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Why Urban Parents Resist Involvement in Their Children's Elementary Education

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Keywords

qualitative research

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Why Urban Parents Resist Involvement in their Children's Elementary Education

by

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Abstract

We examined the perceptions of teachers and parents about family involvement in urban schools. The study generated from several others that we have been conducting about teaching in high poverty, urban schools. Using focus groups, our purpose was to learn how we could better prepare teachers for urban schools. The data revealed that teachers are frustrated with a lack of parental involvement in literacy activities at home and at school. Parents, however, expressed distrust toward the local elementary school because they felt the faculty has been biased against African American and Latino children and their families. Consequently, the parents said they deliberately decided not to participate in school activities. Parents explained they would only work with teachers who respected and valued their children. Results of our study point to the importance of helping new teachers learn strategies for developing strong trusting relationships and effective communication strategies when working with urban families.

Experienced teachers are well aware of the benefits of family involvement in children's education. In the past, parental support was always thought to be a critical component of education, and teachers assumed, whether accurately or not, that families supported their efforts and expectations for children's learning. Yet in contemporary society issues about parental support and involvement are complicated by diverse family arrangements and vast socio-cultural differences among classroom teachers, children and families. In particular, urban families are often marginalized from everyday school life by poverty, racism, language and cultural differences, and the parents often perceive that public education is designed for children from middle class, white families at the expense of others (Oakes & Lipton, [1999](#)).

Many researchers have examined the challenges of involving low-income urban families in their children's education. Comer, Haynes, Joyner & Ben-Avie ([1996](#)) have shown how parent involvement in the most poverty stricken urban schools can improve a building's psychological climate for learning and children's academic performance. Delpit ([1992](#)) argued that families should serve as cultural informants for teachers to interpret children's behaviors. McCarthy ([2000](#)) explained how family involvement in education is influenced by culture, income, language, and the adults' perceptions of school and family responsibilities.

It is widely known that low-income urban parents are reluctant to be involved in their children's education. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler ([1997](#)) identified three psychological factors contributing to this problem. First, the family's perceptions of their role and responsibility in their children's education is the most important factor predicting parental involvement. Middle

class parents, for example, feel that they should collaborate with school efforts. But low-income families often perceive themselves as outside the school system and feel it is the school's responsibility to do the teaching. Second, parental feelings of efficacy contribute to their involvement in their children's school. Parents who believe they can make a difference in their children's education are more likely to visit and participate in school activities than those who feel ineffective. Third, some schools are more welcoming than others, and the extent to which schools make parents feel comfortable and valued contributes to the adults' participation in their children's education. Schools serving low income, ethnically diverse neighborhoods, Hoover - Dempsey and Sandler argued, must make greater efforts to welcome families, because those are the parents who often feel excluded because of differences in their ethnicity, income, and culture.

There are a variety of reasons why low income urban parents resist involvement in school activities, but certainly cultural and communication differences between teacher and families lie at the heart of the problem. Au and Mason (1981) found that when teachers' conversation styles match that of the community, children are more able and eager to participate in classroom activities. Heath (1983) discovered that children will achieve more when their home language patterns and values for literacy resemble that of the school. Cazden (1988) showed that teachers who are familiar with children's conversational styles, including the uses of silence, are more successful in their instruction than teachers who are not.

Urban teachers often lack knowledge and respect of the ethnicities and cultures of the children they teach. Baker, Kessler-Sklar, Piotrkowski and Parker (1999) discovered that teachers often have limited knowledge of what parents do at home to help children in school. Pianta, Cox, Taylor and Early (1999) found that most teacher communication with low income families consists of "low intensity" letters and flyers with little face-to-face interaction with the parents. Moreover, as their number of African American and Latino children increased in a school, fewer "high intensity" teacher contacts with families ever took place. Linek (1997) argued that many urban teachers possess a "We -Them" attitude toward urban parents and do not view them as collaborators in children's education. Valdez (1996) found that even well-meaning teachers do not recognize the impact of family beliefs and values about schooling; consequently, some parent education projects, such as those designed for Mexican American immigrants, do more harm than good because they do not build on the families' cultural capital. Recently, Nieto (1999) and Bloom, Katz, Slosken, Willet and Wilson-Keenan (2000) have emphasized that teachers must establish respectful and trusting social relationships with children and families, and this is essential for any efforts to improve urban education.

