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## Barriers to School-Based Parent Involvement While Living in Public Housing: A Mother's Perspective

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## Barriers to School-Based Parent Involvement While Living in Public Housing: A Mother's Perspective

### Abstract

Parent involvement is associated with child academic outcomes, positive behaviors, and social skills. This qualitative study explored school-based parent involvement barriers experienced by nine low-income mothers. In-depth interviews were used to collect data from mothers participating in a community-based program offered in a large public housing neighborhood. Findings included three main barriers: (a) cultural and language differences in their children's school, (b) undertones of racism from teachers and parents, and (c) being the primary caregiver or sole provider for their children. Although all parents experience challenges to school involvement, low-income mothers face additional obstacles preventing them from engaging in their children's schools. This perceived lack of school involvement can lead to feelings of helplessness, shame, and stigma.

### Keywords

School-Based Parent Involvement, Public Housing, Narratives

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## Barriers to School-Based Parent Involvement While Living in Public Housing: A Mother's Perspective

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*Parent involvement is associated with child academic outcomes, positive behaviors, and social skills. This qualitative study explored school-based parent involvement barriers experienced by nine low-income mothers. In-depth interviews were used to collect data from mothers participating in a community-based program offered in a large public housing neighborhood. Findings included three main barriers: (a) cultural and language differences in their children's school, (b) undertones of racism from teachers and parents, and (c) being the primary caregiver or sole provider for their children. Although all parents experience challenges to school involvement, low-income mothers face additional obstacles preventing them from engaging in their children's schools. This perceived lack of school involvement can lead to feelings of helplessness, shame, and stigma. Keywords: School-Based Parent Involvement, Public Housing, Narratives*

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Parent involvement in schools improves child academic outcomes (Cooper & Crosnoe 2007; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Topor, Keane, Shelton, & Calkins, 2010). This is particularly true for children and youth living in poverty (Garcia-Reid). Some studies indicate economically disadvantaged youth with highly involved parents are more academically oriented, meaning they like going to school, believe they will get something out of school, and strive to do well in school (Cooper & Crosnoe). Parent involvement is conceptualized in multiple ways and there is an ongoing discussion about what parent involvement should entail. For example, Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) identified four basic types of parent involvement. Two types of involvement occur at home, including discussing school activities, and monitoring out-of-school activities, and two types take place at school, including making contacts with school staff, and volunteering and attending parent-teacher conferences or other school events. In support of an ecological approach, Bower and Griffin (2011) defined parental involvement as: communication with their child, involvement at school and in-home learning activities, shared decision making within the school, and community partnerships. More recently, the 2013 Child Trends report defined parent involvement as a combination of commitment and active participation on the part of the parent to the school and to the student, attending school meetings or events and volunteering at the school or on a committee at least once in the past year (Child Trends, 2013). Although there are different descriptions of parent involvement, there is a consensus about the benefits at multiple levels (e.g., home, school, and community).

Social ecological theory suggests family members and primarily parents have the first and foremost influence on a child's development, before children begin school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and it is widely accepted that children whose parents are involved in their education benefit in multiple ways. Children earn higher grades and score higher on tests, enroll in more academically oriented programs, and are more likely to pass their classes, and earn course credit (National Association of Education, 2002; Topor et al., 2010). Children with

involved parents also attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and ultimately are more likely to graduate and go on to postsecondary education (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Furthermore, children whose parents are more involved in their education have better academic outcomes than children whose parents are not involved (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Topor et al., 2010) leading to more opportunities for social class mobility (Kahlenberg, 2000; Weis & Dolby, 2012).

Although research indicates parent involvement is essential for school success, the barriers low-income parents experience in their involvement are not fully understood. Furthermore, there is limited research examining the factors preventing low-income mothers from being fully involved in their child's school. To this end, this study uses narratives from nine low-income mothers living in a large public housing neighborhood, to explore barriers to school-based parent involvement.

### Literature Review

For several decades, parent involvement has been studied prompting scholars to come to a consensus on the best practices of parent involvement and the impact it has on child academic achievement. The Epstein Model (1987) was one of the first parent involvement models developed and is now one of the most widely used frameworks. Epstein suggests *six* critical elements schools and families need in order to enhance the education of their children, including parent involvement at school, school communication, positive home conditions, home learning activities, shared decision making within the school, and community partnerships.

