

FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS: THREE PAPERS ADDRESSING LIMITATIONS IN  
PARENT INVOLVEMENT THEORY AND RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

Jenna N. Tucker: Family-School Relationships: Three Papers Addressing Limitations in Parent Involvement Theory and Research  
(Under the direction of Natasha K. Bowen)

Parent involvement in education is believed by many to be an important determinant of academic achievement. Although the literature on the topic has grown a great deal over the past several decades, it continues to suffer from several limitations. First, the research tends to focus on educator expectations for parent involvement, rather than parent perspectives on their own involvement. A related issue is the fact that much parent involvement research treats parent involvement as discrete activities for which parents are wholly responsible, while ignoring the influence of school variables, particularly family-school relationships. Second, the majority of parent involvement research uses elementary school samples, so that much less is known about parent involvement in education during adolescence.

This dissertation addresses these limitations with a series of three papers. The first paper is a review of parent involvement literature. In particular, the review calls attention to the small body of research that addresses parent perspectives on involvement and provides recommendations for integrating findings from this literature into future research. The second paper describes a qualitative study of a sample of African American and Hispanic parents, which found that parents of color had specific goals when engaging in parent involvement and that family-school relationships suffered when schools were not responsive to these goals. The studies also illustrate how social exchange theory might be applied to address these questions. The final study used hierarchical linear modeling to explore home-based parent involvement

among a sample of students at 11 middle schools students. Among the types of parent involvement studied, only parents' academic expectations had significant and positive effects on student school engagement. A supportive school climate was also significantly positively related to student school engagement. The two variables (academic expectations and school climate) had roughly equal effect sizes.

Taken together, the studies demonstrate the importance of considering parent perspectives and family-school relationships in parent involvement research and interventions. The papers also call attention to the limited information about what forms of parent involvement are relevant for middle school samples.

To my parents, Pam and Ryan Tucker, my brother, Matthew Tucker, and my love, Lee Turbyfill.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Research on parent involvement has demonstrated that when parents play a role in education, their children's academic achievement is improved (Barnard, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Lareau, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). Given the empirical support for the importance of parent involvement in education, observed disparities in parent involvement by socioeconomic status (SES) and race/ethnicity are a concern. For example, white parents and more educated parents are more likely to be involved at school (Lee & Bowen, 2006), and middle-class parents advocate for their children more often than lower-income parents (Lareau, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Another point of concern is the fact that parents' role in education is reduced as students get older (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007), a process that may be partly due to corresponding decreases in expectations and efforts to engage parents on the part of school staff (Seitsinger, Felner, Brand, & Burns, 2008). Yet parent involvement is associated with educational outcomes even in adolescence (Bowen, Hopson, Rose, & Glennie, 2012; Bowen, Rose, Powers, & Glennie, 2006; 2008; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

The fact that family-school partnerships are positively associated with academic outcomes, and correlated with other less manipulable predictors of academic success such as student age, family SES, and parental race/ethnicity, suggests an important avenue for intervention to alleviate academic disparities and prevent academic declines. Yet despite the promise of family-school partnerships as contributors to school success and the attention they have received from researchers and practitioners alike, the literature continues to suffer from several limitations that hinder our ability to intervene effectively. Two of these limitations will be addressed by the three papers that follow. First, parent involvement research has largely been

conducted from the perspective of educators, and has not adequately considered the perspectives of parents. Second, parent involvement research has overemphasized elementary school samples and school-based involvement, largely ignoring the needs of adolescents, for whom school-based involvement may be less relevant.

The research described below addresses the limitations in the parent involvement literature by focusing on three broad research questions. Specifically:

RQ1. How can the limited research on parent perspectives be integrated into the larger body of research on parent involvement?

RQ2. What are African American and Latino parents' perspectives on their relationships with their children's schools?

RQ3. What aspects of home-based involvement contribute to school engagement for middle school students?

Each research question is addressed in a standalone manuscript intended for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Research question 1 is addressed by a review of the literature on parent involvement (Chapter 2). Research question 2 is addressed with a qualitative study of the perspectives of a group of African American and Latino parents in North Carolina (Chapter 3). The third research question is addressed in a hierarchical linear modeling analysis of data on students from 11 North Carolina middle schools (Chapter 4). Following the three papers, a summary section integrates the findings across the studies and presents implications and next steps.

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## CHAPTER 2: INTEGRATING TRADITIONAL AND CRITICAL APPROACHES TO DESCRIBING AND EXPLAINING PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Parent involvement in education is widely accepted as an important contributor to student success. It is a priority in the No Child Left Behind Act (Epstein, 2005), and has been the focus of many individual school initiatives (Agronick, Clark, O'Donnell, & Stueve, 2009). Parent involvement has also been the focus of several literature reviews and meta-analyses (Agronick et al., 2009; X. Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2003; 2007; Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002).

In spite of the level of attention parent involvement has received, parent involvement interventions and research display a number of deficits. Parent involvement interventions are often poorly articulated, are not developed with the input of parents or teachers, and have not been rigorously evaluated (Agronick et al., 2009; Mattingly et al., 2002). Furthermore, those programs that have been rigorously evaluated seldom show significant effects on parent behavior (Mattingly et al., 2002). Evaluation studies also tend to focus on elementary school samples, leaving questions as to the efficacy of interventions among families of children in secondary schools (Agronick et al., 2009; Jeynes, 2012; Mattingly et al., 2002).

The limitations of parent involvement interventions are related to those of parent involvement research in general. The body of literature on parent involvement, as described in this paper, can be described in terms of two broad categories: the traditional approach and the critical approach. Traditional parent involvement research focuses primarily on isolated events of parent involvement and tends to explain differences in parent involvement in terms of individual family characteristics (e.g., Bacete & Ramirez, 2007; Crosnoe & Huston, 2007; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 2007; Gutman & Eccles, 1999; Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez,

2008; Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001; Muller, 1995; Peng & Wright, 1994; Reynolds & Gill, 1994; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Most existing parent involvement interventions are informed by traditional parent involvement research, and are therefore often designed to change parents' beliefs and behaviors. In contrast, critical approaches to parent involvement research often focus on family-school relationships and the power imbalance that characterizes them (e.g., Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). The critical approach is also more likely to explain differences in parent involvement behaviors in terms of school characteristics (e.g., Griffith, 1996; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Such critical research has informed very few interventions, and they merit additional research.

The goal of this paper is to highlight the limitations of current parent involvement interventions and to explain how these limitations are related to limitations of the traditional approach to parent involvement research. In response to these limitations, the paper describes a theoretical approach, social exchange theory, which can guide improvements in parent involvement research and intervention. The fact that the assumptions of social exchange theory are supported by findings in the critical research literature suggests that the critical approach merits more attention, and should inform future interventions. The paper provides recommendations for integrating insights from critical research into future parent involvement research and intervention development.

### **Families and Schools**

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory emphasizes, in part, the influence of immediate contexts (microsystems) and interactions among them (the mesosystem) on human development (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). As noted by Epstein (1995), children are directly involved in at least three important contexts: family, school, and community. In recognition of the fact that the interactions between these systems have important implications for child development, school staff and policymakers increasingly expect parents (and, to a lesser extent, communities) to be involved in children's education (Epstein, 2005).

Unfortunately, parents often experience substantial barriers to their involvement in education. These barriers can include single parenthood, having multiple children to care for, unpredictable or burdensome work schedules, a lack of knowledge about the education system, and feeling intimidated by or unwelcome at the school (Altschul, 2012; Benner, Graham, & Mistry, 2008; Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996).

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that the extent and nature of family-school-community partnerships differs by race and ethnicity, as well as socioeconomic status (SES; Barnard, 2004; X. Fan & Chen, 2001; Lareau, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). For example, White parents and more educated parents are more likely to be involved at school than parents of color and less educated parents (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Other research has shown that middle-class and high-income parents often advocate at school on behalf of their children, and make strategic educational decisions designed to help their children prepare for college (Lareau, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Lower-income and less educated parents, on the other hand, tend to defer to the decisions and leadership of the schools (Lareau, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Thus, in addition to a general desire for parents to be involved in education, there is concern that group differences in parent involvement may contribute to racial/ethnic and SES-based achievement gaps.

### **Current Interventions**

For the reasons listed above, schools, policymakers, and researchers have increasingly focused on designing interventions to encourage parent involvement in education. In their guide to intervention research, Fraser and colleagues (2009) argue that intervention development must start with a clear problem theory, based on an extensive review of the “individual and environmental” risk and protective factors that “give rise to a problem or that sustain that problem over time” (Fraser, Richman, Galinsky, & Day, 2009, p. 48). This problem theory then informs program theory by helping scholars to identify leverage points for their interventions



(Fraser et al., 2009). Once interventions are developed, researchers should evaluate their efficacy, and the validity of the associated program theory. Yet reviews of current parent involvement interventions reveal that many parent involvement interventions have not developed in this way.

Mattingly and colleagues reviewed evaluations of parent involvement programs published between 1960 and 2000, and found that most programs did not identify a theoretical basis (Mattingly et al., 2002). Perhaps because of their lack of theoretical basis, most parent involvement programs appeared to take a “shotgun” approach to intervention, by incorporating components designed to affect multiple parent variables (Mattingly et al., 2002). The most common intervention components reported by Mattingly et al. (2002) were those designed to increase parent involvement in home learning (included in 76% of programs reviewed) and improving parenting skills (61% of programs). On the other hand, only 27% of programs aimed to increase parent involvement in school decision making, and only 37% of programs focused any intervention effort on teachers (Mattingly et al., 2002). In other words, most interventions focus on changing parents’ beliefs and behaviors, rather than school practices (Jeynes, 2012; Mattingly et al., 2002).

The fact that interventions more often focus on changing parent behavior than on changing school practices is reflective of the fact that interventions are developed by education administrators and researchers, and therefore are biased toward their perspectives. Mattingly et al. (2002) reported that most interventions they reviewed were initiated by school districts or researchers and were not developed with the input of teachers or parents. Interventions are more likely to be effective if they take into account the needs of parents and teachers, who comprise the groups most directly affected.

In addition to the fact that many parent involvement interventions were not developed using best practices (Fraser et al., 2009), many also have not been rigorously evaluated (Agronick et al., 2009; Mattingly et al., 2002). Those that have been evaluated have not always

demonstrated efficacy. A recent meta-analysis completed by Jeynes (2012) found that interventions designed to promote collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers had the second largest effect size identified, after programs focused on shared reading practices. Jeynes' (2012) finding that interventions to promote collaborative parent-teacher partnerships were among the most effective is in direct contrast to Mattingly et al.'s (2002) report that the most common interventions focus instead on parent behaviors and skills. Unfortunately, Jeynes (2012) meta-analysis did not report the number of studies contributing to each intervention subsample, so we cannot determine the prevalence of studies of collaborative interventions in his meta-analytic sample.

