

A Critical Analysis of Research Related to Attitudes Toward Low-Income
Families and Services Provided by Public School Systems

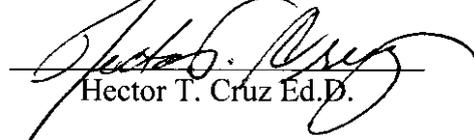
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this literature review was to determine services provided to low-income families within public school systems and to critically examine the solutions and suggestions that will encourage parental involvement. Research indicates that parental involvement in the schools improves multiple aspects of student achievement. Teachers and school staff who overlook the involvement and opinions of low-income parents create an unforgiving school climate and leave children of lower-income parents at a greater disadvantage than their middle-class counterparts. Parental involvement programs and initiatives must maintain family autonomy to be successful. This thesis provided an analysis of three successful models proposed by; Lott, Payne, and Epstein. This paper reviewed and critically analyzed research presented by the three models and offered possible implications for school districts. This author suggested a synthesis of the

strengths of each model that will have the capacity to adapt to the needs of each individual school district.

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Chapter I: Introduction

According to the Children's Defense Fund (2004), more than 12 million children live in poverty; over 9 million children have no health insurance; and 13 million children and over 20 million adults, live in households where hunger or food insecurity is experienced every day. The national poverty statistics are relevant and applicable for every school system and community in America. In 2006, more than 30 million school-age children received free and reduced price lunches through the National School Lunch Program (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2007). Low-income students in low-poverty schools scored better than low income students in high poverty schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1995 a). Students' achievement showed sharp declines when the school poverty concentration rose above 40% (U.S. Department of Education, 1995 b). These startling statistics only begin to depict the impact of poverty in the lives of student and families. An overview of issues regarding the historical and present circumstances of low-income students and their ability to function within the public school system will be presented in this introduction.

According to Lott (2001), many assumptions about low-income families are cause for concern. School administrators and staff that subscribe to these assumptions create an unforgiving climate in our public school classrooms and leave children of lower-income parents at a greater disadvantage than their middle-class counterparts.

A study completed by Barnard (2004), indicates that parental involvement in the schools is associated with student improvement in a variety of areas including academic performance, attitudes and behavior, attendance, school adjustment and engagement, and graduation rates (cited in Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Despite the benefits, low-income parents participate less

in their children's school activities than parents in any other income category (Velsor & Orozco, 2007).

Researchers and educators believe that low-income families experience barriers that are nonexistent in middle class families. According to Crockett (2003), barriers faced by low-income parents are clear causes for low participation, inflexible work schedules, transportation issues, poor school climate, and overall parent confidence. To overcome these issues requires greater planning, collaboration, and program implementation at the school and community levels. Parental involvement has changed over time, and schools must find other means to welcome parent participation in their child's education.

Statement of the Problem

There are many barriers to parental involvement that must be considered and understood before implementation of any program or school effort. Educational and parental barriers can be substantial and persistent (Lott, 2001). The barriers presented include: working households, transportation, technology, language barriers, administrative support, and mental health. Those included do not encompass every obstacle families may face, however, they provide a starting point for discussion and understanding.

Parent involvement in lower-income families needs a broader focus, including more opportunities and less time constraints (Crockett, 2003). Eighty percent of low-income children live in working households, meaning that 80% of families are coordinating time and effort to be a part of their child's education (Crockett, 2003). In many households, parents are working more than one job or facing circumstances that cause unusual scheduling and the inability to be a part of the typical school day. Schools will typically invite parents to chaperone school field trips or

participate in classroom activities. However, this requires a parent who is able to adjust her/his work schedule or a parent who does not work outside the home (Lott, 2001).

Many school districts are considerably large, geographically, and do not have public transportation. With gasoline costs rising, families have been forced to make dramatic cuts in their weekly mileage. Consequently, school activities may not be a priority in households where one or both parents need to use their monetary resources for transportation to their job.

