RESULTS

This study investigated whether there was a predictive relationship between attitudes and behaviors that were thought to lead to parental involvement activities and types of parent involvement derived from Epstein's (1995) typology of parent involvement. A standard multiple regression analysis was conducted for each of the three parent involvement types identified within the larger context of this study, regressing the three domains of Parental motivational beliefs, Invitation from Others, and Parents' Life Context on each parent involvement type, and a summation parent involvement score. Each sub-question tests a regression model for each parent involvement type, home-based, communicating, school-based and summary parent involvement score.

Does a predictive relationship exist between parental motivational beliefs, invitations from others, and parents' life context and Epstein's home-based parent involvement type? A standard multiple regression was performed for the Epstein and Clark Salinas home-based activities score using the variable set of parents' life context, parents' motivational beliefs, and invitations from others. Analysis was performed using SPSS regression (www.ibm.com). Evaluation of variables indicated statistical assumptions had been met.

Results for the regression for home-based activities found the independent variable set of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler domains parents' life context, parents' motivational belief, and invitations from others significant [F (3, 96) = 17.75, p < .001.. The domains, invitations from others and parents life context, contributed significantly to the prediction of the Epstein and Clark Salinas home-based activities score (unique variability, sr^2 = .10). These domains contributed another 26% in shared variability. These results indicate that 36% (34% adjusted) of the variability in the Epstein and Clark Salinas home-based score was predicted by knowing the value of the invitations from others and parents' life context domains.

Does a predictive relationship exist between parents' motivational beliefs, invitations from others, and parents' life context and Epstein's parent type of "communicating"? A standard multiple regression was performed for the Epstein and Clark Salinas Communicating Parent Involvement Type using the variable set of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler domains parents' life context, parents' motivational belief, and invitations from others. Analysis was performed using SPSS regression. Evaluation of variables indicated statistical assumptions had been met.

Results of the regression for communicating activities found the independent variable set of the domains parents' life context, parents' motivational belief, and invitations from others

significant [F (3, 96) = 17.14, p < .001]. The domain parents' life context contributed significantly to predication of the Epstein and Clark Salinas Communicating Parent Involvement Type (unique variability, sr^2 = .18). This domain contributed another 17% in shared variability. These results indicate that 35% (33% adjusted) of the variability in the Epstein and Clark Salinas Communicating Parent Involvement Type was predicted by knowing the value of the parents' life context domain.

Does a predictive relationship exist between parents' motivational beliefs, invitations from others, and parents' life context and Epstein's parent type of "school-based"? A standard multiple regression was performed for the Epstein School-Based Parenting Type using the variable set of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler domains variable set of parents' life context, parents' motivational belief, and invitations from others. Analysis was performed using SPSS regression. Evaluation of variables indicated statistical assumptions had been met.

Results of the regression for school-based activities found the independent variable set of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler domains parents' life context, parents' motivational belief, and invitations from others significant [F (3, 96) = 22.44, p < .001]. The domains invitations from others, parent life context, and parents' motivational beliefs contributed significantly to prediction of the Epstein and Clark Salinas School-Based Parent Involvement Type (unique variability, sr^2 = .12). The variables contributed another 29% in shared variability. These results indicate that 41% (39% adjusted) of the variability in the Epstein School-Based Parent Type was predicted by knowing the values of the invitations from others, parents' life context, and parents' motivational beliefs domains.

Does a predictive relationship exist between parents' motivational beliefs, invitations from others, and parents' life context and all types of involvement? A standard multiple regression was performed for the Epstein and Clark Salinas Summary Score for Parent Involvement using the variable set of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler domains of parents' life context, parents' motivational belief, and invitations from others. Analysis was performed using SPSS regression. Evaluation of variables indicated statistical assumptions had been met.

Results of the regression for summary parenting activities found the independent variable set of parents' life context, parents' motivational belief, and invitations from others significant [F (3, 96) = 29.34, p < .001]. The domains parents' life context and invitations from others contributed significantly to prediction of the Epstein and Clark Salinas Summary Score (unique variability, sr^2 = .12). The two variables in combination contributed another 36% in shared variability. These results indicate that 48% (46% adjusted) of the variability in the Epstein and Clark Salinas Summary Score was predicted by knowing the value of the parents' life context and invitations from others domains.