Although Epstein suggests using these *six* elements to increase parent involvement and improve student success, some limitations exist. First, the role of parents in the decision-making process and the evaluation of parent involvement is often defined by the school and not the parents (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Second, parent involvement strategies are often taken and developed from middle-class European American cultural norms (Jeynes, 2012), which may in turn fail to consider the perspectives of other cultures regarding how families engage in children's educational experiences. Lastly, although parent engagement in schools is one effective strategy for improving children's academic outcomes, this model does not consider race, gender, or socioeconomic status (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Freeman, 2010). Because parental involvement looks different across specific subgroups, parental involvement strategies should consider racial, ethnic, and social class differences.

### African American and Latino/a Student Achievement

Parent involvement in children's education is a key component for increasing the achievement of low-income and ethnic minority students to eliminate the achievement gap between less advantaged and more advantaged students (Dúran et al., 2009; Jeynes, 2003). Particularly for African American and Latino/a students there is a limited body of knowledge that exists regarding which aspects of parental involvement impact these students and the components (e.g., communicating with the school, checking homework, encouraging outside reading, and participating in-school activities) of parent involvement that are most important (Jeynes, 2016). For example, African American students benefit from parent involvement in different ways than white students. African American parents tend to be involved in school related activities such as volunteering, while white parents are more involved at home such as helping with homework (Graves & Brown Wright, 2011). However, researchers have found parent support at home to be key for African American students and their achievement (Lee &

Bowen, 2006), reading comprehension, (Banerjee, Harrell, & Johnson, 2011), grades and standardized test scores (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

Although research on racial and ethnic differences of parent involvement has grown in the past two decades, there is less literature on Latino/a children and youth. Recent literature has examined Latino/a parent involvement in education and found it to be essential for positive education outcomes (Garcia-Reid, 2007). In an attempt to better understand education disparities for Latino/a students, researchers have examined the impact of family on academic achievement (Alfaro & Umaña-Taylor, 2010). Examining family home environments provides insight into the complex layers of cultural systems that affect the everyday life of the family (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). Latino/a parents are more likely to support their children's education through home-based parental support, such as giving encouragement, monitoring student progress (Mena, 2011) helping with homework and having educational resources at home (Altschul, 2011). When parents are involved in their child's education, this increases their sense of belonging contributing to their school success (Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008).

### **Social Class and Student Achievement**

Children from ethnic minority backgrounds experience poverty and the resulting consequences disproportionately to their more economically advantaged white peers. However, poverty rates are nearly doubled for children of color (Lichter, Parisi, & Taquino, 2012; Ou & Reynolds, 2008). Approximately 33% of Latino children, 37% of American Indian children and 39% of Black or African American children, live in poverty. Conversely, 14% of white children live in poverty (Kids Count Data Center, 2014). Therefore, it is also important to discuss challenges to parent involvement associated with social class. Although parent involvement is a key element for children, low-income parents face multiple barriers that prevent them from being involved with their children either at school or at home. Socioeconomic status presents unique barriers to traditional forms of parental involvement (Jeynes, 2005). Low-income parents may work non-traditional hours, have restricted transportation, or lack childcare, preventing them from attending school events or volunteering in the school (Muller, 1995; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Low-income mothers who work full-time or attend school full-time are less likely to be involved with their children's schooling than mothers who work or attend school part-time (Weiss et al., 2003). When low-income parents do engage in schools, it may be for informal conversations or unscheduled visits. This attempt to engage is not what teachers traditionally see and therefore parents are often viewed as obtrusive by schools and teachers (Bower & Griffin, 2011). When schools control the timing of parent involvement and "appropriate" communication then low-income parents are marginalized at their children's school (Freeman, 2010).

As a result, school staff and administrators continue to struggle with engaging minority and high-poverty parents (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Watson & Bogtoch, 2015). Some strategies, such as relationship building, advocacy, and efficacy of parental involvement that are effective for people of color and low-income families are often missing from schools (Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & McRoy, 2015; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Abrams and Gibbs (2002) found schools marginalize parents, ignoring the status differences and re-create the dominant power relationships of race and social class reflective of the larger society. As a result, unequal relationships between teachers and parents occur (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). The resulting lack of parent involvement due to structural barriers can be misperceived as a lack of interest in their child's education.