Recent research indicates that family resistance to school involvement can be reversed. This can be accomplished when teachers actively develop an understanding of children's cultural backgrounds, and when teachers make sustained and creative efforts to collaborate with families. Edwards, Pleasants, and Franklin (1999) show how "family stories" can inform classroom teachers about children's literacy backgrounds -- family stories about children's reading experiences have helped teachers discard stereotyped notions of literacy in the inner cities. Nistler and Maiers (2000) demonstrated how urban families can become successful collaborators in primary grade children's literacy learning. Like Delpit's notion of cultural informants, Nistler and Maiers argue that urban families can provide teachers with "talent, energy, and insight" (p. 671) about children's learning. They described how parents who were scheduled to participate

each Friday in classroom literacy activities became empowered and real contributors to their children's education.

For nearly ten years we have worked with an urban after school literacy program where our graduate and undergraduate students have tutored children (McDermott, Rothenberg, & Gormley, [1999](#)). Yet throughout this time we did not consciously elicit parental concerns about their involvement in local public schools. Our practica students held individual parent conferences to discuss children's literacy growth, and each spring we held a "Literacy Celebration" where children shared their reading and writing with their families. Yet we never asked the parents about the extent of their participation in their children's schooling. Recently, we also wondered what our best cooperating teachers said about urban family involvement in school. Consequently in this study we examined the following questions: 1) What do low-income parents say about their involvement in their children's education? 2) In what ways do low-income parents and teachers agree or differ about family involvement in school activities? By investigating answers to these questions we might find ways to better prepare new teachers for urban schools. In addition, as we grow in our own understanding of effective family involvement, we can influence the local public schools' relationship with the low-income families with whom our students work.

Method

This study generates from several that we have recently conducted about teaching in high poverty urban schools. In the first study we used a rating scale of best teachers and a Likert survey of teachers from high poverty buildings (McDermott & Rothenberg, [1999](#)). In the second study (McDermott & Rothenberg, [2000](#)) we conducted qualitative focus group interviews of teachers, children, and parents in low-income settings. This present paper reports our findings from the focus groups with urban parents and teachers.

The Setting

The setting for this study is an intrinsic component of our method. We conducted the study in a small Northeastern city. Like many cities throughout the Northeast, this city had undergone a collapse of its century old textile industry. As its factories moved out, downtown buildings that previously contained bustling restaurants and department stores closed. The city's population decreased from nearly 100,000 at the turn of the 20th century to about 60,000 at the present time. The drop in the city's size has coincided with a growth in the African American and Latino population.

The college is located in the city's downtown neighborhood. One block away are four high-rise public housing buildings home to approximately four hundred families. Ninety-five percent of the children living there are African American and Puerto Rican. There is a good deal of interaction between the college community and the residents of the housing project. Much of this interaction takes place in the context of practica required in the college students' course work.

One urban school district and an after-school arts and literacy program, in particular, served as the physical and social context for the study. A few years ago the city school district integrated

its elementary schools. The elementary building serving the downtown housing project had become highly segregated with low-income, children of color. Consequently, the district decided to bus children from the downtown housing project to a more affluent elementary school that is located on the hill in one of the city's remaining middle class neighborhoods.

Data Collection

Our qualitative methods evolved from the first part of a previous study (McDermott & Rothenberg, [1999](#)). That study incorporated a selection of teachers in urban and rural low-income schools, based on observation and reports from informants in each school. Our definition of a good teacher was one who, at any level of teaching, created and cultivated ongoing learning. We administered a survey of teaching practices and beliefs, using a Likert measurement scale. Among the highly ranked results, which included the importance of structure and flexibility, personal warmth and empathy, respect for children and their cultures, and knowledge of subject matter, there were several anomalies. The teachers, who were mostly white, decried children's dialects and grammar; felt that children should never use home language in school. The teachers did not believe that their participation in the community was important to their teaching.