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler domains, invitations from others and life context (i.e., knowledge and energy), were found to be significantly related to fathers' home-based involvement. In other words, fathers who reported invitations to be involved in their children's learning from others as well as those who reported having the time and energy to be involved in their children's learning also reported more home-based involvement (e.g., helping their children with their homework). The domain, Invitations from Others, also was significantly related to fathers' communication with teachers. All three domains were significantly related to fathers' reported school-based involvement, such as attending special school events. Finally, both domains, invitations from others and life context were significantly related to the summary score for the combined types of involvement.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Research Findings

This study examined how and why African American fathers choose to be involved in their children's school-based lives. In particular this study investigated whether there is a predictive

relationship between attitudes and behaviors that influence African American fathers' decisions to be involved in their children's school-based lives and their types of parental involvement? In particular, invitations from others and parents' life context significantly predicted the Epstein and Clark Salinas Home-Based Parent Involvement Type. Invitations from others contributed significantly to the prediction of the Epstein and Clark Salinas Communicating Parent Involvement Type. All three domains, invitations from others, parents' motivational beliefs, and parents' life context contributed to the Epstein and Clark Salinas School-Based Parent Involvement Type. The domains parents' life context and invitations from others contributed to the Epstein and Clark Salinas Summary Parent Involvement Type.

Significant Themes

Fathers, in this study, with advanced educational levels also rated home-based activities more favorably than fathers with no high school diploma or GED. Home-based parent involvement activities, in this study, included listening to their child read a story, talking with their child about school, telling their child that school is important, discussing what is watched on television with the child, and helping the child practice skills. Similarly, fathers' knowledge and energy strongly influenced their participation in school-based parent involvement activities. A father's interpretation of his ability and availability to talk with his child about school, help out at school, talk with the teacher, attend school special events, or supervise homework influenced whether or not he engaged in school-based parent involvement activities, such as, participating on school committees, the PTA, or visiting his child's class.

In addition, fathers' knowledge and skills, and time and energy strongly influenced the overall combination of parent involvement activities (home-based, communicating, and school-based) they participated in. A father's assessment of his knowledge and skills about assisting his child in different ways, like, supervising homework, checking homework, listening to her or him read a story, discussing a television show, talking with the child's teacher by telephone or in person, visiting the classroom, or participating on a committee or the PTA influenced what type of activities he participated in that supported his child's school-based life. Fathers primarily engaged in home-based and communicating activities that supported their children's learning such as helping or supervising homework, listening to the child read or reading to the child.

Lastly, the study generated important findings about the invitations for involvement and reported that involvement among the fathers surveyed. The types of invitations fathers in this study received from teachers, the school, and their child along with their knowledge and skills and time and energy strongly influenced their decisions to engage in home-based parent involvement activities. When a child asked his or her father for homework assistance, to attend a special event, or speak to their teacher this along with a father's belief about his knowledge and skills and time and energy to do such activities influenced the likelihood of him fulfilling a particular request. Similarly, communication from teachers that conveyed an expectation for providing homework assistance to the child, a direct request to do so, or an invitation to a school's special event mediated by the father's time and energy and knowledge skills influenced fathers' home-based involvement. Invitations for involvement from the school that included a welcoming school environment and a timely schedule of events also influenced fathers' involvement activities.

Implications for Research

This study adds to a growing body of research that broadens the understanding of the African American family and some of the ways they support the education of their children. Factors that were shown to influence African American fathers' involvement were requests for the father's participation from others (the child, the teacher, or the school) and the father's life context (how much time and energy and knowledge he possesses to help his child succeed in school).

These findings extend the previous understanding of African American fathers' involvement and show the importance of population-specific studies that advance the field. Epstein and Sanders (2002) encouraged research focused specifically on fathers. They noted, "Most studies have been conducted with data from mothers, but we need to know more about the nature and effects of the involvement of fathers and siblings, and other family members across the grades" (p. 531).

They also emphasized the importance of studies that delve beyond demographic data to explore characteristics within specific communities that may influence home–school relations and students' school success. The present study is one example of this type of research. It is important to note that more focused research is needed to understand how factors such as life context, invitations from others, and fathers' knowledge and energy independently and collectively influence the quantity and quality of African American fathers' involvement in their children's learning. Future research also should examine the link between fathers' involvement and specific schooling outcomes for their children.

Implications for Practice

These findings have practical implications for schools seeking to increase paternal involvement. It is beneficial for schools to know and understand that fathers are involved in their children's school-based lives and continue to target them as part of their overall family and community involvement process. This study's findings highlight several significant areas:

- the father's knowledge and energy,
- the father's educational attainment, and
- invitations from others.