An additional issue with the current evidence for parent involvement interventions is that the overwhelming majority of evaluation research is focused on elementary school samples. All of the most rigorous studies identified by Mattingly et al. (2002) used elementary school samples. Agronick and colleagues (2009) reviewed literature on parent involvement practices in secondary education (grades 6-12) and concluded that, with regard to middle and high school, "solid evidence of the effectiveness of parent involvement strategies ... is simply not available" (Agronick et al., 2009, p. 35). Jeynes' (2012) meta-analysis reported significant effects of parent involvement interventions on secondary school samples, but only 39 percent of the studies he reviewed used exclusively secondary school samples, and all of those studies appear to have received the author's lowest possible rating of evaluation quality.

In summary, parent involvement programs are often atheoretical, fail to involve key stakeholders in their development, and focus on parent training (to the exclusion of school-level change) as the primary driver of increased parent involvement. Although evidence of the positive effects of parent involvement programs is growing, such evidence is still lacking for many parent involvement programs, particularly those aimed at secondary school samples. Basing interventions on a theoretical model and targeting mechanisms supported by empirical research should result in interventions that are more effective and easier to evaluate than the

alternative. In search of guidance for the development of effective interventions for parent involvement in education, I now turn to the research literature on predictors of parent involvement.

### **The Research Base for Parent Involvement Interventions**

The deficits of parent involvement interventions are related to deficits in parent involvement research generally. There are two broad categories of parent involvement research: the traditional approach and the critical approach. This distinction is inspired by Young's work on parent involvement policies (Young, 1999). The traditional approach to parent involvement research tends to start from the assumption that parent involvement of any kind will have positive effects on student academic achievement. Traditional parent involvement research focuses primarily on isolated instances of parent involvement, such as volunteering or attending school events, rather than ongoing relationships between families and schools. Furthermore, traditional research tends to explain differences in parent involvement in terms of individual family characteristics, such as race/ethnicity, nativity, and SES. The traditional approach is consistent with the most prevalent types of parent involvement interventions, which are often designed to change parents' beliefs and behaviors, or to provide opportunities for parents to physically visit the school.

Critical approaches to parent involvement research are more likely to focus on family-school relationships and power imbalances. Critical research often applies qualitative methods. It is also more likely to explain differences in parent involvement behaviors in terms of school factors, such as parent engagement practices or the beliefs and attitudes of school staff. Few parent involvement interventions have been informed by critical research.

Of course, the statements above are broad generalizations, and most studies fall somewhere on a continuum between the two categories. Quantitative studies that are critical of traditional notions of parent involvement can be found (e.g., Adams & Christenson, 2000; Griffith, 1996; 1998; Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). There are also traditional studies of parent

involvement that consider school factors in their efforts to explain parent involvement behaviors (e.g., Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). The distinction between traditional and critical approaches to parent involvement research nevertheless offers a useful heuristic for describing and integrating the wide variety of research perspectives and findings on parent involvement. Although both bodies of research offer useful insights on parent involvement, they do not generally inform one another.

### **The Traditional Approach**

As noted above, traditional research on parent involvement usually starts from the perspective of schools, and tends to focus on the ways that parents can serve or assist the school's efforts to educate children. Traditional research explores parent involvement activities such as volunteering at school, helping children with homework, attending parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings and parent-teacher conferences, and communicating with teachers (e.g., Gutman & Eccles, 1999; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2004; Kuperminc et al., 2008; Marchant et al., 2001; Muller, 1995; Peng & Wright, 1994; Reynolds & Gill, 1994; Shiu, Kettler, & Johnsen, 2009; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Studies also sometimes examine whether parents discuss school work and educational plans with their children (Muller, 1995; Shiu et al., 2009; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Many of these types of parent involvement do not position parents as integral to education, treating them as "desirable extras" rather than "essential partners" (Christenson, 2004, p.87).

Traditional measures of parent involvement tend not to distinguish between behaviors that are parent initiated and those that are school initiated. For example, the measures do not take into account that parent-teacher conferences can be routinely scheduled by schools, or can occur in response to a parent request. The goals and nature of conferences differ based on the circumstances. Examining the simple occurrence of parent-teacher conferences may obscure

these differences. The same is true for general communication or contacts between parents and teachers, but the distinction is not typically made in traditional studies of parent involvement. An exception is a study by W. Fan, Williams, and Wolters (2012) that differentiated between problem-focused communication and more benign communication between teachers and parents. That study found that problem-focused communication had a negative association with students' school engagement, while benign communication had no association with engagement (W. Fan, Williams, & Wolters, 2012). Because the study was based on cross-sectional data, we cannot be sure of the causal direction of the associations, however.

Traditional research on parent involvement also does not generally address the ways that parents advocate for themselves or their children. Studies often ask if parents attend parent-teacher association meetings, for example, but seldom ask if a parent holds a leadership position in the organization (e.g., Gutman & Eccles, 1999; Hill et al., 2004; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996).

An example of the school-based perspective inherent the literature is Epstein's (1995) typology of parent involvement, which is widely cited and applied. The model is designed to aid schools in designing, implementing, and evaluating parent involvement initiatives (Epstein, 1995; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Guided by empirical research demonstrating the positive effects of parent involvement on student outcomes, the model takes for granted that schools should encourage parent involvement, and provides a blueprint for doing so. The model is useful as a guide for schools, but suboptimal for studies seeking to describe or understand the behaviors of individual parents.

Furthermore, approaches like Epstein's ignore the influence of "power, agency, and control," (p. 684) as noted by Fine (1993). Epstein's model does include parent participation in school decision-making (Epstein, 1995), but it does not address the fact that this type of involvement is less common, more difficult for schools to facilitate, and perhaps a more meaningful form of participation than behaviors like volunteering in the classroom. For example, one study that applied Epstein's model found that of the six types of involvement

activities, schools were least likely to report that they involved parents in decision-making (Sheldon and Epstein, 2002). Of the schools surveyed for the study, only about 60% reported that they involved parents in annual policy review, whereas all of the responding schools reported that they held regular parent-teacher conferences (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Yet the study made no note of this discrepancy, nor any consideration of why the discrepancy might exist or what it might mean for parents. These criticisms do not apply solely to Epstein's model; they are exhibited in most traditionally executed studies of parent involvement. The fact that Epstein's model is so widely known and applied, however, makes it a useful example.

The traditional research is also problematic in terms of the constructs used to predict variations in parent involvement. Studies tend to focus on individual characteristics of parents, students, and families as explanatory variables. A number of studies have documented differences in parent involvement by parent education level, race/ethnicity, SES, household composition (single-parent vs. two-parent households), and immigration status (Bacete & Ramirez, 2007; Crosnoe & Huston, 2007; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 2007; Gutman & Eccles, 1999; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Hill et al., 2004; P. B. Keith & Lichtman, 1994; T. Z. Keith, Keith, Quirk, Cohen-Rosenthal & Franzese, 1996; Melby & Conger, 1996; Peng & Wright, 1994). Some studies have also explored English proficiency and parent work schedules (P. B. Keith & Lichtman, 1994; Muller, 1995). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler have devised a well-known model that attempts to explain parent involvement largely in terms of parent psychological and material resources, including parents' role beliefs, sense of self-efficacy, and the skills and time that parents have available to offer to the school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). To their credit, the model created by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) also includes what the authors refer to as school invitations to involvement, and they and their colleagues have developed and tested an intervention designed to increase teacher invitations to involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). The latter study is described in more detail below.

The traditional research literature's focus on family characteristics is central to the shortcomings of existing parent involvement interventions. Many of the predictive factors explored in the research are not malleable intervention targets, so they cannot meaningfully contribute to the development of effective interventions. Given the traditional emphasis on differences in individual characteristics of more and less involved parents, it is not surprising that current interventions almost always include workshops that teach parents how to be involved in ways that meet the school's expectations (Agronick et al., 2009; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Mattingly et al., 2002; McDonald, Billingham, Conrad, Morgan, O, & Payton, 1997). This approach places all of the responsibility for the development of a family-school relationship on parents' shoulders, and may encourage scholars and school staff to blame parents for their apparent failure to be involved.

The traditional research literature has helped to call attention to the potential positive effects of parent involvement, and has documented differences in parent involvement by race/ethnicity and SES. Unfortunately, the biases of traditional parent involvement research have hindered the development of parent involvement interventions. By defining parent involvement in terms of school expectations, and emphasizing family characteristics as the cause of varying levels of parent involvement, the current literature provides insight on a narrow set of intervention levers. Furthermore, focusing on individual factors may reinforce negative stereotypes about less wealthy or less educated parents, and parents of color.

### **Theoretical Basis for a Different Perspective**

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory states that the mesosystem plays an important role in development (Tudge et al., 2009). Epstein's (1995) theory of the "overlapping spheres of influence" of family, school, and community similarly highlights the importance of interactions between these systems. These models imply the importance of *relationships* between families and schools, which are often missing from the traditional literature on the topic.

Social exchange theory, which describes interactions between individuals and groups, can also be instructive in re-conceptualizing parent involvement. Social exchange theory focuses on interactions, or exchanges, wherein actors provide one another with material resources, information, or assistance (Lawler, 2001). In family-school relationships, the resource most often exchanged is information about a student and his or her education. Parents and educators have access to different information about students, and sharing that information facilitates intervention on both sides. Additionally, parent involvement at home, such as helping a student with homework, could be part of an exchange with the school if it occurs in response to a request or recommendation from a school staff member.

Exchanges and the relationships in which they take place have reciprocal effects on one another. Lawler and Yoon (1996) explored the effects of exchanges on relational cohesion, and vice-versa. Relational cohesion is the sense that a relationship is “a unifying force or an object of attachment” (Lawler & Yoon, 1996, p.89). Higher levels of relational cohesion increase an individual’s commitment to a relationship and the likelihood that he or she will participate in exchanges in the future (Lawler & Yoon, 1996). Put another way, the quality of the family-school relationship should be an important predictor of specific instances of parent involvement.

A major tenet of social exchange theory is that frequent and successful exchanges strengthen relationships and produce trust by generating positive emotions and reducing the level of uncertainty in relationships (Lawler & Yoon, 1996). The importance of successful exchange is demonstrated by the finding that parents disengage from schools when they feel that their input is unwelcome or dismissed (Griffith, 1996; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013).

Social exchange theory also suggests that exchanges occur less frequently and are judged as less successful when one actor has more power than another (Lawler & Yoon, 1996). Power differentials are often due to one actor having resources of more value (Lawler & Yoon, 1996). Unfortunately, the relationship between parents and teachers is often complicated by just such a



power imbalance. Society recognizes teachers as the experts on education, meaning that the information they hold is often perceived as being more valuable than that held by parents. This dynamic is exacerbated when a parent has substantially less formal education than their child's teacher. Nevertheless, parents observe their children in more settings and know more about their health and experiences, and so remain the experts on their individual children.

Relationship power imbalances also occur when one actor has fewer options for means to achieve their goals (Lawler & Yoon, 1996). This is often the case in family-school relationships because parents and teachers do not always have the same academic goals (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). Parents are focused on the success of their own children; in contrast, teachers may be focused on the success of a class as a whole. Lightfoot (1978) referred to this as the difference between the particularistic concerns of parents and the universalistic concerns of teachers. There are a variety of ways for teachers to pursue classroom-wide success, which may not necessarily require that *all* students excel. In such a situation, parents options are much more limited than teachers; parents *must* exchange with a teacher, while a teacher has the option of exchanging with any of his students' parents.