## Neighborhoods and Student Achievement

Bronfenbrenner (1979) initially thought of neighborhoods as a distal influence on the individual. However more recent studies have offered an alternative explanation and indicate that neighborhoods may in fact have a proximal influence on academic achievement (Henry, Merten, Plunkett, & Sands, 2008; Marjoribanks, 2003) and the concentration of low-income households in low-income neighborhoods is associated with poor school outcomes (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997). Living in subsidized housing, adds additional challenges to the academic success of low-income and ethnic minority children. Housing subsidies provide rental assistance to low-income tenants and are provided by the federal government (HUD, 2017). Children living in neighborhoods with a high concentration of subsidized housing face the added burden of overcoming under-resourced and under-performing schools in their efforts towards academic success (Gennetian et al., 2012; Schwartz, McCabe, Ellen, & Chellman 2010; Varady, & Walker, 2003; Yelowitz & Currie, 2000).

In the United States, there are approximately 1.2 million households living in public housing units (U. S. Department of Housing and Development, 2017). Public housing residents are predominately ethnic and racial minorities (69%) with a further overrepresentation of African Americans (49%). According to the Residents Characteristic Report (RCR), 24% of public housing residents are children and youth between the ages of 6-17 (U. S. Department of Housing and Development, 2014). Since nearly a quarter of public housing residents are school-aged, understanding parent involvement and academic achievement among these students is critical. Families who access subsidized housing often find themselves in a low-income neighborhood with an underperforming school. While research links low-income neighborhoods to negative outcomes there is limited research on the link between living in subsidized housing and parent involvement. As a result, the barriers to school-based involvement for parents living in low-income communities and subsidized public housing neighborhoods is poorly understood.

## Positionality

During our work with the *Your Family, Your Neighborhood* intervention (Lechuga-Peña & Brisson, 2012) parent participants, who were primarily mothers, often shared the challenges they faced while trying to support their children in their education. One reoccurring theme was their desire to be more involved in their child's school-based activities, but several factors impeded their efforts. As they shared their stories, we wanted to learn more about their experiences with their children's school to determine if these were shared experiences among other parents living in public housing neighborhoods. Moreover, we wanted to provide a platform for these mothers to tell their stories and add their voice to the parent involvement literature. Through these efforts, we could begin to change the narrative in which we blame parents for not being involved more at schools and highlight resources needed to improve school-based parent involvement for low-income parents.

## Methodology

This qualitative study used narratives, captured through in-depth participant interviews, to elucidate the experiences of mothers living in public housing neighborhoods. This method provides the opportunity for participants to add their perspective to the debate of the best practices for engaging low-income parents.

## Study Setting

This study took place in a low-income subsidized public housing neighborhood. All participants received a housing subsidy and lived in the housing development when the study took place. In this neighborhood, nearly 87% of children under 18 live in poverty compared to 16% in the surrounding city and it is one of the state's poorest neighborhoods (Piton Foundation, 2014). Approximately, 64% of households are families with children and children make up 54% of the population (Piton Foundation, 2014). It is the only neighborhood in the city where minors outnumber adults (City-Data, 2016). Approximately 46% of residents are Latino/a and 54% are Non-Latino (Piton Foundation, 2014). The study was approved by the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board (IRB 728115-1).

## Recruitment and Procedure

Participants who were enrolled in YFYN were recruited for participation in this study during the eighth session of the intervention. Nine YFYN participants, all mothers, agreed to participate and were interviewed. Participants were interviewed in their home and when possible, interviews were conducted while their children were at school or out of the house to ensure privacy and prevent interruption. At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to provide consent and were provided a copy of the six-question interview protocol (see *Appendix B*). Eight interviews were conducted in English and one interview was conducted with a certified translator in the participant's preferred language, French.

Participants were provided an in-depth explanation of the study and its purpose, and informed that they could discontinue the interview at any point during the interview. The interviews lasted between twenty-five minutes and two hours. All interviews were audio-recorded. Interviews conducted in English were transcribed and the interview in French was translated and transcribed by the certified translator. Data were kept in a secure, locked location and all identifying information was kept separate from the interview data.

## Participant Characteristics

Four participants identified as Latina, three identified as Black, and two identified as African. Seven of the participants were born in the United States, one was born in Rwanda and one was born in Central Africa. Participant ages ranged from 30 to 47-years old and all participants had two or more children. On average, they had lived in this neighborhood for 2.5 years. One participant did not attend high school, three participants attended high school but did not finish, one participant graduated from high school and four participants attended college but did not finish.