We decided to investigate the teachers' opinions about language and community participation further. Consequently, we developed a focus group of four teachers from the original 25 who completed the Likert survey. Based on previous research (Madriz, [2000](#); Morgan, [1988](#)) we felt that a focus group, consisting of teachers we knew well, would allow us to explore contradictions and complexities of the teaching beliefs from the survey.

One of the focus group discussions examined teachers' perceptions about parent involvement. The poverty levels of the schools where the teachers worked ranged from 83% to 90%. African American and Latino children comprised one third to one half the student population in the urban buildings. During the focus group the teachers produced additional comments that were similar to the results from the Likert survey. We met with the four teachers twice for about 90 minutes each, on May 15 and October 16 of 1998. Two of the teachers taught first grade and two were newly appointed assistant principals in two high poverty elementary buildings. One teacher dropped out after the first meeting because of a back injury.

We designed our parent focus group to generate discussion with the least intrusion of power elements that might be introduced by us. We decided to use a study room in the apartments where the parents lived that was a block from our college. We chose focus groups as our method because of its valued use with marginalized participants, in this case people who are minorities, women, and of lower socioeconomic status (Madrix, [2000](#)). Methodologically, we placed ourselves in the framework of standpoint research because we viewed this group as constructivist, developing their own knowledge and ways of working with it, both within and outside the group (Olesen, [1994](#)).

We had additional reasons for using focus groups as our research method: We selected focus groups because we anticipated that they would offer a non-threatening and comfortable social context when interviewing people who have been alienated from the public education system. The goal of the focus groups was to describe and explain the points of view of inner city parents

and teachers about urban education. We anticipated that the social support and camaraderie of focus groups might help the parents when conversing with us, who are college faculty, European Americans, and outsiders to their socio-cultural communities. Furthermore, we thought that our social roles and color might inadvertently serve as a communication barrier between ourselves and the low-income parents we wanted to interview. Consequently, we thought a group interview context might be more comfortable and supportive for the parents as we discussed their children's education. Labov (1972) used a similar research strategy when he interviewed inner city adolescents in his classic sociolinguistic study of dialect. We knew that recent educational research texts (Gay, 1996; Krathwohl, 1997) discussed focus groups as valid and efficient methods for data collection.

We experienced some difficulty scheduling the parent groups. Although the first one proceeded as scheduled, only one parent attended the second scheduled meeting. That parent explained that the others had already attended a housing project meeting the previous night, and that was why, she thought, no one else came. It took two more weeks before we could identify a night that other parents might come, and at that meeting five parents attended. We met with them on June 10, 1999 and May 25, 2000. We first sent the parents a flyer asking to meet and discuss their thoughts about their children's best teachers. We did this because we wanted to conduct the focus groups in a positive manner and not use the meetings as gripe sessions. At the first year's focus group seven women, including three African American, three Latina, and one European American participated. In the second year five parents attended, three were Latina, one African American and one European American. The majority of the women attending were in their late twenties. A few were in their mid thirties and there was one older parent of about 45 years of age. The first year's focus group lasted for one and a half-hours, and the second about one hour. We contacted the parents through the after-school arts and literacy project where our college students tutored children. Teachers from the arts and literacy program helped us contact the parents, but we also relied on one parent who helped us schedule the meeting nights.

When we met with the teachers we questioned them about their thoughts pertaining to cultural responsiveness, language diversity, and methods of teaching in low-income schools. We used different kinds of questions with the parent focus group: 1) Have your children had really good teachers and what were they like? 2) What do you think the principal should tell teachers to assist them with their teaching? 3) What kinds of things should new teachers know when teaching in city schools? And for the second year we added, 4) what do you think teachers should do to help parents feel comfortable about attending school events?