According to social exchange theory, the net effect of the two issues described above (the higher value of teachers' knowledge and their larger number of exchange alternatives) is that teachers generally have more power in the family-school relationship than parents. When a power imbalance exists in a relationship, it reduces the likelihood that the more powerful actor will offer concessions in an exchange, or even exchange at all (Lawler & Yoon, 1996). In practical terms, a teacher can choose to focus on working with parents who are more educated, more cooperative, or easier to contact, while choosing not to engage with parents who require more effort.

In summary, social exchange theory raises a number of important issues for parent involvement research: the centrality of family-school relationships in predicting parent involvement, the potential of frequent and positive contacts to strengthen relationships, the idea

of parent involvement as an exchange of resources (usually information), and the importance of addressing power imbalances between parents and educators. Many of these issues are addressed in the critical research on parent involvement.

### **The Critical Approach**

Consistent with social exchange theory, the more critical approach to parent involvement research acknowledges that parent involvement is affected by the quality of relationships between families and schools, and the level of power and agency that actors bring to the interaction. The critical body of literature supports many of the assumptions of social exchange theory. Unfortunately studies based on the critical approach to parent involvement have not been integrated into the larger, more traditional parent involvement literature, nor have they meaningfully informed interventions.

Importantly, critical research opens discussion about parents' goals for involvement and how goals inform their definition of educational involvement. Lareau and Shumar (1996) note that prevailing definitions of parent involvement (helping with homework, volunteering at school, etc.) are informed by school expectations, and may not be consistent with involvement behaviors considered helpful by some lower-income or less educated parents. For example, research with parents of color found that many parents felt their job was to instill values in their children, take them to school, and then leave the teaching to the teachers (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Other research with African American parents has demonstrated that parents can have broader definitions of involvement, including providing emotional support, encouraging outside interests, and securing access to special programs like gifted and talented education (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008; Cousins & Mickelson, 2011; Howard & Reynolds, 2008, Warner, 2010). These findings suggest that parents may identify a much narrower or broader range of involvement activities than educators do, and research based solely on educator definitions of involvement may not accurately reflect parent involvement behavior. Parents' reasons for involvement also bear directly on their judgment of the success of their

interactions with schools, and therefore on their sense of the quality of their relationship with the school.

Critical studies also tend to look beyond parent characteristics to identify school factors that encourage or discourage parent involvement. For one, critical research has documented differences in the extent to which schools address power imbalances between parents and educators. One study of African American, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander parents found that some respondents felt discouraged from attending or participating in school meetings because they feared that they lacked the knowledge and expertise necessary to contribute (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). This may be due to the fact that when parents did participate in meetings, they felt that their opinions were ignored and that instead, meetings were dominated by the concerns of school officials (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). On the other hand, studies have demonstrated that when schools made parents feel welcomed and respected, parents also felt more responsible for their child's education (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013), and were more likely to attend school meetings and events (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Griffith, 1996; Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2011). In other words, issues of power and respect impact parent involvement even when the outcome is traditionally defined (i.e., attendance at school events).

Critical research has also explored the effects of frequency and form of communication from schools to families. It is important to distinguish this issue from *whether* schools communicate with families, which is often the focus of traditional studies of parent involvement. Parents' past negative experiences with schools can lead them to expect bad news when they receive communications from the school (Williams, Sanchez, and Hunnell, 2011). The perception that all (school) news is bad news can lead parents to disengage from their children's education (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008). Other studies have found that parents wanted to receive more communication from teachers, particularly when there were early signs of an academic or behavioral problem (Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001).

In other words, parents wanted to know that children were struggling, and how to help them, well before the student received a failing grade on a report card (Griffin & Galassi, 2010). Relatedly, Griffith (1996) found that in schools where parents felt well-informed about their children's progress, the parents were more involved at school. A unique study by Adams and Christenson (2000) found that the frequency of communication with teachers was significantly positively associated with parents' level of satisfaction with the parent-teacher relationship. While existing parent involvement interventions sometimes aim to increase the frequency of family-school communication, they do not generally provide guidance as to the nature or quality of the communication. These findings suggest that regular, proactive, individualized, and positive communications are key to improving parent attitudes toward school, and increasing their involvement at school.

Some research suggests that parent involvement interventions that are not mindful of these issues will not adequately address the needs of many parents. Young (1999) found that one school's efforts to increase parent involvement had no meaningful impact on parents, particularly those who were initially the least involved. Perhaps worse, mechanisms that were intended to strengthen parent influence on decision-making (like parent representation on school committees) tended to result in increased involvement of white, male, and/or middle-class parents who were already recognized by the school staff as being "very involved" (Young, 1999, p. 698). Young's (1999) findings suggest that attempting to increase parent involvement without acknowledging the reasons behind SES and racial/ethnic disparities in involvement may simply provide more opportunities for privileged parents to shape the academic experiences of their children, while less advantaged families are left behind. Nevertheless, Mattingly et al. (2002) found that few parent involvement program evaluations explored differential program effects by important parent background variables such as race/ethnicity, income, and education level.

In summary, the critical approach to parent involvement research raises considerations about the difference between school and parent definitions of involvement, and provides insight into the ways that schools encourage or discourage involvement. In spite of the fact that much of it is consistent with theoretical approaches like the bioecological theory of human development and social exchange theory, critical parent involvement research has informed very few interventions, and has not generally been recognized or integrated into the larger, more traditional body of parent involvement research.

### **Moving Forward with Parent Involvement**

Both traditional and critical approaches to parent involvement research have strengths and weaknesses. The traditional approach has called attention to the potential advantages of parent involvement in education, and in particular has documented disparities in parent involvement by race/ethnicity and SES. It has also contributed to the creation of interventions that, at their best, can provide less advantaged parents with insider knowledge on how to help their children succeed in school. Unfortunately, this approach has generally defined parent involvement based on educator expectations, often ignores the power imbalance between schools and parents, and places the majority of responsibility on parents.

Theoretical concerns suggest that parent involvement research and interventions would benefit from more concern for family-school relationships, academic and interpersonal goals of parents and educators, the frequency and nature of communication, and parent-educator power imbalances. The critical research on parent involvement has provided some insight on these points, but has remained largely separate from the traditional body of research. Below, I outline suggestions for integrating these insights into future work.

### **Implications for Intervention**

In line with the best practices outlined by Fraser and colleagues (2009), continued work on parent involvement interventions should be based on well-rounded models of problem theory, including school-level risk and protective factors as well as family characteristics. These

can inform explicit program theories (sometimes called logic models) driving interventions. Interventions with explicit program theories have a higher likelihood of success and can more easily be evaluated for efficacy. Gonzalez and Chrispeels (2008) provided one useful example of the relationship between program theory and evaluation. They created logic models informed by the goals of two parent training programs designed for a Latino immigrant population, and then used these logic models to inform evaluation efforts (Gonzalez and Chrispeels, 2008). Future intervention development and evaluation should explicitly outline the theoretical basis for programs. Social exchange theory may provide a valuable foundation for these efforts.

In addition to theoretical concerns, there are social and practical reasons to broaden the focus of parent involvement interventions. Focusing interventions on changing parents places all responsibility (and blame) for involvement on parents, and may make it easier to accept intervention failure, by attributing poor outcomes to inherent parent limitations. Additionally, focusing effort on changing parents is an inefficient intervention strategy, because hundreds of families enter and leave a school each year. Changes to school climate and practices could affect all families, could be accomplished with far fewer time and resources, and need not be repeated each year.

Interventions that focus on parent skills and behavior and those focused on school characteristics and practices are not mutually exclusive. Reviews of parent involvement programs demonstrate that most programs are multifaceted; they include an average of about 3 different components (Mattingly et al., 2002). The tendency to use multifaceted approaches is reflective of an implicit understanding that parent involvement is a complicated issue. Nevertheless, research also shows that the majority of programs include techniques intended to improve parenting skills and home learning practices, while far fewer incorporate teacher training interventions or efforts to involve parents in school decision making (Mattingly et al., 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Based on these findings, it is reasonable to conclude that

parent training is considered the standard form of parent involvement intervention, while other components are considered optional.

A small number of interventions have been designed to affect educator attitudes and practices. These tend to focus on cultivating positive attitudes toward working with parents, developing skills in parent outreach and communication, and encouraging educators to engage with parents (Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Dotger, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Symeou, Roussounido, & Michaelides, 2012). For example, an intervention that encouraged regular and positive outreach from teachers to parents was significantly positively associated with students' grades (Bennett-Conroy, 2012). There have also been evaluations of teacher education programs, although none explored effects on parent or student outcomes. One pre-service training program gave student teachers the opportunity to practice interacting with parents and to develop sensitivity to parents' concerns and social context (Dotger, 2010). The intervention was associated with increased racial, multicultural, and ethical sensitivity among the student teachers (Dotger, 2010). A similar in-service program provided teachers with training in communication skills and the opportunity to practice applying them in parent-teacher conferences (Symeou et al., 2012). Based on pre- and post-intervention reports, teacher participants were significantly more likely to use the communication skills they had learned (such as active listening and goal setting) and perceived the communication skills to be significantly more useful (Symeou et al., 2012). An in-service program informed by the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model was significantly associated with teacher beliefs about parents' efficacy for helping their children succeed, and teacher invitations to parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Teacher training programs like these show some potential to improve school-family relationships, but they require further evaluation and wider implementation. In the future, parent involvement interventions should explicitly include and evaluate these types of efforts.

## **Implications for Research**

Moving forward, research on parent involvement should be informed by findings from the critical approach, as well as insights from social exchange theory. Suggested changes to parent involvement research include placing a greater emphasis on the effects of educator attitudes, beliefs, and practices. In addition, studies should test intervention effects on family-school relationship quality rather than isolated parent involvement activities. Finally, interventions, particularly those that are already widely used, should be subjected to rigorous evaluation.

We know from the critical literature that school practices and educator attitudes have important implications for parent involvement at school. Thus deeper exploration of educator attitudes and practices and their effects on parent involvement will be helpful in the development of effective interventions. Examples of attitudes to explore include multicultural attitudes and racial/ethnic sensitivity (Dotger, 2010), beliefs about parent involvement and parent efficacy for involvement, and the importance that educators attribute to various parent engagement activities (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2002). It would also be useful to know about educators' attributions of student success (e.g., attribution to parent efforts, teacher-parent collaboration, or innate ability) and their explanations for why parents do or do not engage with schools. School practices that merit further exploration include educator use of specific communication skills, such as sharing of information and verbal encouragement (Symeou et al., 2012), and invitations for parents to be involved (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005).