Technology is becoming a costly necessity for parents of school-age children. School districts are now placing important information such as grades and testing results on a secure website and encouraging parents to communicate with school staff through email. While this comes as a relief for many families, the cost of a home computer for school communication is not realistic for all families.

Parents who are non-English speaking have many concerns regarding school interactions. They may experience feelings of insignificance and unimportance when making efforts to become involved in their child's education (Lott, 2001). According to Harry (1992), who interviewed a group of low-income Puerto Rican families in New York City, one mother told an interviewer, "La opinion de nostotros no vale" ("Our opinions are not valued" as cited in Lott, 2001, p. 251). These parents reported receiving only formal, written communications from schools, incomprehensible and confusing papers from a powerful and impersonal "they" (Lott, 2001). School newsletters and classroom updates that are offered only in English and without translations fail to serve their purpose of informing parents. School staff has failed to create a bridge between school and home. Instead they have widened the gap, and hesitant parents become less involved in their child's education. The differences that exist between the home

culture and school culture may further alienate apprehensive parents from walking through the school's doors.

Teachers who are suffering from burnout or lack of administrative support may not be willing take extra time to understand each child's family situations (Bohn, 2006). They are exhausted from their own stress and cannot comprehend issues outside their own. They are only focused on survival. Ultimately, it is students and families who suffer from the blame game. Support will come from above and, therefore, administration must do their part to allow parents to feel like a part of their child's education (Bohn, 2006).

School is also an intimidating place for many people who have had difficult educational experiences, and entering the doors with their children can be terrifying. Some emotional scars are powerful enough to prevent adults from being a part of any school environments (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Feelings of danger, vulnerability, and helplessness may be beyond a parent's emotional ability and s/he is not able to enter her/his child's school (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Situations involving parents who feel extremely defensive of their child's well being due to their own past circumstances may experience difficult communication between the school and home. Rather than being resolved, these issues tend worsen as the child continues through school.

Finally is the consideration of a parent's mental health. Many Americans are suffering from exhaustion, stress, and depression. Consequently, our nation's schools experience the same issues. Families may be struggling with abuse issues, chemical dependencies, or more severe mental health diagnoses that require intensive support for the caretaker. Families in poverty who are focused on survival may have a difficult time placing priority on parent-teacher conferences and field trips.

Our school systems need to prepare for this reality and make systematic changes rather than lay blame on struggling families. The learning, academic achievement, and social development of students who are in poverty can be affected positively or negatively by the attitudes of teachers and administrators and the involvement of families (Bohn, 2006). In the search for solutions to strengthen and maintain positive relationships between home and school, schools must look inward and put an end to “quick fixes” and problem-focused approaches.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this literature review is to determine what services are offered to low-income families within public school systems and to critically examine the solutions and suggestions that will encourage parental involvement by examining current literature.

Definition of Terms

Low-income: Households with incomes that are less than 50% of the median household income, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, adjusted for family size.

Poverty: A person is “in poverty” if s/he resides in a household with income below the U.S. poverty threshold, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. Poverty thresholds differ by family size and are updated annually for inflation. However, they do not take into account geographic differences in the cost of living.

Parent confidence: perception of parenting ability, a belief in one’s abilities to appropriately parent and care for their child.

Assumptions and Limitations

It is assumed that an exhaustive search of the current literature will be conducted. It is assumed that the literature may not only be current, but will also be valid and empirically based. And, it is assumed that the research will be thoroughly and objectively examined, setting subjectivity and bias aside. However, limiting factors must be considered.

All research on the topic will not be investigated. It is possible that the author's interpretations and perspective may impact the paper to some degree. Lastly, although empirical research may be sought, it may be difficult to find and outdated at times.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter will include a review of the literature in relation to attitudes toward low-income families and services provided by public school systems. A brief history of parent involvement, teacher perceptions, and an overview of suggested program models for school systems to implement will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with a summary of current research in the area of low-income parent-school partnerships and a comparison of approaches.