One researcher interviewed the parents and the other served as an outside reader of the field notes. Both researchers participated in the teacher focus groups. During the focus groups we wrote verbatim and paraphrased entries about what the respondents said. Afterwards these notes were typed and filled-in with contextual information. We analyzed the notes by testing for emerging categories, patterns, and themes that we detected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the first focus group, the parents built upon what each other said and the conversation became rich and energetic. In the first focus group in particular, the parents expressed frustration and anger about their relationships with school personnel. In the second focus group, some of the parents expressed more contentment and comfort with their children's teachers and the assistant principal. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

Results

We first present data from our teacher focus group, and then share our findings from the parents. Data representing salient moments from these focus groups discussions are presented. That is, we offer data that revealed the frustrations and conflict expressed by the participants in the study. This data is representative of the information and emotional tone shared and displayed during the focus group discussions with the urban parents and teachers.

Data from the Teacher Focus Groups

This focus group consisted of some of the best urban teachers we knew. We had worked with them for many years, and they were well respected by other college faculty and colleagues in their schools. Yet, even this well regarded group admitted an overall lack of success at involving urban families in school events.

The teachers recognized the importance of parental involvement in children's education, but they knew they were unsuccessful in this aspect of their teaching. They thought the mobility of low-income urban people contributed to their lack of involvement in school activities. Diane said that the composition of children in many classrooms changed by half over the course of an academic year. Dorothy agreed, saying that the transience of families, as well as their own alienation from the public educational system, explained the lack of family involvement in school events.

"Maybe the difference is that in my school's community the families are transitional. Parents are new to the community and many of them move in and out of it (over the course of the school year)..."

Frustration characterized many of the teachers' statements about parental involvement. "We have trouble getting them to conferences... They are always working," Meg complained. The teachers acknowledged the importance of involving parents in family literacy events, but they admitted they had little success with it. "We need to teach parents again...we have tried [to teach them about literacy activities]...but many of the parents are so young, and they are afraid to come to school because of their own [poor] school experiences."

Dorothy gave specific examples of the lack of parental involvement in her school's recent Open House: "...this year I only had five out of 19 parents attend. Last year it was worse, with only one parent attending. So, I don't know."

The teachers thought the lack of family involvement in school was an increasing problem. They sensed that parents had become more resigned and removed from the impersonal forces of large city school district. They thought that many parents felt urban schools were unresponsive to their children's learning needs. They felt there was a general deterioration in family involvement as children progressed through school. "In first grade, more parents are actively involved ... they are still clinging to their children.... but in a few years they have bought into the system and they have accepted their children's problems and accepted the system [for good and bad]. "

Yet unlike many other teachers from high poverty schools who often give-up, this group still held high standards for children's learning. They supported Meg's comment, "All the children are going to leave my classroom reading!"

Meg shared her frustration about getting parents to attend school conferences, but said she would no longer accept excuses: "They may have good excuses for not coming to school, but they are not good enough for me anymore! " Yet at the same time, she said it was her responsibility to make sure children learn in her classroom. She did not scapegoat and said that she frequently wakes up at four in the morning to plan ideas for her teaching.

Teachers shared interesting comments about culture and teaching. They said they tried to integrate children's cultural experiences into their lessons. Meg matter of factly said, "You have to include children's language into your teaching... at my school we have 28 ESL children from Asia, Africa, and South American countries...schools are getting more students from other countries and teachers are incorporating these cultural experiences into their lessons." Dorothy elaborated, "It is the right thing to do. A few years ago several of our teachers received a teacher grant for 'Walk a Mile in My Shoes.'" This was a faculty and student collaboration to study cultural and ethnic differences in their schools. The teachers discussed the importance of selecting literature that illustrated the children's cultural backgrounds. Dorothy gave one example of tying literature to children's linguistic backgrounds, "There is a book I like to read to my children. It is by Lois Erhart and it is bilingual." Teachers stressed the importance of integrating children's cultural knowledge throughout the curriculum. Diane explained that she used social studies to discuss children's cultural backgrounds by using music, food, literature, dance...and guest speakers. I even integrate cultural knowledge into science," Diane proudly added.