An additional recommendation is to devote further research to the importance of family-school relationship quality. Social exchange theory suggests that developing high-quality relationships will be predictive of ongoing exchanges between families and schools. High-quality relationships and frequent communication may provide a valuable foundation for intervention with specific families when students need it. These hypothesized associations merit empirical



investigation. Constructs to explore include relational cohesion (Lawler & Yoon, 1996) and trust (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Additionally, it may be fruitful to explore parents' and educators' stated goals for their interactions, and whether they feel that their goals are met. The participants' subjective sense of success in exchanges will depend on the goals they bring to the exchanges. Potential goals of interaction may include getting advice or assistance related to a problem, getting more information about an issue, or obtaining permission to use a particular intervention with a student. Mutual understanding of the goals that participants bring to exchanges could provide context for parent and educator behavior. Likewise, understanding parents' goals when they interact with schools could help educators begin to evaluate parent behaviors in terms of their goals, rather than compliance with school expectations.

### **Conclusion**

Social science theories support the potential of parent educational involvement to have a positive impact on child and youth development. Programs to promote parent involvement are widely used and promoted. Despite their popularity, the interventions commonly used are flawed. They are often only weakly related to theory or stakeholder concerns. Intervention mechanisms most often center on changing parents, rather than school contexts. In addition, many have not been rigorously evaluated.

The limitations of interventions are related to limitations of the parent involvement research literature. Traditionally, this literature has focused on defining parent involvement in terms of educator expectations, and explaining variation in parent involvement in terms of family characteristics rather than school characteristics or practices. Research on interventions has not generally critically evaluated whether the interventions are appropriate or theoretically sound.

This paper argues that future research on parent involvement requires a more nuanced understanding of family-school relationships. Up to this point, research has often ignored that a relationship between the two actors even exists; research has instead assumed that parent

involvement is something that parents do, and is almost entirely dependent on parent and family characteristics. In reality, parent involvement is best understood in terms of interactions *between* families and schools, in the *context* of family-school relationships. Theoretical approaches such as the bioecological theory of development and social exchange theory support this perspective, as do the findings of critical research on parent involvement.

The recommendations described here constitute a shift from focusing on parent resources and behaviors to focusing on the co-creation of positive relationships between families and schools. Such a shift may result in interventions that are more efficient and effective than current programs designed to promote parent involvement. Given that the time and resources available to educators are extremely limited, the development of such interventions is crucial.

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### CHAPTER 3: PARENT PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR INVOLVEMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH SCHOOLS

Parent involvement in education is valued by educators, researchers, and policy makers as a way to improve student outcomes. As such, it has been extensively investigated by scholars in a number of fields (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Christenson, 2004; Epstein, 1995; 2005; Lee & Bowen, 2006). It is worth noting, however, that the definition of parent involvement varies a great deal across studies. Scholars generally agree that parent involvement is a set of activities that falls into two broad categories: home-based and school-based parent involvement. As their names suggest, home- and school-based involvement are parent activities that occur either at home or at school. Home-based parent involvement includes things like helping children with homework, discussing academic topics with children, or monitoring children's activities. School-based parent involvement includes things like attending school events and communicating with school staff.

Although both types of parent involvement are believed to be important, this paper focuses primarily on school-based parent involvement. Research on school-based parent involvement shares a set of shortcomings. One of these shortcomings is a tendency to focus on schools' expectations for parents, while ignoring parents' reasons for being involved at school. A second shortcoming common in parent involvement research is to ignore or minimize the role played by the quality of family-school relationships in determining whether parents are involved at school, and to what extent.

By failing to consider family-school relationships, parent involvement research ignores how schools might improve the quality of those relationships. One of the few studies to focus explicitly on family-school relationship quality found that parents' satisfaction with the

relationship was significantly associated with the how much they trusted their children's teachers (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Other studies have also found school and teacher characteristics to be significantly associated with parent behavior. For example, studies have demonstrated that in schools that made parents feel welcomed and respected, parents also felt more responsible for their child's education (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013), and were more likely to attend school meetings and events (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Griffith, 1996; Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2011). Griffith (1996) also found that in schools where parents felt well-informed about their children's progress, they were more involved. Bennett-Conroy (2012) tested the effects of direct teacher outreach to parents and found that it was significantly and positively associated with the number of homework assignments that students turned in, and the grades they received on those assignments.

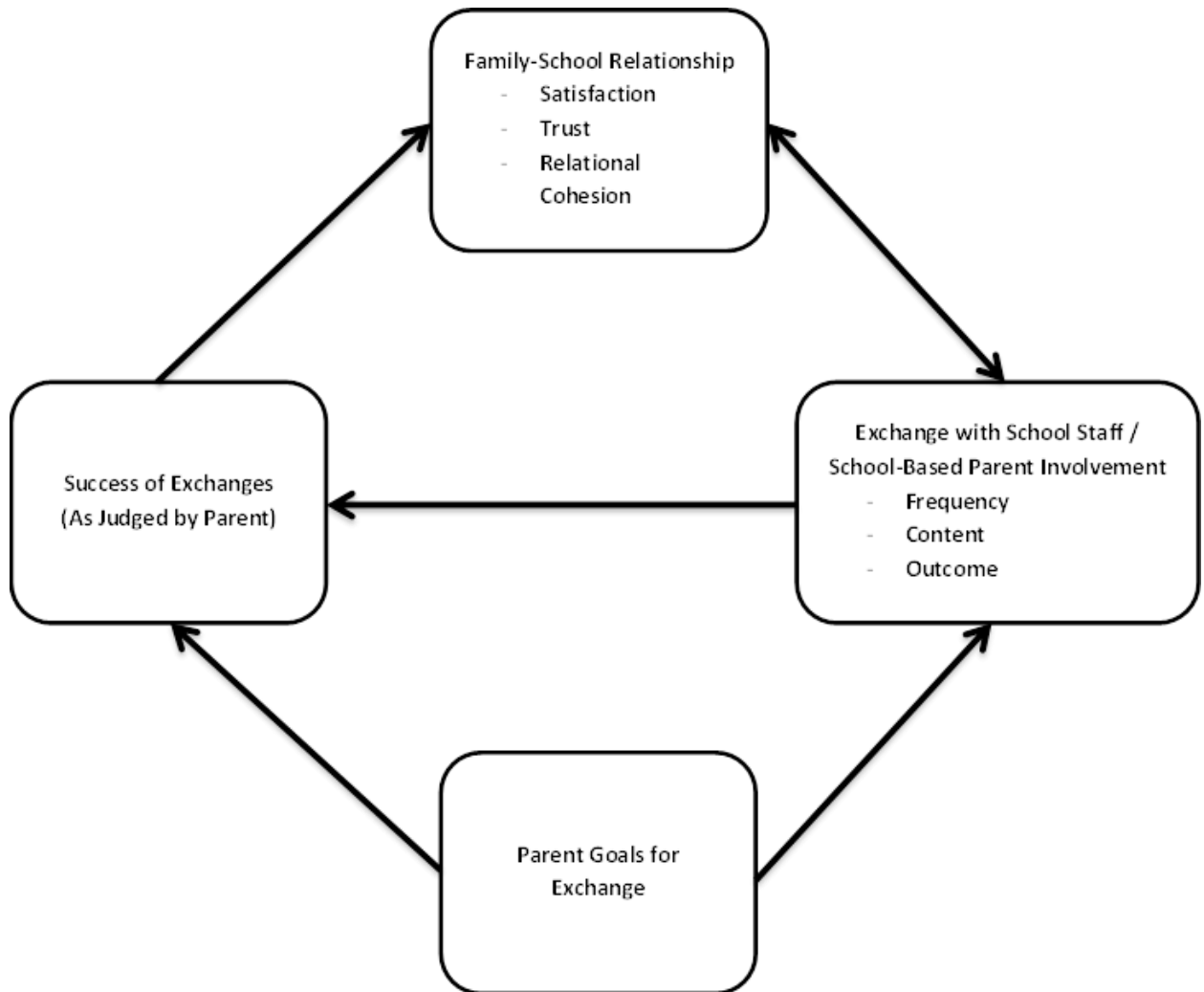
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One framework for understanding interactions between individuals and groups is social exchange theory. Social exchange theory focuses on interactions, or exchanges, wherein actors trade material resources, information, or assistance (Lawler, 2001). In exchanges between parents and educators, the resource most often exchanged is information about students and their education, which can facilitate interventions at school and at home.

Exchanges are affected by the relationships in which they occur, and vice-versa. This association is depicted in Figure 3.1. Relationships have a number of characteristics, including satisfaction, trust, and cohesion. Relational cohesion is the extent to which a relationship constitutes “a unifying force or an object of attachment” (Lawler & Yoon, 1996, p.89). Higher levels of relational cohesion, in particular, increase the likelihood of future exchanges (Lawler & Yoon, 1996).

Likewise, exchanges increase relational cohesion to the extent that they are frequent and successful. Frequent exchanges can increase trust by giving actors more experience with one another and reducing the level of uncertainty in the relationship (Lawler & Yoon, 1996). When exchanges are perceived to be successful, the experience generates positive emotions, thereby reinforcing relational cohesion. Thus as Figure 3.1 illustrates, the frequency and nature of exchanges affects, and is affected by, the quality of the relationship.

While frequency of exchanges is easily measured, the subjective sense that exchanges are successful is harder to quantify. In Lawler and Yoon’s (1996) study, laboratory exchanges were modeled on business negotiations, wherein study participants bought and sold material resources. Thus exchanges were successful when groups were able to reach agreements that were favorable to all actors. In family-school exchanges, where the resource exchanged is likely to be information, success will depend on individual goals in the exchange, which can vary widely.



*Figure 3.1.* Hypothesized relationships among family-school relationships, school-based parent involvement, and parent goals.

Parent involvement research has not extensively explored parents' goals. Research on parent perspectives suggests that in general, an important goal of parents is to ensure student success and well-being (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008; Cousins & Mickelson, 2011; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Warner, 2010). In their study of a small sample of elementary school parents of color, Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001) found that parents wanted input into decisions about their children's education, but felt that school officials did not value their contributions. This resulted in feelings of frustration, and likely damaged the family-school relationship. These findings reinforce the idea that parent goals determine

whether family-school exchanges are perceived as successful, which in turn has implications for the quality of family-school relationships.

Exploring parents' reasons for involvement can also yield information about why parents choose different methods of involvement, or choose not to be involved at school at all. Some parents may believe that it is possible to ensure student success and well-being without engaging in the involvement behaviors typically emphasized by schools (for example, attending school events). There is substantial evidence that parents differ in their approaches to educational involvement, but less research on the social and psychological variables that might explain these differences. In her seminal work on the topic, Lareau (2011) demonstrated that middle-class parents expected to have influence over how their children were educated, and therefore behaved as empowered consumers in the school system, who questioned school decisions, and advocated for their children. Lower-SES parents, on the other hand, tended to believe that education was solely the educator's domain, and as a result they generally deferred to teacher expertise. Thus parent beliefs and goals affect the frequency and nature of school-based involvement.

For all of the reasons outlined above, this paper examines the interrelationships between parents' goals for involvement, their interactions with their children's schools, and their relationships with those schools. The study investigates these issues among a sample of fairly involved African American and Hispanic parents. Specifically, qualitative analysis is used to explore the ways that parents interact with the school, their goals and beliefs about parent involvement, and what they consider to be important contributors to positive relationships with schools.