Arguably, schools alone have very little direct influence over the first two areas, but through collaboration with community organizations they can assist families in a variety of ways (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007; Shah & Blank, 2004). As Epstein (1995) stated in her theory of overlapping spheres of influence, the family, the school, *and* the community has its distinct role, along with interactions among and between the three entities. While schools' primary function may be the education of children, they can, as a support for children and families, collaborate with community agencies. For example, they can advertise programs for other agencies or provide space (community schools) for programs such as GED classes, mediation or relationship workshops, parenting classes, health fairs, and job training (Anderson-Butcher, 2004; Blank et al., 2004; Jacobson, 2003; Pardini, 2001). These types of collaborations might assist fathers with their own educational attainment or knowledge and skills about the ways in which they can be supportive of their child's educational endeavors. The parental motivational beliefs and life context were found to impact if and how fathers were involved with different types of parent involvement activities.

Studies have consistently shown that school and teacher practices matter (Dunn, 2004; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Nord, 1998a). This study confirms that finding. Invitations to become involved were found to influence fathers' involvement at school and at home. Schools can start by examining their current involvement procedures. How do they contact parents? When? Which languages? Where? What type of events? As they answer these questions a pattern of communication practices may begin to emerge as well as areas of needed improvement. Are any of the events for fathers only? If so, are the invitations going directly to fathers? Are they being placed in areas where fathers may visit like local recreation centers, religious institutions, or car washes (Fletcher & Silberberg, 2006; Shedlin, 2004a, 2004b)? Based on conversations with fathers and school-based personnel some father-focused events might be "Donuts with Dads", father–son basketball games or other sports, father–daughter dances or an

opportunity to build scenery for a play or other community initiative that enlists their knowledge and skills and that they have the time and energy to incorporate into their schedule.

Schools could provide information directly to fathers, regardless of educational levels, about ways that they can be involved. This can be accomplished through the school's newsletter or Website, and notes to the home, since the mother may need to have this information reinforced for her as well. As part of the family and community involvement process, schools should say "thank you" to all their volunteers in various ways and at various times; however, special attention may be needed for fathers to encourage their involvement and reinforce the importance of their efforts. Reinforcements may be both immediate and long-term. In the short-term, schools could provide fathers with certificates of appreciation, gift cards to local businesses, or acknowledgments in the school newsletter. In the long-term, the school could host a formal celebratory breakfast, place an advertisement in the local community paper, or hold a formal volunteer award ceremony at the end of the school year.

Schools also should aid children in engaging fathers, by encouraging them to invite their father's to be active in specific types of involvement such as checking for completed homework, reading stories, or watching or reading the news and asking questions. Children can be given interactive homework, the teacher's homework policy could ask for a parent or guardian's signature to facilitate communication between the teacher and the parent that he has seen the child's homework and knows that it was completed, the child can survey his or her father or other adult male family member about current events or issues related to class content. Fathers can be asked to come to school and demonstrate a skill or talk about their jobs or careers. Giving children opportunities to learn from and appreciate the adults in their world, including the adult men, helps to build relationships and support child development and growth (Dunn, 2004; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Gadsden, 1995; Nord, 1998b).

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The major limitation of this study is its small sample size. A sample of 101 African American fathers is a limited sample and not representative of the broader population of African American fathers who have children in elementary school. In addition, as this study only focused on African American fathers with elementary-aged children it is not representative of the broader population who has children in middle or high school.

In addition the data in this study are self-reported and solely from the perspective of fathers who volunteered to participate in this study and therefore may not be representative of fathers who declined to participate. Surveying children and their mothers will allow for the data to be triangulated for a richer, more complex view of African American fathers' involvement in their children's school-based lives. This study was quantitative in nature with proscribed Likert scale responses. Conducting in-depth interviews or focus groups would allow for expansion of the survey data responses and more opportunity for understanding the issues through the fathers' own words and direct experiences. Additional research studies would build on the findings of this study and related works and continue to build the knowledgebase about how and why African American fathers choose to be involved in their children's school-based lives. Providing children with opportunities to learn from and appreciate the adults in their world, especially fathers, helps to build relationships and support positive outcomes in school-related endeavors. School success, for Black boys, can be a predictor for later outcomes, including being involved in the school-based lives of their own children. Therefore it is imperative that schools capitalize on ways to facilitate the African American father's involvement in his child's school-based life.

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AUTHOR

YOLANDA ABEL is Assistant Professor in the School of Education, Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

All comments and queries regarding this article should be addressed to yabel@jhu.edu