Supporting Teachers in Developing Multicultural Family Engagement

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**Abstract**

This capstone paper seeks to explore the development of teacher coaching/mentoring with regard to family involvement and its effect on student achievement. First, a review of the literature will show the vast impact that effective family engagement has upon student achievement—specifically within urban and minority populations—and the necessity for meeting the context-specific needs of families in order to achieve this. Next, this paper will explore the learning and support for teachers, both pre-service and novice, in developing the necessary competencies to combat negative stereotypes and adapt their practice to involve the families that their schools serve, even with a lack of structural or administrative support. Finally, strategies will be offered that teachers can implement in their classrooms and schools that will increase family engagement and therefore increase the effectiveness of the learning experience for students. I will end with the need for further exploration into this topic.

**Background**

My background as a classroom teacher and the frustration that I experienced in regards to ineffective professional development and support, as well as a perceived lack of involvement from the school’s families drove my interest in this project and two papers during the year.

I first explored this issue with Dr. Kristen Neil in EDUC 3220, Parents, School, & Community, by conducting an inquiry project into the barriers that exist when attempting to engage non-English speaking families. I interviewed several Family Involvement Specialists at MNPS schools and attended a town hall meeting hosted by Teach for America that had representatives from many local organizations including the Center for Refugees and Immigrants of Tennessee, KIPP, the MNPS Director’s PAC, and the Urban League. This experience provided additional insight beyond my own experiences into the challenges and benefits of engaging diverse families that has helped developed the framework presented here.

Next, I used my research with Dr. Andrew Hostetler in EDUC 3830, Action Research in Education. For my action research project, I explored the issue of teacher agency and autonomy, along with effective professional development and mentorship. Again, this experience provided the basis for further research into how best to support developing teachers.

This capstone paper serves as a culminating point that will synthesize my two research interests throughout the year and serve to highlight the importance that schools and teachers must place upon family engagement, especially in diverse, urban environments.

**Introduction**

The demographics of this country have changed drastically over the years with students of color now forming a majority in our classrooms, yet far too many of our pedagogical practices and mindsets have failed to change alongside. Statistics show that what we currently are doing in schools leaves many students behind in preparing them for participation in modern society. 20 to 60 percent of urban, suburban, and rural high school students have become chronically disengaged from school—not counting those who already dropped out (Klem & Connell, 2004). On average, the urban high school graduation rates hovers around 50 percent and in New York City, Baltimore, and Detroit, graduation rates in 2006 were a depressing 38.9 percent, 38.5 percent, and 21.7 percent, respectively (Toppo, 2006). Even more disturbing is that approximately 30 percent of high school students “participate in or experience multiple high-risk behaviors (e.g. substance abuse, sex, violence, depression, attempted suicide) that interfere with school performance and jeopardize their potential for life success” (Payton et al., 2008, p. 3).

In spite of this, for at least the last decade if not longer, the emphasis in US education has been on raising academic standards and student (and teacher) accountability through frequent standardized testing. However, the achievement and opportunity gap persists despite the standardization movement’s claims of rigor, coupled with high-stakes testing (Stiggins, 2002). Thus, it becomes necessary to reflect on the fact that what has been focused on as a solution, is not working. We first must acknowledge the many dimensions that constitute our students’ lives and that academic learning and achievement do not happen in a vacuum. If we truly are to help all students reach their full potential and improve the above trends, we must address the development and education of the whole child. The only way to effectively achieve this is for schools and families to form operational partnerships that foster learning in all aspects of a student’s life.