## **Bridgedale<sup>1</sup>**

The Bridgedale school system serves two towns in a southeastern state. The combined population of the two towns is roughly 80,000 people. The community is dominated by a large public university which is the major employer in the area. In the past several decades, the towns have seen much development, mostly in the form of student housing and rental properties. The development has been criticized by some as squeezing out the lower-income and African American populations. This criticism is supported by the fact that in 2011, the median rent in the area was nearly \$900 and median family income was roughly \$100,000. Nevertheless, enrollment in Bridgedale schools is diverse. In the 2012-2013 academic year, the student body was roughly 50% non-Hispanic white, 10% Black, 15% Hispanic, and 15% Asian. Seven of its 11 elementary schools were Title I schools. About 25% of students received free or reduced lunches in 2012.

The performance of Bridgedale's schools is above the state average. The district enrolls students in advanced college prep courses (Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, etc.) at roughly twice the state average. Local per-pupil funding is also about twice the state average. The percentage of students scoring at or above grade level of end-of-year subject tests also exceeds the state average, although the percentages are only 60-70%, depending on the subject. This overall picture of an above-average school district, however, obscures the reality that certain subsets of students in the district are struggling. Although 75% of white students passed both reading and math subject tests in 2013, only about 15% of Black students did. Hispanic students passed at slightly higher rates than Black students, at roughly 25%. Similar disparities were found when comparing economically secure students with economically disadvantaged students.

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<sup>1</sup> All names of locations, school programs, and individuals are pseudonyms. To maintain the community's anonymity, exact statistics are not presented.

## **Parent Involvement Program**

This study is based on a sample of Bridgedale parents who enrolled in the pilot year of the district's Parent Involvement Program. The Parent Involvement Program was designed to "improve academic success for students of color" in Bridgedale Schools, "through a series of workshops and classes" that would "provide parents with tools to locate and utilize academic and social supports provided by the school district and the community, to build positive relationships with school staff, and to help their children achieve academic success." School social workers and graduate-level interns worked with an existing program in the district (Pathways) to design and implement the program. Pathways provided mentors and enrichment opportunities for students of color with promising academic records. Because of the connection between the two programs, many of the parents who participated in the pilot year of the Parent Involvement Program also had children in Pathways.

In its pilot year, the Parent Involvement Program ran for a semester. It has since expanded to offer activities throughout the academic year. The program provides a comprehensive calendar of workshops and community and school events for parents to choose from. For example, in its first two years, the program offered workshops on preparing and paying for college, helping students succeed in school, and coping with emotional and behavioral issues. Parents make a formal commitment to participate by registering for the program, and then attend a required number of workshops, school events, and parent-teacher conferences. If parents complete the requirements, they "graduate" from the program and participate in a celebratory ceremony at the end of the year. The program is open to parents with students in all district schools and grade levels.

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

The sampling frame for the current study included all parents who registered to participate in the Parent Involvement Program during its first semester of operation. In total, 73

parents registered in advance of the program start date. Thirty-one parents (42%) spoke Spanish as their primary language; all other parents were English-speaking.

Figure 3.2 depicts the sampling and recruitment process for the study. A stratified sampling strategy was used, with the goal of recruiting 10 English-speaking and 5 Spanish-speaking participants for interviews. Twelve English-speaking parents and seven Spanish-speaking parents were randomly selected from the list of registered program participants to be contacted by telephone and recruited to participate in the research study. Of 19 parents contacted, 1 had provided a non-working phone number, 1 had moved out of the school system, and 1 declined to participate. Three other parents (all English-speaking) initially agreed to participate but could not be reached to schedule an interview, or repeatedly cancelled and rescheduled. Ultimately, 13 parents agreed to participate in the study and completed an initial interview (a response rate of 68%). Eight families were English-speaking African Americans, and five were Spanish-speaking Hispanic.

Table 3.1 lists pseudonyms and relevant characteristics of each study participant. All of the Hispanic participants were married or partnered, while most African American participants were single. Respondents had children whose ages ranged from 6 to 18 years. By chance, all but two participating families had only female school-aged children. A few families had additional children who were either too young to attend public school, or had already graduated high school; several of these non-school-aged children were male. Hispanic and African American parents were roughly equally likely to have graduated from the Parent Involvement Program (4 out of 8 African American parents and 3 out of 5 Hispanic parents graduated).

Although individual parents were originally recruited, three Hispanic parents participated in the program with their spouses and were interviewed together. Among families where only one parent was interviewed, the majority were women. One African American family was represented by the father.



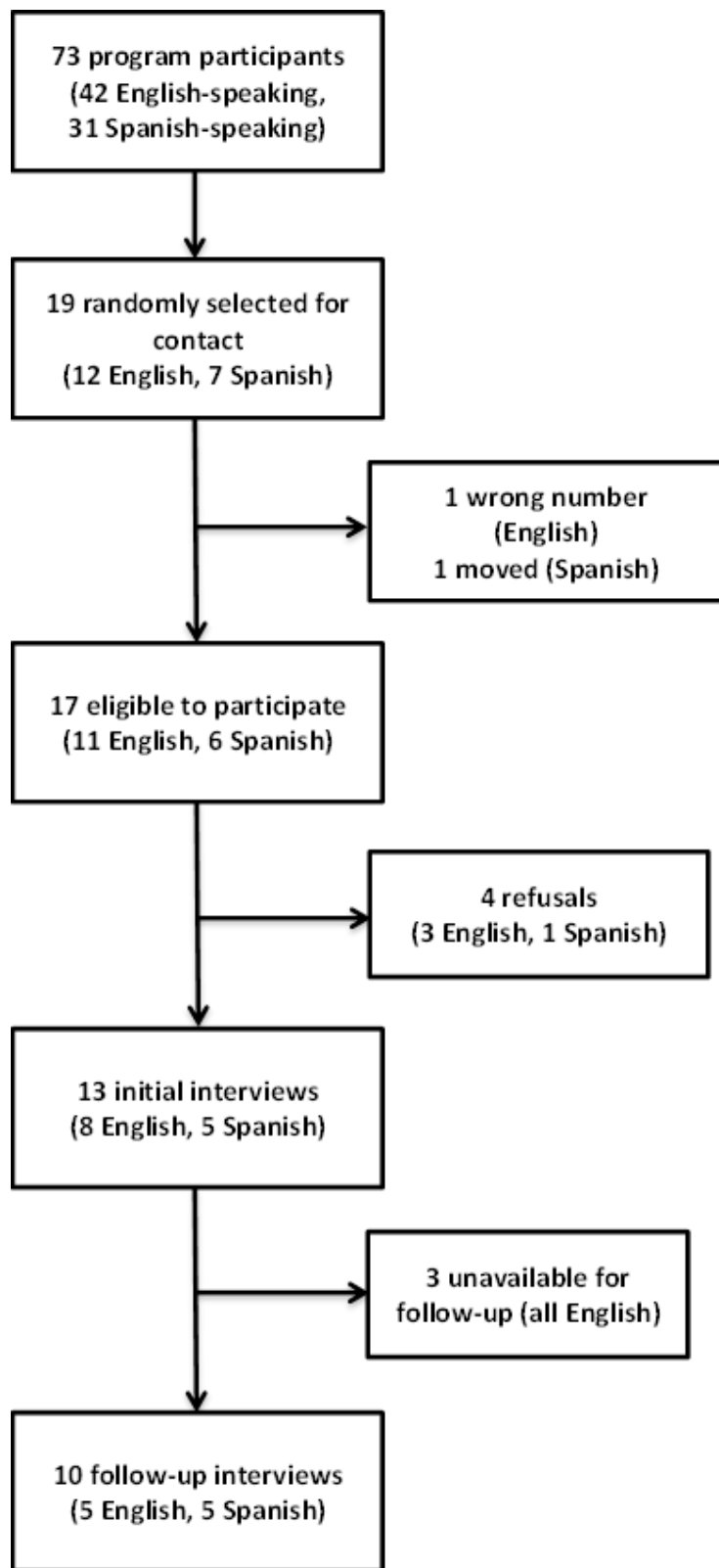


Figure 3.2. Sampling and recruitment of participants.

Table 3.1

*Study Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Relationship status</b>	<b>School-aged children (Gender and age)</b>	<b>Graduated from Parent Involvement Program?</b>
Larissa*	African American	Single	F (12 yrs.) M (9 yrs.) F (7 yrs.)	N
Joe	African American	Partnered	F (15 yrs.)	Y
Tina	African American	Single	M (13 yrs.)	Y
Leigh*	African American	Single	F (18 yrs.) F (11 yrs.) F (6 yrs.)	N
Melissa*	African American	Single	F (9 yrs.)	N
Serena	African American	Single	F (8 yrs.)	N
Louise	African American	Single	F (6 yrs.)	Y
Jenny	African American	Partnered	F (15 yrs.) F (9 yrs.)	Y
Mari	Hispanic	Partnered	F (12 yrs.)	N
Carlos	Hispanic	Partnered	F (11 yrs.)	Y
Sofia	Hispanic	Partnered	F (10 yrs.) F (9 yrs.)	Y

Elena	Hispanic	Partnered	F (18 yrs.) F (17 yrs.) F (12 yrs.)	N
Pablo	Hispanic	Partnered	M (15 yrs.) F (10 yrs.)	Y

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\* Participant completed only the first interview. All other parents were interviewed twice.

### **Procedures**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parent participants twice: once early in the program, and a second time after the program had ended. Three of the English-speaking parents could not be re-contacted for the second interview. Most parents were interviewed in their homes, but some chose to be interviewed in quiet public spaces such as a coffee shop or library. Families received a \$10 incentive for each interview. Interviews with Spanish-speaking parents were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter. All of the interviews were conducted by the author, were audio-recorded, and transcribed by the author.

### **Measures**

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data. All parents were asked the same open-ended questions, and standardized probes were used to follow up as necessary. The questions were:

- How have you been getting along with your children’s schools this year?
- Do you feel confident about working with the schools? Why or why not?
- How far do you expect your children to go in school?
- What is your role in helping your children succeed?

### **Analysis**

Ritchie and Spencer (2002) describe framework analysis, which they argue is well-suited to short-term (occurring over a period of months rather than years) qualitative inquiries with clear research objectives. Framework analysis is particularly appropriate for what Ritchie and Spencer (2002) call “applied policy research” (p. 305), where goals are “contextual, diagnostic,

evaluative, [or] strategic” (p. 307). The goals of the present study are both contextual and diagnostic. In other words, the study sought to “identify the form and nature” of the educational involvement of parents of color, and to “examine the reasons for, or causes of” parents’ involvement (p. 307, Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Framework analysis proceeds in 5 stages:

- *Familiarization* – immersion in the data and identification of key ideas and themes
- *Identification* of a thematic framework which can be used to sort, index, or code data
- *Indexing* – applying the thematic framework to the data; identifying passages of text that fit under each thematic heading
- *Charting* – organizing data and comparing across cases or themes, in order to identify patterns and associations in the data
- *Mapping and interpretation* – defining concepts, developing typologies, and identifying continua of experiences or associations between phenomena; returning to key objectives of the research study and summarizing findings

The initial process of familiarization consisted of listening to, transcribing, and re-reading the interviews. Notes were made about the key themes and ideas (such as emotions, beliefs, and events) that appeared in the data. These key concepts were expanded into a thematic framework by incorporating ideas inspired by the literature and the study’s original research questions. The themes were organized into a hierarchy. Broad categories included things like parents’ beliefs about family-school relationships, reasons for being involved, and desired characteristics of family-school relationships.