Data from the Parent Focus Group

The data in this section come from the voices of six mothers who participated in our focus groups. The women are as follows: Mrs. Herrera, a Latina immigrant from Puerto Rico; Mrs. Davis, an older African American woman; Mrs. Taylor, an African American woman who recently finished her degree at a local university; Mrs. Howard, an African American woman; Mrs. Figuerra, a young monlingual parent from Puerto Rico, and Mrs. Evers, the only white woman in the group.

The women said they were very concerned about their children's education. They also said that their children have benefited from some good classroom teachers. Several parents, in both the first and second year focus groups, spoke about a kindergarten teacher who was particularly kind to their children; although she was strict teacher, she looked for positive qualities in each child. Mrs. Herrera, said, "Mrs. DeSantis loves children." When asked how she knew that, Mrs. Herrera said, "She hugs and kisses them!" Although this might seem incidental to being a good teacher, the parents frequently discussed the importance of teachers being respectful and loving of their children. Displaying respect for children and their work such as hugging in kindergarten and praising in upper grades may be more important when teaching children in low income families than middle class ones whose families are already well established and connected in the communities.

Other parents agreed about their experiences with Mrs. DeSantis, whom they all liked. This teacher frequently sent notes home to the parents. This teacher, Mrs. Evers said, "...affirmed my child...Mrs. DeSantis is really good." Mrs. Evers added that this teacher taught her daughter, Liz, to express her feelings: "Mrs. De Santis drew 'happy faces' on her work ...she sent notes home about Liz and kept me informed." Another mother, Mrs. Taylor said, "She gives positive reinforcement...she recognized my child as 'star of the month!'" They said Mrs. DeSantis even came to visit the housing project to see the after school program. Mrs. Evers said, "Mrs. DeSantis stayed in contact with me, even after Liz was promoted to the next grade... Mrs. DeSantis left space on her notes for me to write back...She emphasized choices for kindergartners. But some people say too rigid...Keeps them at their desks, but I like her."

Parents believed it was essential that teachers were positive with their children. Good teachers complimented children frequently about their work and made children feel good about being in school. Mrs. Taylor said, "I like it when teachers look for the positive in kids... Everyone has something positive...Children pick up on it...Children like compliments...Teachers need to look for the positive." Conversely, the parents repeatedly spoke about how the communication they typically received from school was negative. They shared anecdotes about school suspensions, placement of their children in special education programs, and retention. Mrs. Taylor, a particularly articulate mother, shared her frustration with her daughter's school: She was "...sick of hearing the word 'immaturity'...this word was a code (word) to retain kids... it was used to retain children of color...They track my child by saying she is immature... It is the same negativity!" Mrs. Taylor told the other parents they should not feel "intimidated by school...I know they don't make you feel comfortable...They throw language at you ...How many black kids did Piaget study? It makes you feel uncomfortable...teachers should communicate so you understand...teachers need to be creative...build on what my daughter knows...I had some fights with her teacher...Parents should not back off...I don't care what they (the teachers) think of me..."

In the second focus group parents shared a coping strategy for interacting with the teachers. In last year's focus group Mrs Herrera said she was nervous and uncomfortable when visiting the school. When she went to the school her English became awkward, and she could not understand what the principal or classroom teacher told her. So this year she brings her own interpreter, a teacher from the arts and literacy program!

Evidently, the school also improved its strategies for working with families from the housing project. The assistant principal, for instance, came down from the school to visit the housing projects several times. He helped with the bus and he removed dead pigeons from under the bridge that were frightening the children. The parents said this "showed that he cared" to come to the river and visit their community.