**Family Involvement**

Parent and family involvement isn’t a new concept; for decades, research has shown the positive effects that parent involvement has for both the school environment and student achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001). More importantly, this effect is even greater for students from ethnically, linguistically, or culturally diverse backgrounds that fill our urban classrooms (Finn-Stevenson & Zigler, 2003). For this paper, I define diverse urban environment using Waddell (2013), as a setting where people of “multiple ethnic backgrounds who dwell in cities and bring their cultural, ethnic, socio-economic, and familial diversity to the city schools they attend” (p. 2). Since again these students are now a majority and it is in our urban schools that we see the biggest gaps in opportunity and achievement occurring, we need to look specifically at how to engage these diverse populations. So what actually is family involvement? Does it look the same for different ethnic/racial/SES groups? And more importantly, do schools and families perceive the role of family involvement the same way?

The most prominent and foundational theoretical framework for defining family involvement was developed by Epstein (2009) and defined six types of school-related opportunities for parental involvement: (1) assisting parents in child-rearing skills, (2) school-parent communication, (3) involving parents in school volunteer opportunities, (4) involving parents in home-based learning, (5) involving parents in school decision-making, and (6) involving parents in school-community collaborations. The strength of this framework is that it calls for a broad range of involvement activities from the home to the school and promotes collaborative cooperation between the two. It is also effective because it allows schools to think through the different ways that parents may be involved and the assistance that the school needs to provide in order to help facilitate this (e.g. teaching parents child-rearing skills and how to conduct lessons at home). Though these activities undoubtedly benefit both family and school, it nevertheless only focuses on *how* families engage, not *why* families engage. Due to the many diverse families that our schools serve, this question must be answered first to help schools understand the best ways for interaction and involvement.

To explore this issue of motivation, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) offered up three main issues surrounding family involvement: (1) why parents become involved in their children’s education, (2) how parents choose specific types of involvement, and (3) why parental involvement has positive influence on students’ education outcomes. This framework allows for more flexibility than Epstein’s (2009) as it deeply explored the motivations behind parents’ involvement and attempts to explain *why* parents choose to be involved rather then *how* parents should be involved. Because these motivations vary by background, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) argued that family engagement looks entirely different by race, culture, and environment. Just because we don’t see parents in the traditional role of volunteering or being involved in a PTO/PTA, doesn’t make one form any more valid than another. Furthermore, the motivational belief of the parent, created by their role construction and sense of efficacy in helping their child succeed, is the driving force of their involvement. For example, family involvement generally declines as students get older; involvement is the highest in elementary school, begins to drop off in middle school, and sharply declines by the time the student is in high school. One possible explanation is that for parents who may not have a very high education, they are unable to navigate the intricacies of high school homework or aid their student in applying for colleges. If a parent does not feel effective in advocating for their child, most likely they won’t continue to do so.

Specifically for minority families, unique challenges exist in our schools today. In her seminal work on the lives of children from different SES groups, Lareau (2011) indicated that parents living in low-income neighborhoods do not have access to the same financial and educational resources as their middle-class counterparts and may experience “time poverty” that limits their involvement. Many parents do not work traditional 9-5 jobs or may lack reliable transportation that makes getting to the school feasible. Moreover, some minority parents, especially African Americans, may be reluctant to become involved because of their own negative experiences as a student (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). These previous negative interactions serve to propagate a continuing cycle of suspicion and frustration, regardless of what the school or teacher attempts.

These factors become compounded for our immigrant parents who may be unable to help their children succeed to the extent they would like because they are not familiar with the US school system, cannot speak English very well, and generally do not understand what the schools expect of them (Nam & Parl, 2014). As well, many immigrant parents from certain ethnic groups feel that educating a student is the teacher’s job, and getting involved in a child’s education is perceived as disrespectful of the teacher’s expertise (Johnson, 2003). Additionally, Carreón et al. (2005) argued their experiences are generally a process of isolation that make it difficult for them to create social support networks for two main reasons. First, because language is an instrument of identity and power, parents lose some of the authority they possessed in their home countries due to their limited familiarity with English. If a translator is not available (which is often for a variety of reasons), parents have to rely on their children as translators, disrupting the power structure both within the family and the school. Second, the social and cultural capital (Bordieu, 1986) that immigrant parents draw upon to influence their actions often differs from the forms of capital recognized and valued in the school’s cultural world. Thus, a disconnect is created between schools that decry the lack of parental involvement and parents who are frustrated at feeling like they do not belong. Carreón et al. (2005) highlighted this disparity with an interview with a Latina parent She had tried to get involved in the traditional way of joining the PTA, but no one was available to translate and even in the rare instance there was, only parts were translated. Ironically in this case, the more she attempted to be involved in the way the school wanted her to, the more she felt like an outsider and second-class parent.