History of Parent Involvement within the Schools

American history is filled with unsuccessful attempts to reform education. Knudsen (1998), states that American public schools have experienced a number of crises since being established in the 19th century. It has been generally accepted that schools mirror society (U.S. Department of Education, 1995 a) and consequently, perceived crises in the educational system resulted from societal change.

Historically, parents have been the educators of their children. In the past, they provided the necessary education to understand culture and purpose as defined by each family's position within the community. When small schools formed, knowledgeable teachers from within the community were hired. They knew the community and parents on a personal level, and reinforced the values that were already instilled at home (Butenhoff, 2003). By the mid 1800s, a separation between families and schools began. The industrial revolution's impact on families was damaging. Children were home alone, parents were working late and odd hours, and the sense of community provided by small schools and close neighbors was missing. In order to regain stability, the school system required attendance and set curriculum (Butenhoff, 2003).

New Relationships between Institutions

In the 19th century, schools were located further from homes and the relationship between parent and school became even more impersonal (Butenhoff, 2003). According to Knudsen (1998), education plays a critical role in promoting social equality and eliminating poverty, racism, and sexism. Thus, Head Start and Title IX were introduced and the subject matter of parental involvement began to take shape. Educators wanted to know the components of best practice and how to implement them into their classrooms (Butenhoff, 2003). The government took notice of improving schools with the recognition of the need to maintain U.S. leadership and competitiveness in a global economy (Epstein & Sanders, 2000).

On March 31st, 1994 *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* was signed into law (U.S. Department of Education, 1995 a). It encouraged broad-based community involvement in education and included a goal that urged parents and family members to become more involved in children's education. That same year, a report made by the Families and Work Institute (1994), stated that families are integral to children's readiness for and success in school. Children who are most successful in school are those whose families care about their education and are involved in their learning (Lott, 2001).

In 2000, Secretary Richard W. Riley signed "Goals 2000, Strong families make strong schools" (U.S. Department of Education, 1995 b). It is based on the premise of outcomes-based education - that students will reach higher levels of achievement when more is expected of them. Educators expect parents to participate in their child's education through school communication and helping the child at home. Accordingly, schools must inform parents about the school system and its functions. Teachers must guide parents in monitoring, assisting, and interacting with their

own children at home on learning activities that are coordinated with class work or that contribute to school success (Epstein & Conners, 1994).

The Peril of Low-Income Families

A study done by Johnson (1994) found that:

1. More children are being born into poor families than wealthy families, and more parents were themselves unsuccessful in school and lack the skills necessary to assist their own children in schools.

2. Immigration from non-European countries has altered the language, customs, affiliation groups, and child-rearing practices in many communities.

3. Fewer households have children in school. Thus, fewer families feel they have an investment in the schools and its students. (Hochschild, 2003)

The composition of America's public school system is changing and needs appropriate resources. Historically, the response from schools toward low-income parents has neither been positive or supportive. The elitist nature of education and those who oversee its functions may be the most difficult barrier for under-privileged students and their families (Lott, 2001). Rushing (2001) reports that the blame of failure has shifted from schools to students, especially low-income and minority students deemed unteachable and unemployable. Rushing (2001) also states that policy-makers along with scholars supported recommendations that tended to be cast as "blaming the victim" and focused on deficiencies of the victims rather than on the structure of economic and educational institutions (p. 30). Biddle (2001) conveys that:

Unfortunately, most Americans (even educators, let alone politicians) seem to be unaware of the impact of poverty effects on education, and the concept of poverty is largely absent from today's debates about education policy and "reform." Nor has much

research yet surfaced concerned with the mechanisms through which poverty play out its evil effects in education. (p. 3)

According to Lott (2001), the school's attitude toward low-income families is translated into negative, discouraging, and exclusionary behavior and is communicated to low-income parents in a myriad ways. Low-income and working-class parents, as compared with middle-class parents, "receive less warm welcomes in their children's schools; their interventions and suggestions are less respected and attended to; and they are less able to influence the education of their children" (p. 249). Deeming low-income families as incapable will only contribute to their further exclusion in the schools and decreased parental confidence.