In the process of indexing, the thematic framework was applied to the transcripts. Atlas.ti software was used to aid in the application of the framework and in the later retrieval of text related to each category. Up to this point in the process, memos were written to document emerging themes and connections (Gibbs, 2007). The analysis produced a total of 13 memos, reflecting on a number of emerging themes and patterns in the data.

Charting was then used to compare families on important concepts, including their reasons for being involved at school, whether or not they expressed concerns about racial/ethnic educational stereotypes, and their beliefs about the consequences of their involvement. The final stage of analysis, the mapping and interpretation of the data, was completed with the aid of the reduced and organized forms of the data (indexed transcript excerpts, charts, and memos) and resulted in the overall research findings presented below.

## **Results**

Consistent with the research questions, the central theme that emerged in the interviews was that of family-school relationships. More specific findings were focused on parents' goals in interactions with the school, the types of interaction parents used to pursue these goals, and the complementary roles that schools played in these interactions.

Parents' goals and methods of involvement will be discussed first. Parents will be identified by race/ethnicity, and gender and age of children, following the format Name (*Race, Child gender-child age*). Table 3.2 summarizes these activities, the goals associated with them, and the school responses that suggest to parents that an interaction has been successful. Following a discussion of these activities, the role of schools in promoting positive family-school relationships is discussed.

### **Parents' Goals for Involvement**

As suggested above, parents do not engage in involvement simply for its own sake; they have particular goals in mind for their interactions with school staff. Parents identified two broad goals for their involvement with the school: exchanging information with school staff, and securing intervention for their child.

Table 3.2

*Interview Themes: Types of Interactions with Schools, Goals, and Beliefs*

<b>Immediate Goals</b>	<b>Interaction</b>	<b>Long-term Goals</b>	<b>Indicators of Success</b>
Exchanging information	Attend general informational events	Prevent serious problems  Convey to staff that parents “care” about education  Fight negative stereotypes  Establish a positive relationship with the school	Securing desired information  Feeling “heard”  Acknowledgement that parent “cares” and is invested in education
Securing an intervention for child	Contact specific school staff	Address academic, social, emotional challenges of child	Implementation of intervention  Referral to alternative source of intervention  Guidance for at-home intervention

**Exchanging information.** The focus of exchanges in the family-school relationship is usually information, rather than material resources. Parents wanted to know about their children’s daily lives and the adults that cared for them, their student’s progress in class, the types of courses students would need to take in the future, and how to navigate the college applications process. As Sofia (H, F-11) remarked, “I want to be there with [my children]. For me, if I distance myself from the schools it’s like distancing myself from them.” Joe (AA, F-15) noted, “I just like to get more involved. I don’t think [my daughter] sees a need for it, but just to know who she’s interacting with on a daily basis, as far as adults, would be helpful to me.”

Parents also wanted to learn more about how to help their children succeed in the future. Sofia (H, F-11), whose sister has a student in a Bridgedale middle school, said,

When [my sister] has meetings for her son who goes to the middle school, I go because my daughter is going to go there, so I want to be more connected there and what's she going to do, what are they going to talk about, what's she going to see.

Parents recognized the value of the information they obtained from schools, and believed that staying informed would prevent problems with schools in the future. Information gained from schools could facilitate parents' early intervention into any emerging problems. As Sofia (H, F-11) said, "I'm very involved, I'm one of those moms who goes month after month to the meetings, and I try to stay on top of things ... because I go, thank goodness, I haven't had a problem." Louise (AA, F-6) believed that her involvement prevented

a situation where, I don't know, [my daughter] would get left back or be forced to go into remedial something, or whatever other more extreme measures could have been taken because I think they've gotten to know that I'm being involved and proactive, if that makes sense.

Some of the more "extreme measures" that parents hoped to prevent were that teachers would "give up" on their student, retain the student, or promote the student in spite of a lack of preparation.

Louise's (AA, F-6) comment above also hints at the type of information that parents hope to convey to school staff in their interactions. Interacting with school staff gave parents the opportunity to manage staff perceptions of their family. Parents in this study were particularly concerned with conveying their interest in and commitment to their children's education. As Louise said, "they've gotten to know that I'm being involved and proactive." Many parents believed that if school staff knew they were "interested" or "cared," staff would pay more attention to their children. Louise argued, "Honestly I feel like the teachers are working harder with her because I'm becoming more visible to them. It's sad, say if someone can't be more visible for whatever reason, and then their child might slip through the cracks."

Parents' desire to convey their interest in their children's education was partly in response to concerns about negative racial-ethnic stereotypes in schools. It was apparent that respondents had internalized negative stereotypes about uninvolved parents. Nearly every

parent made a point to distinguish him- or herself from other parents who were not involved, or who did not appear to care about their children's education. Sofia (H, F-11) pointed out, "I know that lots of parents don't go. Lots of parents don't know anything because they don't go. They only know because their child tells them. Because they send them a note." Elena (H, F-18, F-17, F-12) was proud that among parents of children in the Pathways program, "I was one of the first parents who would say, parents have to come, they have to attend. [Other parents] only want to get summer camp for their kids." Some parents specifically referenced their own racial/ethnic group when they talked about the lack of parent involvement. For example, Pablo (H, M-15, F-10) said, "Later I want to become a volunteer to help pull together other Latino parents because we're lacking involvement. It's a powerful downfall that we have as Latinos; that we're not as involved in our kids' education." Similarly, Jenny (AA, F-15, F-9) felt that

As an African American, going to the town meetings, and just the lack of us that are involved. I think that is a big deal. And I would advocate more of us need to participate . . . . Because when you have younger parents they don't make it a priority ... I think that a lot of these parents need to be educated on how important it is.

Thus, the negative stereotype of apathetic parents of color was clearly a powerful motivator for many parents to interact with school staff and convey their interest in their children's education.

To summarize, an important overarching goal of parent involvement at school was to exchange information with school staff. In particular, parents wanted to obtain information about their children's academic performance and daily lives, and to convey information about their interest in their children's education. These exchanges were intended to fight negative stereotypes about racial/ethnic minority parents, to make a positive impression on school staff, and to prevent serious problems developing in the long-term. It also seems that an implicit motivation for these general exchanges of information is to build positive family-school relationships. As predicted by social exchange theory, many of the parents in this study are concerned with the quality of their relationships with schools, and are therefore intentionally engaging in frequent, positive exchanges with school staff.



**Securing interventions.** Another overarching goal for parent involvement at school was to secure an intervention that would address a particular concern about their child. Common concerns included low grades, lack of preparation for standardized testing, struggles with homework, bullying or teasing of their children, and student frustration with teachers. Interventions sought in these cases took a variety of forms. Sometimes parents were simply asking school staff for guidance, while other respondents reported that they had made specific requests for psychological or academic testing, classroom transfers, or specific instructional techniques.

Tina (AA, M-13), whose son struggled with several emotional and learning disabilities, said,

I call [the Exceptional Children Teacher] almost every day. Sometimes [my son] will tell me something that's not true and she checks in on it. If he's frustrated with a class. If I let them know something they'll check on it with [my son] or the teacher and have a meeting.

Due to her son's past difficulties with his math course, Tina also asked for help preparing for summer break: "I asked his teacher to give me a little stuff to help him keep his mind going so he doesn't forget some of the stuff that he learned, especially math." Jenny's (AA, F-15, F-9) younger daughter was enrolled in a Spanish and English dual language program, and Jenny had serious concerns that her daughter did not have a firm enough grasp on either language. Jenny described her doubts:

So here she's learning Spanish, the vowels, everything with the Spanish. But when it came to the English, it's been a slow process, and I've had to put in a lot of work just trying to make sure that she maintains grade-level, and trying to balance out whether, ok, is there a learning issue?

These concerns had led Jenny to spend a great deal of time talking with school staff: "Since kindergarten I've been questioning what's going on, something's not really, I'm trying to pinpoint as a parent, what can I do, what can I do..."

In these cases, parents exchanged information about specific concerns in the hope of receiving advice, referrals, or institutional resources from school staff. These interactions differ

from the general exchanges of information described above, because parents expect school staff to take some sort of action in response.

### **Parents' Methods of Involvement**

The methods parents used to pursue their goals fell under two broad categories: attendance at general informational events and targeted contact with school staff. General informational events were used for general information exchange. These events included things like parent-teacher association meetings, school improvement team meetings, regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences, open houses, Literacy Nights, Math Nights, awards ceremonies, and public forums. None of the parents complained of a lack of these opportunities, with the exception that some parents of older students lamented the loss of regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences once their students left elementary school.

Parents also engaged in targeted contacts with specific school staff. This type of interaction could be used for general information exchange (such as finding out about a student's recent academic performance), but was typically used for securing interventions. Parents contacted whomever they judged to be the appropriate person for the matter at hand. Depending on the issue in question, parents reached out to teachers, school social workers, principals, counselors, and special education staff. Methods of contact included phone calls, emails, notes, formal meetings and informal conversations. Parents varied in their ability to locate the "right" person for their inquiry. Some parents had a particular school staff member that they relied on for most of their needs. As noted above, Tina (AA, M13) called her son's special education teacher "almost every day." Sofia (H, F-11), who emigrated from Mexico and spoke very little English, had a similarly close relationship with the bilingual social worker at her daughters' school. She said,

[The school social worker] is the one who helped me the most to figure out how to get this stuff, where to look, where to apply, where there weren't applications or for example right now they have scholarships for Girls on the Run [a running program for school-age girls], she let me know. She's the one who helps me the most.

Jenny (AA, F-15, F-9), who had struggled to get school staff to take seriously her concern about her daughter's Spanish and English language ability, discussed the difficulty of finding the "right person" to contact:

You really have to know people that know information to get around certain things or certain needs, it's just not publicized a lot, the connections ... it gets to a point where if you don't have the right person fighting, it's easy to give up.

In the same vein, other parents mentioned that they felt they had an advantage because they were very familiar with the staff at the schools their children attended. In response to the question, "Do you feel confident working with the school?" Joe (AA, F-15) said,

One thing that actually gives me a confident foundation is my wife works in the school system, [as] an employee in the administrative offices of my daughter's elementary school, she's been there for 20 years. And I worked there for 2 years back in the 90s. I still know some of [my daughter]'s middle school, some students, that's where I worked. I understand where some parents, especially some with high school education or less, may come in and be intimidated by someone that's overeducated. I've seen that.