Keeping these unique realities and challenges in mind, Lopez et al. (2001) offered insight into several successful strategies that schools with high populations of immigrant and migratory families were able to implement. Their main findings suggest that the foremost criterion for successful parental involvement programs was a steadfast commitment to meet the multiple needs of families above all other involvement considerations. In other words, the schools and overall district understood that before any type of practical involvement could be expected of parents, they first needed to address the social, economic, and physical needs of their families. In order to do this, teachers and staff expressed the need to know families on a more personal level, and felt that without this knowledge, it would be very difficult to understand the lived reality of migrants and therefore be able to effectively support them. A main part of this was believing that schools were responsible for initiating parental contact, and often relied on nontraditional means to get families involved in their student's education. As well, adult education and training courses were offered to improve the social capital (Bordieu, 1986) of parents so that they could more successfully interact with overall society and be aware of their parental rights and responsibilities. These successful strategies only fall into three types of Epstein’s (2009) framework—assisting parents with child-rearing skills, clear communication, and collaboration—but nevertheless highlight that by adapting to the specific needs of their families, these schools were able to have extremely high levels of family involvement outside of the traditional perspective.

For urban schools with a predominantly African American population, Williams & Sanchez (2012) conducted a study to find common themes between the perceptions of schools and parents. Five major themes emerged regarding the meaning of parental involvement at the school: Participation at School, Being There Outside of School, Communication, Achieve and Believe, and Village Keepers. The biggest takeaway was that the way in which school personnel interacted and communicated with parents played the most defining role in the level in which parents participated in their child’s high school education. In other words, school receptivity was the strongest predictor of parental school involvement; parents who believed that the school wanted them to be involved were far more likely to be involved. This is important as once again out of the five themes that emerged as to how families were involved, only three fall into Epstein’s (2009) framework. Yet, this school was highly effective at engaging with their specific population.

These two studies conducted by Lopez et al. (2001) and Williams & Sanchez (2012) emphasize that although existing models of parent and family involvement can be useful, no single model encompasses the meaning of parental involvement for those within their specific setting. School personnel in both studies strongly believed in crafting support for families based upon personal relationships and collaboration.

**Coaching and Support**

Acknowledging now the importance and power that effective family involvement has for schools, especially for highly diverse urban ones, how can teachers best be equipped and supported in developing these relationships? Research already shows the dramatic effect that highly qualified teachers have upon student achievement within the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2010), so the training and retention of these teachers should be a top priority. Sadly, most educators and those involved in the field are well aware of the depressing 50% teacher dropout rate within the first five years of teaching and the even higher rate in diverse urban environments where they are the most needed (Ingersoll, 2003). On a more positive note though, research also shows that effective mentoring and support can ameliorate this issue (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). In other words, teacher agency—the ability and capacity to make choices and effect change to adapt to their circumstances—is arguably the most important skill that needs to be developed through mentoring and professional development. However, in the context of urban, high-needs schools where this would be the most necessary, it is also the most constrained. It is necessary to look at the state of pre-service training in order to assess how teachers are being prepared for these diverse environments as well as common methods for ongoing professional development and its effectiveness.

Wang & Odell (2002) provided a comprehensive review of pre-service teaching programs and argued that understanding and interpreting students has become increasingly challenging for novice teachers. This is mainly due to the fact that our teaching force remains predominantly White middle-class females, which directly contrasts with the majority of students in the classroom. One study reported that novice teachers are not able to reconcile the assumptions that they should treat students equally and at the same time approach students' learning individually and differently as needed to be culturally responsive (Kennedy, 1991). Thus, novice teachers often treat student diversity as a problem rather than a resource.