Research completed over past years illustrates examples of middle-class bias by teachers and school administrators. Polakow (1993) (cited in Lott, 2001), conducted oral interviews in Michigan, and reported hearing a teacher in a public preschool program for "at-risk" children tell a mother, "You people better do something about your kids" (p. 250) Another teacher was reported as saying, "These people lead such chaotic lives and none of these women are married, so the boys have no role models" (p. 250). Children in poverty were described by another teacher as "all the bad low-skilled kids...[who] come from broken homes... They are either hillbillies or blacks from the poor section where those run-down apartments are...and that means trouble." (p. 250).

In a study by Dodson (1998) (cited in Lott, 2001) on low-income women from Boston, a mother was sometimes late picking up her children after school because she had to travel by train for 45 minutes after making deliveries of her home-baked cakes. The principal at the school berated her in front of her children. "She'd yell at me, 'What kind of example are you setting for your children?' Then she'd get in her new car and drive on out of there." (p. 251).

A Teaching Perspective

It is estimated that nearly one third of teachers leave the profession sometime during their first three years, and almost half leave after five years (Nelson, 2004). This rate is even higher in low-income communities. Many teaching programs have failed to prepare their students for success in complicated urban environments (Nelson, 2004). While graduates of teacher-credential programs may be categorized as “highly qualified,” they still may not possess the kind of knowledge and experiences required for success in these more challenging schools (Nelson, 2004). Being fully prepared to teach is having the ability to develop and critically examine curriculum until it addresses the educational needs within a classroom.

In 1954, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), a voluntary accrediting organization was established. Its mission is aimed at the development of rigorous standards for teacher-preparation programs and processes to determine which Schools of Education (SOE) measure up to them (NCATE, 2002). NCATE and the SOE provide a shared vision in preparing teachers to work effectively in K-12 education. This shared vision includes competency in the area of diversity, NCATE’s Standard 4:

This standard designs, implements, and evaluates curriculum and provides experiences for candidates to acquire and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn. Assessments indicate that candidates can demonstrate and apply proficiencies related to diversity. Experiences provided for candidates include working with diverse populations, including higher education and P-12 school faculty, candidates, and students in P-12 schools” (NCATE, 2008).

The language used within this standard is rhetorical and leaves SOEs the flexibility to define and determine what multicultural education might look like. Many teacher-preparation

programs address this standard with one course in multicultural education, believing this will be sufficient to prepare students with the knowledge and background to teach in settings with multiple ethnicities (Holt & Garcia, 2005). But, as Tozer and Miretzky (2000) explain, if such a course does not enable students to better understand the multiple issues or underlying conditions of diverse populations, from the perspective of race, class, ethnicity, gender, disability, etc., or help students to critically assess their beliefs, values, and assumptions of “otherness,” then students may possess a shallow understanding of the issues surrounding diversity and be ill-prepared to either teach their student about diversity or to work in school settings with diverse populations (p. 113). In the absence of this educational experience, teachers are left to figure things out on their own over time. In this process, teachers experience burnout and are unable to connect with the school community. Unfortunately, the inability to connect will also keep students and families critical of the classroom and school climate.

Nelson (2004), shares her experience as a first year teacher in an urban, low-income school in Rochester, New York.