### **The Role of Schools**

Implicit in a discussion of the family-school *relationship* is the presence and influence of two actors. Even the most conscientious parents can only do so much to build and maintain effective relationships; without corresponding effort on the part of school staff they cannot succeed. This analysis of parents' goals and methods for interacting with school implies a number of complementary roles for school staff. Schools must provide opportunities for the types of exchanges important to parents, make building relationships an organizational goal, and be responsive to parent efforts in ways that will leave parents feeling that exchanges have been successful.

**Provide opportunities and information necessary for exchange.** Schools are already effective at providing general informational events for parents. These tend to be central to parent involvement programming efforts, perhaps because they are the simplest approach to implement. It is useful, however, for schools to keep in mind that the primary draw of these types of events is for parents to obtain information about their children's daily life. Thus parents

may be more likely to attend events that explicitly emphasize the provision of useful information. Larissa (AA, F-12, M-9, F-7) was very frank about her priorities:

[The school has] been implementing some really good stuff, like the Coffee with the Principal. For the longest time I didn't go to that, my first time going to something like that was last Friday and I actually got a lot out of it, it was almost life-changing. And I downed it at first because I was like it's just an opportunity for parents to get together and blow smoke up the principal's ass, and I'm not interested in that, I want to know how I can better help my child because if you have a child below grade level it's just always hanging over you.

Providing opportunities for parents to pursue interventions for their children is a more complicated issue. Several parents made comments about how "knowing people" was instrumental to their intervention efforts. One way schools could facilitate this type of exchange is to make sure all parents know at least the names, responsibilities, and contact information of key school staff. The responsibilities of individual school staff can be particularly obscure to parents. For example, Melissa (AA, F-9) described how, when her daughter was hit by another girl on the bus, she had to contact several people before she learned that the assistant principal was responsible for dealing with bus issues.

In addition to not knowing who to contact at the school, parents also experience difficulty securing interventions due to a lack of knowledge about the education system and their family's educational rights. More than one of the parents in the sample had children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and were unclear about their family's rights in the context of the special education system. Leigh (AA, F-18, F-11, F-6) described her confusion in dealing with her youngest daughter's speech delay:

Different staff members in the school are there [at an IEP meeting]. I'm very new at this. It's the teacher, the speech therapist, sometimes the principal. I'm not sure because really, I didn't know. And that's another thing, if you've never been through this .... When report cards came out I had to ask [my daughter]'s teacher, was I supposed to receive a report card for her speech [therapy]? And she said yes, and I didn't. So that's another thing I'll bring up in the [IEP] meeting. So parents that have never been through this, you don't know what to expect. I didn't know it was my right to call and request a conference ... I brought it up to my sister, she works in the school system, and she talked to one of her colleagues about it and she said that if I wanted to have a meeting every day, that's my right.

A related issue arose for Jenny (AA, F-15, F-9), who wanted her daughter to be tested for learning disabilities, and was unaware that she could challenge the school's decision not to do so. At her follow-up interview, Jenny had just learned about the existence of IEPs from a friend, and was very upset that this had never been explained to her by school staff:

So to find out now, after all this time, and I've stressed my concerns with every teacher, every year, the counselor, every year, from the first day throughout the entire school year, as well as with the principal, and then someone mentions this program and it's like, well wait a minute. Why hasn't anyone at the school even recommended this as a possibility of something that may need to be checked into? And it became very disturbing to me ... Now that I've brought it to their attention, they're like, 'Oh, we didn't think...' and I'm like, hello. Well now she's going to have to go through, I guess, their testing to see if she even qualifies. But 5 or 6 months ago, I would have rather had them say, 'Hey, well this is something that's out here that we do offer, let's see if this is something that she qualifies for.'

Jenny's primary complaint was that she should have been informed and given the opportunity to decide for herself whether to pursue an IEP. She felt that instead the school decided for her that it was not necessary. These experiences demonstrate that in order for schools to facilitate parents' efforts to secure interventions, they must ensure that all parents are well informed about their rights and resources in the education system.

**Make building relationships a goal.** Many parents in the study regularly tried to exchange information with school staff, in an apparent effort to build positive relationships with them. Schools should similarly make building strong family-school relationships an explicit goal. Social exchange theory suggests that strong relationships will be associated with additional exchanges in the future. In other words, they will encourage parents to approach the school when they have a concern. Consistent with this prediction, parents who reported success in securing interventions for their children often had existing positive relationships with particular school staff, who they could contact for assistance even when their concern was likely unrelated to the person's responsibilities. Unfortunately, these kinds of close family-school relationships were relatively rare (reported by 4 out of 13 respondents), even in this sample of fairly involved parents.

Social exchange theory further tells us that relationships can be strengthened through frequent and positive exchanges. This was supported by parents' comments about the school practices that helped to build positive relationships. In particular, they appreciated when school staff reached out to them to share information about students' struggles and achievements. Louise (AA, F-6) described the positive communications she received from her daughter's teacher, which she was able to parlay into increased involvement in her daughter's education at home:

Like this week [the teacher] sent an update about [my daughter], that she reached her goal of being able to start [reading] chapter books. And that was something she wanted to do by the end of the year, so she said, 'She's ahead of schedule, she's starting to read chapter books, and also ask her about this book that she's been working on, she's been writing a book for the past couple of weeks, it's great, and she's been doing a lot of work on it, so ask her about it because she's doing a great job' ... So I was able to actually follow up. Because I wouldn't have known to ask her about that if I hadn't been told. So that's good.

Louise went on to describe the way this teacher's sharing of information strengthened their relationship:

So I mean that makes me feel good and it also makes [my daughter] feel good, so when there are things that she needs to improve on, it doesn't feel like so much of an attack or like berating the child or the parent. And it feels like more of a partnership, like we're in this together, rather than, 'You need to fix your child.'

Because the teacher kept Louise informed and had made an effort to develop a positive relationship, Louise did not feel alienated when problems arose. Carlos (H, F-11) had a similarly positive relationship with one teacher, which was also built on a regular exchange of information:

There's one teacher, I said, can you please let me know when there are problems, call me, send me the reason. Whenever [my daughter] is failing or having problems, she calls me at the house and tells me.

Louise and Carlos had strong relationships with these teachers because the teachers were frequently in contact, sharing valuable information with the parents.

On the other hand, when school staff had not made regular efforts to contact parents and share important information, parents were skeptical of their commitment to address more

serious problems. Larissa (AA, F-12, M-9, F-7) was frustrated when her son received unexpectedly poor grades on his report card:

I had a problem with the fact that, if my son has been having issues with something or lacking concepts, so the only consistent person he's been dealing with since he's below grade level is the reading teacher, so if he's been dealing with her for the 3 years he's been there, then why is it I'm just now hearing from you that he's lacking concepts? Me and you should be in communication every week about it.

Later in the interview, Larissa remarked about the same teacher, "When you're saying you care, I'm thinking that's a bunch of bullshit, and don't come at me with that, because you're not invested. I haven't heard from you, not once."

The parents in the study were very concerned about their students' academic progress, and wanted to be able to address problems before they affected students' "permanent records." But parents felt unable to proactively intervene without the schools' cooperation in keeping them informed. When schools keep in frequent contact with parents about students' progress, be it positive or negative, it can help build relationships that facilitate future collaboration when serious issues arise.

**Be responsive to parent goals.** As social exchange theory suggests, another way to strengthen family-school relationships is to ensure that parents feel their exchanges with schools have been successful. This study explored parents' goals for interaction in part to determine what parents considered to be "successful" exchanges. Consistent with parents' desire for information about their children's educational lives, relationships were weakened when parents felt that schools had withheld important information, despite their explicit efforts to secure this information. Jenny (AA, F-15, F-9) said that she was "disturbed" by her daughter's report card:

Because I'm constantly staying in touch, asking, 'Well how are things looking?' Every day when I pick her up, I get these, 'Oh she's doing great, she's improving,' and then I got her report card and the report card did not reflect everything that they said. And this is the type of stuff that becomes very concerning and irritating as a parent, because it's misleading.

Perhaps in an effort to reassure Jenny, her daughter's teacher said that her daughter was "doing great," even though this report was not consistent with her actual grades. Jenny's goal in these interactions was not to seek reassurance, but rather to stay informed about her daughter's academic progress. As a result, there was a lack of congruence between Jenny's goal and the teacher's response, which left Jenny frustrated. These unsuccessful exchanges also damaged Jenny's relationship with the teacher.

In addition to seeking information, parents also come to school staff seeking interventions for their children. Parents expected the school to take some kind of action. This action need not be complex – it can be as simple as providing the parent with a referral for outside services – but some action must be taken in order for the parent to feel that the interaction has been successful. There were numerous examples in the data of harm done to family-school relationships as a result of schools' failure to act. For example, some parents began to endorse their child's misbehavior in response to a school's unresponsiveness. In one such case, Louise's (AA, F-6) daughter had endured bullying on the bus that went unaddressed by school staff. She remarked:

The situation with the bus is still not ideal ... she's had a couple of incidents where she's actually, I got notes home that she punched this boy for teasing her, because again, the people on the bus, they're driving and I don't think they're really interested in helping defuse a situation. And I don't condone the violence ... but if someone's kind of antagonizing you, I still don't think that's the best solution, but that's the choice she made and I wasn't entirely unhappy about it because no one else was doing anything.

Some parents felt that their children were demoralized by the school's failure to address the children's needs. Tina's (AA, M-13) son was hospitalized four times as a result of mental health issues related to the bullying and teasing he experienced at school. Each time, Tina requested a meeting with school staff to ask that something be done. She said:

After [the fourth time] I'd tell them, [my son] has had enough, you're not listening to him. And he doesn't say anything after the first couple of times. He feels like nobody's listening, so what's the point in saying anything if he doesn't feel like anyone's going to address the issue like he feels they should be?



In summary, schools can be responsive to parents' needs by providing timely and accurate information about children's challenges and successes when parents request it. Additionally, schools must take action when parents request intervention on behalf of their children. In such cases, the school's responsiveness helps parents feel that their interactions with schools have been successful, which strengthens family-school relationships and increases the likelihood of future exchanges. Respondent Melissa (AA, F-9) may have put it best when she argued,

If it's a problem for me, and you're basically responsible for my child the majority of the day, then whatever is important to me should be important to you too, especially if it has something to do with my kid.

The result when schools are not responsive to parent needs is weakened relationships, demoralized parents and students, and an exacerbation of existing problems.

### **Discussion**

Most existing parent involvement interventions are focused on changing parent beliefs, knowledge, and/or behaviors. Because schools have limited empirical information on the needs of parents in family-school relationships, interventions focus instead on getting parents to meet the needs or expectations of schools. Ignoring issues of overall family-school relationship quality is a significant oversight because family-school relationship quality is likely to determine parents' willingness to continue to engage and cooperate with the school in the long-term. This study drew on social exchange theory to guide exploration of factors contributing to family-school relationships. Particularly, social exchange theory suggests that relationship quality is improved when actors perceive interactions, or exchanges, to be successful. Whether an exchange has been successful is a subjective judgment that will be based on a person's goals for the interaction. As such, the study examined parents' goals and methods of educational involvement in a sample of African American and Hispanic parents with children ranging in age from 6 to 18 years. This study raised a number of issues that have not generally been the focus of other research on parent involvement.