## Qualitative Analysis

To analyze the qualitative data, a grounded theory approach was used to examine participant's experiences, context, setting and summary of the study's major themes (Padgett, 2012). Both first and second cycle coding methods were employed using Atlas.ti software. First cycle coding methods occurred during the initial coding of the data followed by second cycle coding methods that were used to develop themes, and a conceptual organization from the first cycle codes (Saldaña, 2013). The in vivo first cycle coding method included words and short phrases from the participant's responses in the transcript as codes to capture the participants' experiences in their own words. These codes were then generated from the language and terms provided in the interviews (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This coding method

provided more familiarization with the data and identified initial codes for the remaining transcripts.

The next method used was Initial Coding. This coding strategy broke down the data into small parts, and allowed a closer examination of similarities or differences in the data. (Saldaña, 2003). This type of coding was helpful in identifying nuances of the data that occurred across transcripts. The *in vivo* codes were then refined creating thematic codes of the transcripts. After all transcripts were coded using first cycle coding methods, *in vivo* and initial coding, one second cycle coding method, Axial coding, was employed. (Saldaña).

Axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data from the initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Axial coding helped determine the dominant codes and the less important codes. If codes were similar, they were merged into the dominant code to decrease the large amount of codes and to sort them into conceptual categories. After using second cycle coding the emerging themes of the data were concluded.

## **Findings**

Findings revealed participants experienced three main barriers to school-based parent involvement including (a) cultural and language differences in their child's school, (b) undertones of racism and (c) being the primary caregiver or sole provider. Although all parents experience challenges to parent involvement, these mothers face additional barriers that prevent them from participating in their child's education. Their lack of school involvement due to barriers they experience is often perceived as a lack of interest and caring in their child's education.

### **Cultural and Language Differences**

One of the first barriers, cultural and language differences were identified when the mothers were asked about their parent involvement at school. In the United States parent involvement is a cultural expectation which may not be the expectation of parents who are still learning about or do not align with our cultural norm. Several of the mothers noted they were responsible for their children's education when they were at home and the school was responsible for their education when they are at school. As was evident in Reine's response,

I brought my child to school, it's the teachers who have to manage the children. I am going to drop off my child here and then after, at the end of the day, I will go get him... there isn't engagement really with the school.

Regarding language, some of the mother's first language is not English and this made it particularly difficult to communicate with the school. Josiana was not confident in her English language skills and was nervous to go to the school, fearing she would be judged,

Actually, you know, if you don't speak English, you're scared. You say, maybe when I speak they're going to say, eee, what is that kind of English? So, like, I'm scared to talk with people or the teacher. Yeah. I'm scared. Maybe when I go to school to learn English, okay, but for now, I'm going home.

This not only impacted her ability to engage her child's school but it prevented her from helping her daughter with her school work. She felt a sense of helplessness, "My daughter ask me



something to do for her, I say, no, I don't understand. I don't know this, she's sad. She tell me, "Why mom, every time I ask you to do this, you don't help me?"

### **Undertones of Racism**

Several mothers spoke about how they were treated at their child's school by staff, teachers and other parents at the school. Maya shared what she perceived as undertones of subtle racism she experienced on a daily basis and the ways parents of color were treated,

The staff and teachers are sharp with them [parents of color]. Not as friendly. I mean, it's like, it's like everybody's labeled in a certain status and if you're not up here, then you're down here, it's not so much attention and it's really quick, really brief. Not so friendly sometimes.

She provided an additional example when she noted how the PTA parents treated her,

I'm not trying to single out people, but, let's just say upper class, above middle parents... you see a lot of that at my son's school, and a lot of them are involved in the PTA. They have the money. They have the resources to get these things going. So we try and get involved, and it's like we're alienated and we're pushed aside because we're not up there like "they" are.

Aliyah shared the following story about how her daughter was treated by her teacher. In this example, she believed her daughter received unfair treatment because her daughter is African American,

Like with my oldest daughter, she was one of the hardest working students in the class and he tried to give her an F. She turned in everything, but this teacher wanted this one final thing. I came right up to that school and said you're not going to fail my baby on one incident. Everybody in this class, including her principal and everyone else knows me., so either you fix it or I'm not leaving the school until you fix it. Oh, he didn't want to do it, but he fixed it, that next day, he fixed it.