“According to my verbal feedback and evaluations during student teaching, I should have been very successful my first year. Why, as a first year teacher, did I feel so ineffective, not to mention totally exhausted? I, of course, played the “blame game”. I blamed my difficult year on the fact that the students just didn’t care about school, nor did their parents seem to care how their children performed in school. After all, out of 140 students, only three parents showed up for back-to-school night. I also blamed the administrators in my school who showed so little support for teachers and students. Who ever heard of not having enough textbooks for 7th grade students? ” (p. 476)

Teachers in this position may become defensive of their teaching methods and struggle to relate to the students and school community. They may become unable to truly listen to parents as they are overwhelmed and cannot accept suggestions or explanations outside of their perspective. Accepting the value of parental knowledge seems to be especially difficult for school systems and teachers when the parents are poor and of minority status. It seems much easier, when overwhelmed, to place blame on the student, the parents, and the system. Reflection cannot happen when a teacher's mind is clouded by feelings of blame and frustration. A school system flooded with these underlying feelings creates a toxic environment for parents and staff alike.

Ruby Payne

Payne is a teacher-turned-speaker who conducts more than 200 seminars a year, training more than 25,000 teachers and administrators to work with children in poverty (Bohn, 2006). Her work is immensely influential in education and has raised many eyebrows. Her self-published book, A Framework for Understanding Poverty, has sold more than one million copies. Her principle message is that poverty is not just a monetary issue. It is its own culture with rules, values, and knowledge passed through generations (Bohn, 2006). As poverty rates increase and combine with high stakes testing, Payne is slowly becoming many teachers' heroine.

Payne's work has posed many questions, most importantly, "Is there really a culture of poverty?" And if so, "Are we simply finding another means of oppressing groups who are already at high-risk?" "Is the gap in parent involvement due to the misunderstanding between classes?" And if so, "Can this be solved by addressing class differences or values?" These are dangerous questions to answer.

Research has explored this topic for many years, and schools are left with differing theories and opposing conclusions to consider (Holt & Garcia, 2005). Some responses have stood out more than others. Payne's response to addressing poverty in education is presented with the bells and whistles that for-profit companies can afford. Many educators have purchased her work for their classrooms and claim that it changed their teaching experience. J.K., a Wisconsin special education teacher, reported:

I began to understand each student's experiences differently. I realized my middle-class experiences and values created a barrier with certain students and families. I was trying to reach students through my system's values, rather than understanding their background and beginning from that point (personal communication, September 8, 2008).

Payne has made such an impact that post-secondary programs in education and social work use her texts as a primary resource to educate students about issues of class within their future classrooms. Education and social work entities now offer continuing education credits for participation in Payne's seminars (Osei-Kofi, 2005). Her framework and concepts are transforming school districts and curriculum.

Hidden Rules of Poverty and Middle-Class

According to Payne (2001), hidden rules are the unspoken cues and habits of a group. Distinct cueing systems exist between and among groups and economic classes. Generally, in America, that notion is recognized for racial and ethnic groups, but not particularity for economic groups. The rules examined in her work are those that carry the most impact on achievement in schools and success in the workplace.

Payne's principle belief is that people in poverty face challenges virtually unknown to those in middle class or wealth, challenges from both obvious and hidden sources. The reality of

being poor brings out a survival mentality, and turns attention away from opportunities taken for granted by everyone else. According to Payne (2001), the culture that exists in poverty can be seen in relationships, communication style, jobs, and where pictures are hung on the wall. The differences between situational and generational poverty and also between new and old wealth are outlined in her work. Payne suggests that by recognizing and addressing the gaps, educators will understand their students and have the ability to open doors that were previously closed.

Sections of Payne's basic framework (2001) for working with families in poverty are as follows:

- (1) Poverty is relative. If everyone around you has similar circumstances, the notion of poverty and wealth is vague.
- (2) Each individual has resources that greatly influence achievement and poverty is the extent to which an individual is without these resources.
- (3) The hidden rules of the middle class govern schools and work. Students from poverty come with a completely different set of hidden rules and do not know the hidden rules of the middle class.
- (4) Language issues cause many students from poverty not to fully develop the cognitive structures needed to learn at the levels required by state tests. For these students to learn, direct teaching must occur to build these cognitive structures.
- (5) Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of the middle class. These norms and hidden rules are never directly taught in schools or in businesses.
- (6) For our students to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and at work. We can neither

excuse them nor scold them for not knowing. As educators, we must teach them and provide support, assistance, and high expectations.