Why is this though? If the entire purpose of these teacher education programs is to prepare teachers to be successful in today’s classrooms, how can the knowledge pertaining to student diversity be so woefully lacking? Wang & Odell (2002) contended that the primary reason for this was that pre-service teachers' beliefs about knowledge, learning, and teaching often mirror the prevailing theory of teaching as a process of transferring information from teachers to students (Weber & Mitchell, 1996) and that teacher education coursework is often a weak intervention for changing or developing novice teachers' beliefs and dispositions (Wideen et al., 1998). The main reason for this weak intervention is that pre-service teachers' beliefs are most commonly formed through their personal experiences in schools and their classroom learning (Holt-Reynolds, 1992) and teacher education courses do not focus on having them question their dispositions and beliefs.

Clearly, traditionally educated teachers are not being effectively prepared to engage with their diverse student populations and families at their school sites. Thus, it seems that the skills and pedagogies being taught to pre-service teachers are isolated and disconnected from the realities they will face entering the classroom. If this is the case then, it falls to the ongoing professional development and support provided by schools and districts for their novice teachers to help fill the gaps. Again, Wang and Odell (2002) provided a comprehensive review of various research on mentoring programs and found that most revolve around the idea that the role of mentoring is mainly to provide temporary emotional relief for novice teachers, not the further development of practice and skills. As new teachers face a multitude of challenges and generally have a limited repertoire of strategies, routines, and practices, they may feel discouraged from attempting or implementing innovative practices (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000), let alone reflecting on and challenging their preconceived notions about their diverse students.

But with the overall move towards the standardization of curriculum and pedagogy, most ongoing professional development focus on the technological and skills-oriented approaches necessary for having students take standardized tests, removing space for reflective thought and critical interrogation of the curriculum (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012). Additionally, even when there is a priority on mentoring and support, the tendency is for districts and schools to view support as something provided *to* teachers *by* experts, not something that is initiated by the teachers themselves (Anderson, 2010). As mentioned previously, teacher agency and the ability to adapt practice to circumstance is one of the most critical skills that needs to be developed; therefore it becomes problematic when support isn’t considered from a proactive point of view because, by that omission, it “deemphasizes teachers’ capacities to identify, seek, and secure supportive resources in relation to challenges they face in the local contexts of their work” (Anderson, 2010).

One way to avoid these issues is with "educative mentoring" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), a specific type of mentoring that helps novice teachers use their own practice as a site for learning as they work together with mentor teachers in “co-thinking relationships.” Educative mentoring takes a developmental view of learning to teach and unlike more traditional forms of mentoring, educative mentoring seeks to meet the immediate needs of novice teachers while also focusing on long-term goals for growth. In addition, this type of support serves as an individualized form of professional development as mentors begin with discussions of issues of immediate concern to a novice and help them develop alternative perspectives that lead to new solutions to difficulties. Most importantly, educative mentors strike a balance; they value the unique ideas of each novice while developing with them shared visions of good teaching practice. Educative mentoring seems to address each of the issues previously raised about current teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional developments, but how effective is it actually?

Anderson (2010) conducted a study utilizing educative mentoring that also sought to take a more inductive and proactive perspective on teacher support and consider teachers’ support seeking as a manifestation of teacher agency. By doing so, teacher development was not dependent upon the support of either school or district and could be tailored for each teacher’s need. The main participant in the study, Liz, was a first year teacher whose mentor encouraged her to seek out support and guidance, both from fellow teachers and support staff. She was repeatedly urged to reflect upon and sketch out visually the support network that she was building and what exactly she felt comfortable doing with each source. For example, from a more experienced teacher she expanded her pedagogical resources and from an assistant in the front office who was from the local community, Liz was exposed to valuable information to relate with her student. In the context of this study, the act of visually creating a representation of their supports allowed the teacher to reflect upon their practice and gain further insight into their degree of dependency and plans for future action, as well as adapt their practice to meet the needs of their diverse students and families.