### **Primary or Sole Caregiver**

During the interviews, many of the mothers noted how challenging it is to be a single parent and/or the primary caregiver for their children. They shared how much they "love all of their children," but could not provide adequate attention to all of them at the same time. Tianna shared how she struggled to provide the same attention to each of her children. She wanted to participate in both of her children's field trips but could not because they were at the same time. She felt guilty about the choice she made, because she felt like she was choosing one of her children over the other,

I think my kids kind of feel bad when they see the other parents attend things, and then their parents don't. I got to go on [daughter's name] camping trip, I was pregnant and I couldn't do [son's name] camping trip, So I couldn't do his, so he felt bad about that and then I felt bad because I told him I would, you know, go up there, and I couldn't make it up there.

Maya, a single mother, felt the pressure of trying to divide her time between multiple responsibilities, including her time at her son's school,

You know, I'm a single parent. I don't think people see that as much. They don't realize those are things that impact it. I had appointments that got in the way and sometimes we'd have to stop at the grocery store or what not. That's a 45-minute ride on the bus. Now if I had a partner, that'd be different.

### **Discussion**

This study explored school-based parent involvement barriers experienced by nine low-income mothers living in a large public housing neighborhood. Findings revealed low-income mothers want to be involved with their children's education and want to support them in their school-based activities. This is not an uncommon experience for low-income parents as their socioeconomic status presents unique barriers to traditional forms of parental involvement schools recognize (Jeynes, 2005). Furthermore, cultural and language differences with their children's school are clear challenges that these mothers faced, similarly to what Yoder and Lopez's (2011) found when they explored parent involvement barriers for parents living in public housing. These differences made them feel embarrassed and shame. This not only set up a barrier at school but they also faced challenges when trying to help their children with homework causing frustration for them and their children. These mothers also experienced undertones of racism from teachers and other parents at the school. The examples these mothers provide, including how their children were treated in the classroom and the social exclusion from other parents, created a hostile environment and served as an unseen but very much felt barrier. Unfortunately, these experiences are all too common for these mothers and they are confronted with this treatment daily. Finally, they are the primary or sole caregiver limiting the time they have for school involvement. The limited time with their children lead to their feelings of guilt and powerlessness and prevented them from attending school events or volunteering in the school (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Muller, 1995).

### **Study Limitations**

Although this study advances the discussion on school-based parent involvement by examining the barriers low-income mothers living in public housing experience, study limitations exist. First, participants were not asked to review the themes and results. Therefore, member checks should be included in future studies. Second, one of the interviews was conducted with an interpreter and the information may not have been translated accurately or reflected the participant's experiences. Finally, these are the experiences of nine mothers living in one public housing community and may not reflect the experiences of other parents in similar neighborhoods. However, it does provide a better understanding of the barriers many low-income parents experience and adds to the dearth of literature on parent involvement experiences of mothers living in public housing.

### **Study Implications**

Parents who live in public housing often feel silenced and discounted because of where they live and they may carry the stigma of being an uninvolved or disengaged parent. Schools contribute to the master narrative that low-income parents do not care or are not willing to put in the time with their children when they do not see parents involved at the school. However, as indicated in this study, many low-income parents, particularly mothers, experience

numerous barriers that prevent them from being as involved as other parents and experience unique barriers that are not easy to overcome. This can lead schools to blame parents for their children's academic failure and other consequences that occur because of school failure. When these barriers are better understood schools can be more responsive and work towards parent involvement in a more culturally responsive way. Schools can learn from these mother's experiences and develop new ways to engage and support parent involvement for low-income parents. For example, providing translators for parents when they come to the school, providing training for school staff about cultural differences reflective of their student body, providing childcare for parents when they want to participate in their children's school activities and asking parents how they can improve parent involvement at the school.

Like most parents, these mothers want the best for themselves and their children. They have hopes and dreams for their children and want to expose them to rich opportunities. When parents are given the opportunity to tell their story and schools take the time to listen to these stories, then parents and schools can begin to work together to improve school-based parent involvement.

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Stephanie Lechuga-Peña, is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work and has over 15 years of experience in social work practice, working with low-income youth and families. Her research examines factors impacting academic achievement for Latinx low-income children and youth. She co-developed and is testing a dual-generation intervention, Your Family, Your Neighborhood, which is designed to support parents in their ongoing efforts to provide their children with an effective and supportive educational environment within a supportive and engaged community. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [stephanie.l.pena@asu.edu](mailto:stephanie.l.pena@asu.edu).

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