Parents appealed for good communication skills in their children's teachers. The best teachers communicated frequently through notes and telephone conversations with the parents. Parents liked teachers who sent home weekly newsletters or notes. They appreciated phone calls and loved it when teachers visited the afternoon tutoring program in the housing project, as a guidance counselor and kindergarten teacher had recently done. Parents discussed how communication difficulties were a major problem with their children's school. Mrs. Howard said,

"Last year I didn't know that my child was doing poorly...the report card said everything was good, yet at the end of the year, she said my child needed to be left back...this year the same thing is happening... they keep telling me everything is good until the end of the year, he is left back." Mrs. Taylor echoed a similar feeling about her child's teacher, "Same thing with Tonya, I didn't know...they never let you know... never once told me she wasn't doing well...they don't tell me what's going on...this year I know how my daughter is doing." Mrs. Taylor said, "No mother wants to hear her child is doing badly. I want to know how to help...constructive criticism...come up with a plan!"

The parents confirmed what the teachers in our focus group said about parent involvement in school events - parents were so busy it was difficult for them to visit. Of course, there was more to it than that. Many of the parents worked. However, their jobs consisted of low wage, low skill employment. So although most worked, they were employed in poorly paid positions, that offered few benefits or security. Consequently, none of them had cars, and to visit the school required a great deal of planning to take time from work and arrange for transportation. It was not simply a matter of jumping into a car and driving up to the school for an hour. Moreover, the parents felt anxious about visiting the school. They generally perceived schools as racist institutions. For example, some parents thought their children were "singled-out" whenever there was a problem in school. Given these issues as well as others, it is no wonder that they have been "always busy" and unable to attend school events.

"Parents have something to do all the time," Mrs. Evers explained. "So teachers should send home notes." "Each child is an individual," she added. "Teachers should call the mother if there is a bad day...maybe the mother can work with the child...they should give information to the mother...let the parent know, nip it in the bud." Mrs. Evers continued, "Some teachers show favoritism...sometimes it is the way they talk with children." Mrs. Davis added, "My child says, 'they dis me.' parents should nip it in the bud!"

We often needed to redirect discussion during the first focus group because of the negative tone of much to what parents said. At that time parents spoke far more about negative experiences with urban teachers than positive. Unanimously, the parents said they felt unwelcome and uncomfortable in the school to which their children were bussed. They complained that many of the teachers "spoke down" to them, some "brushed them off," and others did not answer their questions. Mrs. Howard shared how she felt a teacher was disingenuous to her and her daughter, Alena. The family has a genetic eye disorder that has been passed down through at least three generations, but she said it had no relationship to intelligence. In February of this year the third grade teacher said Alena needed to be retained. "My child came to school in January, but in February they told me she should be left back - only one month and they decided this! They never gave her a chance...stigmatized!"

Parents in the first focus group said teachers did not like being questioned about their teaching methods. They spoke about the principal who did not speak respectfully with them. They wished the school used interpreters to help with Spanish speaking parents. All the parents wanted to be part of their children's education, but they felt excluded because of negative attitudes they perceived in teachers. Mrs. Herrera said, "I feel like dumb going to the school...I'm not comfortable...I don't feel welcome...They don't interpret for me...Teachers look at us as

beggars..." Parents said the teachers have poor communication skills and lack respect for Latino and African American people.

Good communication skills and respect for children and their families reappeared as the most desirable teacher characteristic for these parents. These qualities ran throughout the focus group discussion and were evidenced in each of their anecdotes. The parents also wanted teachers who knew how to teach their children well. They wanted teachers who would be "kind but strict," and they did not want their children "babied." Their children needed to be "pushed to the limit," but done in ways to make "learning fun." For example, like learning a "rap song would be fun!" "Some teachers," Mrs. Taylor said, "baby the kids so much the children believe they are inferior."

The parents also discussed culture and teaching. Mrs. Taylor said, "New teachers should be aware of not just reading 'white' books...they should make an effort to celebrate "Kwansa" because more families are doing it and children should share it...teachers should look into the holidays...they [teachers] should visit here." Mrs. Figuera said (as interpreted by Mrs. Herrera), "It is harder on the Spanish-speaking children to read cursive, so teachers should also print."