Bieler (2013) as well praised the uses of educative mentoring as it would also address another main issue that is common amongst professional development: that it generally does nothing to promote collaboration among teachers who may feel isolated as new teachers. Bieler (2013) argued that the experiences of teachers are too often characterized by various kinds of separation, from the school day divided into time periods, to individual teachers spending these periods in separate classrooms teaching separate subjects, to separation from one another during most of the school day, to what often are ideological distances between their schools and their university coursework. As an educative mentor, Bieler (2013) maintained that three pedagogical moves were necessary in order for novice teachers to realize their potential as independent agents of change and effectively engage students.

The first move was to provide openings for student teachers’ voices, particularly in the early stage of the relationship, to cultivate their sense of agency. If teachers feel that their opinions and concerns are not heard or invalid, then they as a person and professional are invalidated. The second move involved exhibiting continuous inquisitiveness and questioning them about how new information connected with their ever-developing identities as teachers and learners. Reflection as a tool for growth and development can be powerful indeed, and Dewey (1933) maintained that reflection is truly the *only* way that we can improve. The third move was to reinforce a holistic perspective of the student teachers’ students; a view of their students as more than just students—as people whom are experts in their own right, with complex lives and which school is only one part. If teachers can embrace that students bring their own type of social and cultural capital (Bordieu, 1986), the classroom becomes a more democratic place with reciprocal teaching and learning. All three of these moves are important, but the third is critical in developing the culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) necessary to effectively engage diverse students and their families.

Having been a classroom teacher and serving as an instructional coach with Teach for America in Nashville, I have experienced firsthand the overwhelmed feeling of suddenly being responsible for a classroom when you do not feel prepared and in attempting to support novice teachers overcome these same feelings. What is different from my support as classroom teacher to the support offered for Teach for America corps members is that TFA has placed a priority on developing teacher mindsets about their students. Three full days was devoted to a “Justice Journey” that had CMs exploring key locations around Nashville that speak to its rich history and diverse population, such as Fisk University, American Baptist College, and the Islamic Center of Nashville. Being exposed to these places is just the first step in an ongoing development that has CMs weekly engaging with a range of topics from culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) to critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) to microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) in order to reflect upon their practice and effectively respond to the needs of their students. For my corps members, I am using a form of educative mentoring myself as I provide best practices that can be immediately implemented as well as strategies for reflection that empower the novice teachers to take ownership over their own growth. This seems to be the greatest strength of educative mentoring and why it could be the solution to many of the ills that plague traditional professional development; teachers take control of their own learning while gaining experience and are able to immediately adapt their practice to their specific students due to the constant reflective structure. As well, it is not dependent upon administrative support; after the initial mentoring, teachers have developed self-agency and professional confidence to navigate their own development and seek out new avenues for growth independently.

**Strategies**

Having now looked at ways teachers can be supported in developing the competences necessary to engage diverse students and families, what are strategies that in-service teachers can actually implement? One way to do this is with homework. Mapp (2003) conducted a study on how parents of different races defined their participation in their child’s education and found that an overwhelming majority of Black and Hispanic parents said that the main way they are involved in their child’s education is by helping with homework. But a bit more digging shows a different picture that for many parents, they just check to make sure that they are doing it, not actual participation or guidance. TIPS (Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork) is a framework developed by Epstein (2001) to help remedy this by involving elementary and middle school parents in their child’s homework. The main point of TIPS is to make an interactive assignment where parent and child are working together, which obviously entails that the parent does not need to have content knowledge to participate. These assignments are generally assigned no more than once a week to allow plenty of time for parents to assist, can be a message between the parent, student, and teacher ensuring that everyone is on the same page, and can be applied to all subjects. Since the assignment will be a collaborative effort between student and family of a real-world application, student engagement will increase (Bransford, 2000). A vital component though is that these assignments are culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1995) that engage students and need to be an integral part of the curriculum (Banks, 1994), not merely additive or enrichment.