(7) To move from poverty to middle class or middle class to wealth, an individual must give up relationships for achievement.

The notion of needing to understand people's perspectives and experiences that shaped them is a significant piece of the human experience and of acceptance. Payne's work builds from this notion and attempts to outline the experiences that shape certain economic groups. Payne (2001), states that educators must consider the experiences that each student has based on their economic background when attempting to understand dynamics within the classroom. Teachers must understand their student's experiences before they can critically engage them in a classroom environment, and more importantly, in their own learning.

Ruby Payne's Critics

While her work may begin with great concepts, many researchers and educators believe her assumptions are counter-productive. Payne's critics say she is oversimplifying the complexities of poverty in the United States and perpetuating offensive stereotypes (Tough, 2007). Lower-income students are achieving at a lower rate than their higher-income counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 1995 a). Should this be written off as a cultural difference? If the blame is placed on the culture of low-income children, is our school system then innocent of the achievement gaps?

Bohn (2006), states that Payne's ideology may effectively prevent social change (p. 371). Rather than implement systematic changes within the institutions, Payne encourages educators to teach families in poverty a different "set of rules" by which to live. If the continuance of poverty is viewed as resulting from particular values and beliefs held by those in poverty, ultimately the

poor are fully responsible for their own condition. As it happens, poverty is a national problem that cannot be addressed until there are realistic opportunities and solutions for families that are struggling.

Bernice Lott

Enter Bernice Lott who also addresses middle class bias and beliefs held by public schools regarding families in poverty. However, her framework begins in a much different place than that of Payne. Lott states (2001):

It is not surprising in view of the tendency for social scientists to either ignore or pathologize low-income families. Knowledge about poor people's experiences in the public schools is limited, particularly if we are interested in learning about this experience from the perspective of low-income parents themselves.

A deficit-model viewpoint is widespread in our culture and largely shared by public school teachers and staff. Lott attempts to address deficits and encourage systemic change that confronts school inequality.

Lott (2001), describes a significant lack of resources on the part of low-income parents to follow through on the desire to help their children negotiate success in school and to be as effective as middle-class parents in communicating with teachers and administrators. Webster-Stratton (1997) conducted a study using Head Start families. Results indicated that low-income parents "frequently talk about not knowing what to ask teachers, how to act in the classroom, and how to develop a positive relationship with teachers." (Stratton, 1997, cited in Lott, 2001, p. 254). Of course, there are many teachers who take this situation as opportunity for improvement. Teachers who make impressive efforts to welcome parents, work through inadequate budgets, and outdated materials for little compensation compared to their teaching equivalents in affluent

districts (Holt & Garcia, 2005). However, we cannot always rely on those willing to travel the extra miles.

Lott (2001) has suggested problems and possible solutions in the public school system (p. 255). Listed below are abbreviated versions of her six suggestions.

(1) Teachers and administrators need to communicate with low-income parents about their children's successes, not just about problems or failures.

(2) The initiative in parent-teacher cooperation must be taken by the schools, which have the advantage of power and resources. To expect low-income parents to bridge the social-class gap without help and encouragement is not realistic and is a "blame the victim" strategy.

(3) Increase the number of ways that low-income parents can be involved beyond that of "consent-giver," or signers of notes. Expand the number of possible roles they can play in the classroom while respecting their work schedules and family responsibilities. Take advantage of the skills, experiences, and wisdom the parents can share.

(4) Encourage informal communications. Low-income parents say that they are more interested in informal than in-school meetings, possibly because they are less likely than middle-class parents to see casually, or "run into," their children's teachers in out-of-school community settings. Schools should always adopt an open-school, open-classroom policy so that parents are always welcome.