Three important topics repeatedly appeared throughout our work with the parents: 1) Teachers need to display respect and love for children. 2) They should communicate frequently with families, and this can be done through notes, newsletters, and telephoning the mothers at home or work. 3) Teachers should visit their community because this shows interest and care for children and their families.

Discussion

In recent presentations at the meetings of the American Educational Research Association (e.g., Allestaht-Snyder, [2000](#); Gunn-Morris, [2000](#); Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, [2000](#)) researchers reported difficulties that teachers experienced in working closely with urban parents. These papers explained that teachers need a whole new set of skills and new psychological dynamics for engaging urban parents in meaningful discussions about their children and their children's learning, especially for children with learning difficulties. Urban teachers reported that their administrators supported neither their efforts nor their problems when it came to parents. Administrators would bow to the easiest solution, and encourage them to avoid future problems with parents. There are very real issues, particularly if, as we believe, engagement with parents is important for low-income children to succeed and for meaningful school reform in low-income urban schools.

This year we are beginning a study with novice teachers, introducing skills, issues, and experiences in working with low income, urban parents. But we find it increasingly difficult to fit into our syllabi, already crowded with new standards, and all that we want and need to teach. This points further to the need for longer teacher preparation programs and more experiences for novice teachers directly in schools while being mentored. It is vital that this experience occurs during the preparation program, given the ambivalence of many schools toward parent engagement.

Urban school districts know the influence families have on children's education. Yet, except in a few rare cases, urban districts are notoriously ineffective at involving parents in school activities. The teachers in our focus group, whom we believed were highly experienced and skilled, admitted they had little success at involving urban families in their children's education. As one teacher said, "They [parents] are always busy."

Our data revealed the urban mothers who participated in our focus groups said they were very concerned about their children's education. They also indicated in many ways that the schools were not welcoming or considerate of their circumstances. Parents from our first year's focus group revealed a surprising point of view about school involvement - they deliberately decided to withdraw from school activities because they thought the school was racist.

Many of the parents' comments indicated that they perceived the school as representing the values and interests of established white America and not the needs of low-income people of color. We suspect the parents assumed a "We-Them" attitude about their children's teachers, similar to what teachers assumed of them. Whether fairly or not, the parents perceived the public school to be unwelcoming, and social interaction with teachers became painful encounters. Even during our second focus group when parents were far more positive about the school's efforts, some parents thought teachers unfairly blamed their children for classroom incidents because they lived in public housing and were bussed to school.

The urban teachers expressed frustration with parental involvement. Although they believed in family participation, they despaired at improving it. However, the teachers did not know that parents deliberately decided to stop supporting school events. Even on seemingly straightforward issues, such as homework, the teachers did not understand the parents' perspective. Teachers complained parents did not help children with their schoolwork, but the parents explained they did not know what homework teachers assigned their children. This frustration and anger felt by the parents were indications of the gulf existing between the community and school.

A year later, there were indications of improvement in the communication between parents and the school. Parents praised the vice-principal who visited their community, and they said one of the teachers visited the after-school arts and literacy program. Parents said these visits showed they cared about the children. There was additional evidence that the parents were learning how to better communicate with the school. Last year one of the parents said the school should provide an interpreter for teacher conferences; but this year she brought her interpreter with her whenever she visited the building. However, even though communication had improved, parents continued to be wary of the school's ability to help.

Social relationships are what drive parents' perceptions of their children's school. There are already so many social barriers between the school and the families due to differences in skin color, ethnicity, culture, and language that the parents are highly sensitive to whether teachers respect their children. The parents said they could recognize when teachers do not appreciate their children. Given the frequency in which this issue emerged in our focus groups, it is clear that teachers' ability to convey kindness and respect for children and their families is essential for their classroom effectiveness and any family support that they might obtain.

Urban parents are more likely to participate in school activities when they feel their children are respected, and their communities and heritages are valued. Yet the parents admitted that they often were busy and could not attend school events. This is, perhaps, why they valued frequent communication from the teachers. However, when parents perceived that the teachers did not like their children, they would not participate or contribute in school activities.