One such assignment from a poetry literary analysis unit asks the parent and student to read through a short poem written by a well-known Black poet, analyze the poem using the TP-DASTT strategy, identify at least two literary devices, before finally writing a thesis statement for what would be the start of a literary analysis paragraph. The student would take ownership of showing the parent the strategy, but in addition there are several questions that they will answer together with no need for prior knowledge, merely the ability to think about what they just read together. The last section is an opportunity for both parent and student to communicate with the teacher about the difficulty of the assignment, enjoyment, and ensures that the parent understands what is going on in the classroom. With one strategy, a teacher is able to engage parents in two types of Epstein’s (2009) framework of family involvement—parent-school communication and involving parents in home-based learning.

If there is a bright side to all the testing that’s now required in schools, it’s that the results are a goldmine of information. Testing is not going anywhere soon, so the data might as well be put to good use. By looking at the data, school staff and parents can see how students fare from year to year and across subgroup. In addition, a glimpse is offered into how students are doing in different subjects, at all the grade levels, and across all programs (Title I, ESL, SpEd, gifted, magnet, etc.) With all of this data readily available, another way for teachers to engage families is with data (Henderson et al, 2007). For one, teaching parents and families what data is, how it is used, and its importance will increase their social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and therefore confidence in interacting with schools, enabling them to become more effective advocates for their children. For practical purposes though, this would allow teachers to target extra help for students by giving parents information about how to work with their children at home or find a tutor/after-school program. When student test reports come back (school, district, state, etc.), teachers can help parents analyze the information and identify skill areas that still need work. While this would be most effective if implemented across an entire school, individual teachers would still be able to accomplish something similar within their own classes.

In addition, No Child Left Behind provisions require every Title I school (which are predominantly in diverse, urban areas) to develop a school-family compact or agreement (Henderson et al., 2007). Teachers could make use of this compact to make clear what each group—parents, teachers, and students—should do to encourage student learning guided with data. For example, a parent commitment could be to monitor their child’s progress at home, based upon data previously shared. Students could commit to working on math and reading skills at home, using materials the teacher sends home. Teachers could commit to keeping families informed of their children’s progress and needs in each subject. Again, this would have the biggest impact if employed within a whole school, but teachers could still commit to aspects on a smaller scale. By utilizing data in an explicit and specific way with families, a teacher would be able to engage families in even more types of Epstein’s (2009) framework: assisting parents in child-rearing skills by building the cultural capital necessary to understand how data impacts their student’s achievement, providing clear school-parent communications centered on data and tracking of student progress, involving parents in home-based learning by showing what specific areas a students needs increased support in, and to some extent involving parents in school decision-making by empowering parents with the knowledge necessary to advocate for their student’s specific needs. Building in effective family involvement will make a classroom more effective and the benefits to the students last longer.

**Conclusion**

If we as country want to continue believing that education is a gateway of opportunity and should prepare students to become active participants in society, then we must acknowledge that teachers play a fundamental role in preparing students to take on this responsibility. I have shown though that engaging families in diverse, urban environments is critical in developing the student as whole and makes the overall learning experience far more effective than just focusing on academic achievement in the classroom. Since many teachers do not look like the students they are teaching however, they may be affected by stereotypical views of their students and need support and development centered on reflection and collaborative learning to become successful. Teachers need to be equipped with the self-agency necessary to adapt practices in order to create equitable classrooms for their students and engage families. Further exploration must be conducted on how to restructure existing teacher education programs and professional development/mentor programs to ensure that pre-service and in-service teachers are exposed to the realities that minority families face and engage in reflective practice that adapts to the context-specific needs of their school environment.

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