(5) Combine the education offered to children in public schools with community social services to their families so that the schools can function as community centers. If schools could provide referral or direct service resources to families, they would be seen

as more welcoming by parents and would encourage greater parental involvement in both school and the community.

(6) The issue of how to better communicate with and involve parents who are not mainstream and middle-class must become a central part of all teacher-training programs.

Though Lott's work only provides general suggestions, her ideas and thoughts are inclusive of struggling families. Her framework suggests that schools can implement small programmatic changes to encourage student success and better home-school connections. Lott's work encourages strong, supportive connections among teachers and administration. This connection piece is vital for burned-out staff or lost first-year teachers. Her framework focuses on empowerment to encourage a relationship between the school and low-income families and communities.

The Epstein Model

Last is Joyce Epstein, developer of the research-based Epstein model of *Six Types of Involvement*, which emphasizes three overlapping spheres of influence on student development (National Center for Student Achievement, 2005). Her platform is about research -- that it is needed to understand all children and all families, not just those who are economically and educationally advantaged or already connected to school and community resources. Epstein focuses on specific programs, such as the *Six Types of Involvement*, to create a learning environment that will create ties and support low income families and communities. A school learning community includes educators, students, parents, and community partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students' learning opportunities (Epstein, 2001).

Epstein provides a framework to review research that ties family and community involvement in schools to positive student outcomes (National Center for Student Achievement,

2005). Family, school, and community can collaborate in six key ways to foster a caring community that students need to maximize their potential in school and in later life. Her work has been recognized by the National PTA and the National Coalition for Parent Involvement. Many school districts across American are utilizing this model to help schools take a comprehensive approach to promote meaningful parent and community involvement in schools (National Center for Student Achievement, 2005).

Epstein refers to her work as an “emerging field of study”, as many schools have not implemented a strong, home-school-community connection program (Lindsay, 2002). Her work consists of three spheres, home, community and school, and six types of involvement that fall in and between the spheres. Each type of involvement supports the collaboration and connection between the spheres and the language is flexible so that each district can adjust the model to best meet the needs of its students. Listed below are abbreviated versions of her six suggestions.

- (1) Parenting: help all families establish home environments to support children as students.
- (2) Communicating: design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and student’s progress.
- (3) Volunteering: recruit and organize parent help and support.
- (4) Learning at home: Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.
- (5) Decision making: Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.

(6) Collaborating with community: Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Epstein's complete model includes possible challenges, expected results, and recommendations for implementing and establishing school policies. She provides a packaged, research-based model for schools to adapt and begin building partnerships. In an educational world of accountability and testing, the capacity to take on the challenges of low-income schools with evidence-based programming is well received (Lindsay, 2002). The *Six Types of Involvement* have been proven with students and families, they are not possible solutions or "band-aids". Struggling teachers are able to implement the model without extensive training and can expect results.

Critics believe Epstein's model attempts to explain the origins, meanings, and effects of parental involvement as a requisite of schooling, and particularly as a policy solution for low achievement and even inequity in the American educational system (de Carvalho, 2001). Epstein does not address the complications and implications of parental involvement. The home-school ideal uses parental involvement as a means to enhance or equalize school outcomes, but disregards how family material, cultural conditions, and feelings about schooling differ according to social class (de Carvalho, 2001). Therefore, the Epstein model ideal projects an image of middle class, suburban community schooling rather than an invitation for diverse families to recreate schooling. Family autonomy may be lost as conventional wisdom of parental involvement dictates school policies.

Chapter III: Critical Analysis

Summary

The benefits of family involvement are tremendous. The learning, academic achievement, and social development of low-income students can be affected positively or negatively by the attitudes of staff and the involvement of family. Students are more resilient with the presence of a parent or parent figure to help them navigate their education. School staff is able to better serve their students when they have support and communication between home and school. Parents feel valued and comfortable entering the school doors when their child is content and their voice is heard. In the search for solutions to strengthen and maintain positive relationships between home and school, schools must look inward and put an end to “quick fixes” and problem-focused approaches. Energies must be refocused on creating an inclusive community of families. Schools must move away from the tired notion that families who are involved are those only present during the school day.