Schools are responsible for establishing open communication with parents. Yet, we learned that teachers, even the exemplary ones, expected parents to communicate with the schools in middle class ways, such as telephoning them, visiting, and writing notes. But parents in our focus group felt vulnerable with school authority, and they could not comfortably communicate with teachers in ways that white, middle-class families were accustomed. These urban parents did not have cars and could not easily visit the school. Some of them spoke English hesitantly, and most, we infer, felt anxious about their own writing.

Urban schools need alternative ways of connecting and communicating with parents who live in high poverty areas. For example, the conventional "Parents Night" might be placed at a community room in the neighborhood where families live. Schools with children who are acquiring English should plan for interpreters when parents attend conferences and other school events. While some of the parents are bilingual, we know their anxiety about visiting school still blocks their ability to understand what teachers say to them.

Teacher education programs must prepare new teachers to work effectively with parents. New teachers need to learn a variety of strategies and skills to involve urban parents in their children's education. Teachers must learn to communicate clearly and sensitively with adults of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They must learn strategies that allow parents to collaborate in their children's education; evidence from other studies indicates that exemplary teachers view families as collaborators in their children's education (Alvarez & Williams, [1998](#); Ladson-Billings, [1994](#)) and not as clients or adversaries.

White, middle class teachers must learn to build trusting and respectful relationships with low-income people of color, and these strategies will differ from what they are accustomed. Teachers should learn about the ethnicities of the children they teach and develop culturally sensitive ways of connecting and establishing good relationships within those communities.

Communicating effectively in multiethnic communities is essential for today's teachers. From the very beginning of their practica placements prospective teachers should learn the importance of parental participation in children's education and ways to bring it about. Prospective teachers must acquire both "low and high intensity" strategies for communicating and working with urban parents. Introductory course work should help students understand their own values and attitudes about diversity. The same course work should provide them opportunities to see and hear what urban life is like for families in high poverty neighborhoods. After acquiring a better understanding of themselves and others, prospective teachers can develop communication strategies that can make a difference when teaching in urban classrooms.

Methods course work should provide opportunities for prospective teachers to learn how to write effective notes, letters, and newsletters to families. Prospective teachers must learn how to

display their value and respect for the cultural backgrounds of the children they teach. They need to learn how schools should be transformed so that cultural and ethnic diversity is celebrated throughout the school year; such celebrations should be evident the moment one walks into a building and its classrooms. Teachers should learn to display books and media representing children's cultural backgrounds. Frequent notes and letters to families acknowledging children's strengths are also helpful.

Urban schools might make greater use of "looping" models of instruction. With "looping" children remain with the same teacher for two years. So, for example, a first grade teacher would move-up to second grade to follow her students as they are promoted. The advantage of looping in terms of family involvement is that teachers will have greater opportunity to construct long lasting relationships with parents and family members. Less learning time will be lost at the beginning of a school year because the classroom teacher already knows the children and their families.

Prospective teachers must learn how to conduct effective parent conferences. They should learn conversational strategies that focus on children's positive qualities as well as identify ways they might grow and be helped at home. Teacher education programs should encourage prospective teachers to visit urban communities. Although many urban neighborhoods are plagued by violence, there are ways teachers can safely visit; for example, teachers might visit community centers, churches and after-school programs. Teachers can attend cultural events that are held in urban neighborhoods. These are all gestures that may help break social and ethnic barriers and foster understanding and respect between family and schools.

From this study we learned the great value of constructing strong, trusting relationships with families and children. Nieto (1999) and Ladson-Billings (1994) argue that meaningful relationships between teachers and the urban communities lie at the heart of effective urban teaching, and the results of our study support their argument. Unfortunately, some of the parents in our study lacked trust and respect for their children's school. We have also learned that teacher education programs must do much more for helping prospective teachers learn about the urban families and neighborhoods of the children they will teach.

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