The three models presented addressed the issues listed above and provided strategies for implementing each. Payne’s provocative language and primed curriculum is holding the attention of school districts across the nation. Her concepts, while dangerous, make sense to working professionals who are experiencing disconnect with their students. Her ideas of “cultural poverty” and “hidden rules” are counterproductive to the larger issue: creating an inclusive environment for students to learn and feel validated. Payne is able to provide real life examples that pull at the heartstrings of professionals and administrators alike. Her work makes sense to the working professional. However, it lacks the research and adaptability needed for today’s classrooms.

Epstein's model fills this gap. Evidence-based research and inclusive language are foundations of her work. The model emphasizes the importance of utilizing the overlap between school, family, and community to maximize building potential and student success. Epstein's model has the capacity to meet the diverse needs of school districts. Sound examples are provided for professionals to build upon and adapt for their students. However, it is unclear whether family autonomy will be lost within the framework. The complications and implications of parental involvement are overlooked in order to address larger, systemic policy changes. Epstein's model creates an equal and welcoming environment to all families if low-income parents are willing to succumb to a middle-class, suburban classroom. This model attempts to correct the deficits of low-income families rather than lay groundwork for a tolerant and flexible school atmosphere.

Lastly is Lott, who proposes that middle-class bias may be the true deficit in these classrooms. Trying to "fix" low-income families does not address the intolerant viewpoints that generate toxic school environments. Lott's framework focuses on empowerment to encourage a relationship between the school, low-income families, and communities. She avoids a deficit-model approach and suggests that schools can implement small programmatic changes to encourage student success and better home-school connections. While Lott's language and suggestions are general enough to be applied in various settings, the challenge becomes a lack of specificity. Her proposal is without a method for implementation and only provides an outline to follow. Schools would be wise to use Lott's framework as a guide when designing school policies and programs. However, her framework cannot stand alone and will require districts to find accommodating programs and material.

Recommendations

Through comparative analysis, this author recommends a synthesis of the three presented frameworks. Though each framework is exclusive to its own research and concepts, there are strengths within each that can be combined. In the push for research-based initiatives, schools will need to determine what will work best for their school rather than adopt the best research or most provocative curriculum.

Overcoming the barriers of poor school attitudes toward the involvement of low-income parents will require a paradigm shift. This author calls to address the shift with more research and opportunities for overlap. School districts search far and wide for appropriate and well prepared parent-involvement programs. Many are put in place without foresight and quickly lose momentum. Programs that are highly marketed do not work for every school. There is a need for researchers to find program faults and continue to make progress. Similarly, districts must find or create a model that will best fit their school's needs.

There is also a strong need in the training of school employees in the area of multiculturalism and families in need. This is a clear deficit in teacher training programs and requires attention. Teaching professionals are unable to correctly perform job duties without having extensive knowledge of the issues that low-income families face and the means to address them. Our schools are throwing first-year teachers into classrooms that they have not been prepared to handle which results in good teachers leaving the field.

Schools must encourage relationship building with students and families as a primary focus. Family autonomy needs to be maintained for any program or initiative to work. School administration will need to model support by finding appropriate resources and encouraging the larger goal -- more involved parents.

Changes must also be made at the state level. Implementing expensive evidence-based programming is not a viable option for districts with limited amounts of monetary resources. Policymakers need to address the discrepancy and make resources available for schools in need. If options and support are not offered, parents are likely to keep their distance and school climate will worsen. Both school and families will resist change if they feel their voices have not been heard or considered. Addressing school climate and parent involvement must be managed delicately as larger policy changes cannot be made if the system is not healthy or stable enough to adapt. Creating a welcome environment for low-income families must begin with open minds and the tolerance to welcome change.

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