For one, nearly all of the parents in the sample talked about efforts to secure interventions to address children's challenges at school. These interactions were very important to parents and, when unsuccessful, were very likely to contribute to reduced family-school relationship quality. When parents' attempts to secure interventions were unsuccessful, it was often because the parent lacked information about who to contact, or because the school staff they contacted were not responsive to their requests.

Respondents in this study also reported difficulty locating the right school staff member to contact with a specific issue. Parents may not know the roles, or even the identity, of guidance counselors, social workers, assistant principals, or school psychologists. This can result in parents choosing not to address an issue, or contacting the wrong person with the issue, both of which can exacerbate existing problems. For example, if a parent contacts a teacher with a problem that is not related to her classroom, the teacher may simply respond that there is nothing she can do. Such a response will damage the family-school relationship. For this reason, it is important that parents (and school staff) are able to easily locate the appropriate person to address a particular issue. This may seem like a minor point, but at an institutional level it can prevent a great deal of frustration and bitterness.

A handful of studies have also focused on ways that school staff can recognize and be responsive to parent goals. Symeou and colleagues designed an intervention in which teachers practiced using listening and reflection skills in parent-teacher conferences (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). Such a training program could help school staff learn the skills necessary to identify and respond to a parent's needs, particularly in situations where a parent is seeking an intervention for his or her child. As discussed above, the parents in this study were concerned about what school staff thought of them, and how those beliefs might affect the school's treatment of their children. If school staff can convey to parents awareness of and respect for parents' investment in their children's education, family-school relationships may be improved. This is a relatively simple strategy that could have important implications for

parent involvement. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues created and tested a training program for teachers that could serve as a model for interventions that would affect attitudes about parent involvement, and found that it was significantly associated with teacher beliefs about parents' efficacy for helping their children succeed, and teacher invitations to parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones & Reed, 2002).

An additional important finding of the present study was that managing impressions was an important secondary goal of parents' exchanges with schools. Parents often wanted to fight negative racial / ethnic stereotypes and to convince school staff that they were truly invested in, and cared about, their children's education. Research has shown that parent involvement may affect teacher's treatment of students (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). The findings of the present study are the first evidence, to this author's knowledge, that parents of color are aware of these judgments and their importance, and that parents consciously work to affect teacher's judgments.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study is based on qualitative data drawn from a small localized sample of parents who self-selected into their school district's parent education program. Future research should test these relationships qualitatively in other diverse samples, as well as quantitatively with larger, more representative samples. The present study also relies on parents' recollections of their interactions with schools. Future studies should use prospective designs to examine parents' initial goals and subsequent reactions to exchanges.

Assuming additional research supports the findings presented here, school-based interventions and training programs should be developed with the intention of encouraging school staff to focus on relationship-building and to identify and be responsive to parent goals. Such interventions may be adapted from programs described above, or developed from scratch based on additional research in this vein. In the long run, the effects of such interventions on

student well-being and academic performance should be evaluated, as positive student outcomes are the ultimate goal of school-based interventions.

To school staff members who are already overburdened and short on resources, it may seem that implementing new programs and/or increasing personal attention to parents is not feasible. However, this research demonstrates that positive family-school relationships can prevent more serious long-term problems which could eventually require far more school resources. Additionally, when responsibility for building good family-school relationships is shared across school staff members, responsibility for addressing parent concerns is also shared. This may reduce the time spent by certain school staff on dealing with student and family issues, and redistribute it across other staff members (although this supposition will need to be empirically tested). Finally, programs designed to change school practices or train staff with new relationship-building skills need not take extensive time. The in-service training program developed by Hoover-Dempsey and coauthors required only 6 hours of staff time, spread across several weeks (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Another training in communication skills required more time, at 12 hours total (Symeou et al., 2012). Investing time in training staff to may also be more efficient than the parent training programs typically used to encourage involvement, because staff members stay on for many years, while a new group of parents and students enter the school each year.

Furthermore, parent outreach efforts can be implemented in ways that do not require extensive time commitments from school staff. For example, Bennett-Conroy (2012) tested an intervention in which middle school English teachers were encouraged to engage all parents in brief (at least 5 minutes) conversations about students' academic achievement. Although the teachers spent no more than 3 hours each week in these outreach efforts, the study demonstrated significant effects on the number of homework assignments students turned in, as well as students' homework grades.

When we shift our thinking about parent involvement from a focus on school expectations to a focus on family-school relationships, we find that these relationships are strengthened by frequent, positive contact, and responsiveness to parents' goals. Strong relationships appear to contribute to parents' willingness to collaborate with school staff, and to facilitate parents' ability to ask for help when they need it. Consistent with social exchange theory, a cyclical pattern emerges: a parent reaches out to school staff, school staff members are responsive, the family-school relationship is strengthened, and the parent is more likely to reach out in the future. Schools also have the option, and perhaps the responsibility, to reach out to parents in order to jumpstart this cycle, so that a strong relationship is already in place when the family needs the school.

The quality of family-school relationships affects parents' and children's attitudes toward school. These consequences should be meaningful to schools. It complicates the work of schools when parents do not believe that their involvement matters or that schools care about their families. It further disrupts teachers' efforts if students are demoralized because the school was unresponsive to their struggles. The finding that frustrated parents did not object to their students' misbehavior should be particularly motivating to schools. A failure to establish strong, positive relationships with parents has the potential to wreak havoc that goes far beyond a shortage of parent volunteers.

School social workers are well-equipped to lead efforts to improve family-school relationships. Social workers have historically served as parent liaisons, and are often responsible for implementing parent involvement programming. They are also one of the few school staff members specifically charged with building relationships with families. Social workers are trained to establish relationships across institutional boundaries, and across differences of race/ethnicity, culture, and socio-economic status. The social work skill set also explicitly includes communication and interpersonal problem-solving skills that are not the focus of educator training. Thus school social workers are in a unique position to share their

expertise with fellow school staff members and build schools' capacity for strong, positive relationships with all families.

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## CHAPTER 4: COMPLEMENTARY EFFECTS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE AND HOME-BASED PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Parent involvement in education has been widely researched and promoted by scholars in education, social work, and psychology. Studies have demonstrated positive effects of parent involvement on students' school engagement, educational aspirations, behavior in school, and academic achievement (Altschul, 2012; G. L. Bowen, Hopson, Rose, & Glennie, 2012; G. L. Bowen, Rose, Powers, & Glennie, 2008; X. Fan, 2001; W. Fan, Williams, & Wolters, 2012; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2003; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996).

Although parent involvement is often thought of in relation to elementary school students, middle school students are also likely to benefit from parent involvement in education. Many middle school children experience problems in the areas that parent educational involvement ameliorates. For example, Roeser and colleagues (2000) found that only 40 percent of middle school students could be classified as "positively adjusted" (demonstrating academic competence, positive school valuing, and positive mental health, p. 455) while 31% were classified as having "multiple problems" (p. 456).

Despite early adolescents' continued needs for emotional support and guidance, several factors contribute to a reduced likelihood that parents will be involved at school during the middle school years. Among these factors are increased complexity of the school system and fewer school-facilitated involvement opportunities (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Eccles et al., 1993; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Fortunately, there are many ways for parents to remain involved during the middle school years, even when they may not be as likely to visit the school. For example, parents can continue to express high expectations for students' achievement and

behavior at school, monitor behavior at home, and discuss academic topics and issues with their children.

Parent behaviors are not the only contextual determinant of student performance, however. A number of studies have documented the importance of school climate variables, particularly teacher support (Perry, Liu, & Pabian, 2010; Roeser et al., 2000; Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy, 2012; Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010; Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009). In order to best understand the effects of home and school climate, research should explore the two variables simultaneously whenever possible.

This paper investigated the effects of home-based parent involvement on middle school students' school engagement. In addition, the complementary effect of school climate was examined.

### **Parent Involvement and Academic Motivation**

One of the proposed mechanisms for the effect of parent educational involvement on academic achievement is through effects on students' academic motivation. Self-determination theory provides a framework for understanding motivation. Students can be either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to do well academically. Purely intrinsic academic motivation may not be common, but self-determination theory describes a continuum of extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation can be entirely external, such that a child is merely complying with outside pressures, like threats of punishment. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation can be internalized and even integrated into a child's self-concept, meaning that although the child might not find schoolwork intrinsically pleasurable, she personally values outcomes associated with it, such as getting good grades.

Self-determination theory further describes how three basic psychological needs – the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy – can affect children's motivation. When students feel competent in a domain, when they experience close relationships with people associated with the domain, and when they feel they have autonomy to make their own decisions

in a domain, they are more likely to internalize the motivation to engage and perform well in that domain (see Ryan & Deci, 2000, for a review of research). Even when students are intrinsically motivated, Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that their autonomy must be supported in order to facilitate and maintain intrinsic motivation.

The tenets of self-determination theory help explain how parent involvement may affect academic motivation. Through their involvement, parents can model academic success strategies, thereby increasing students' sense of competence. Parent involvement can also demonstrate that a positive relationship exists between the family and the school, thereby increasing students' sense of relatedness to school. The effect of parent involvement on students' sense of autonomy is less clear, however, and likely depends on the form of parent involvement. For example, when parents discuss school course selection with students, it may increase their sense of autonomy. On the other hand, punishing students for poor academic performance is likely to detract from students' sense of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Nevertheless, self-determination theory suggests that parent involvement in education should generally facilitate students' internalization and integration of academic motivation.

Because theory suggests that parent involvement should have effects on student motivation, this paper focuses on a motivational variable as its dependent variable. As a proxy for integrated academic motivation, this study uses a measure of student emotional engagement, or positive affect toward school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Conceptually, emotional engagement is similar to Ryan's and Deci's (2000) description of integrated or intrinsic motivation because it measures students' liking and enjoyment of school.

### **The Middle School Context**

The study of parent involvement, and of academic motivation, becomes more complicated as students age. Academic motivation declines for many students during middle school. Woolley and Bowen (2007) found that grade level was negatively associated with school engagement among a sample of middle school students. Similarly, a longitudinal study that

followed children from age 7 to 18 evidenced a decline in academic interest in early adolescence, which was significantly steeper for boys than for girls (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009). In addition, Simpkins and colleagues (2009) found a negative association between age and math and reading achievement test scores among early adolescents.

Research on samples of early adolescents and their families has also documented a negative relationship between student age and parent involvement (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002; Van Voorhis, 2003). The reasons for declining parent involvement in middle school may include the increasing complexity of the school system as students transition from elementary to middle and high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Eccles et al., 1993; Roeser et al., 2000), which makes it more difficult for parents to navigate. Older children also desire greater autonomy, which may discourage parents from being involved at school, and discourage teachers from reaching out to parents (Eccles et al., 1993; Erikson, 1983; Orthner et al., 2010; Roeser et al., 2000). Additionally, middle and high schools generally provide fewer opportunities for parents to be physically involved at school, for example by volunteering or attending parent-teacher conferences, which are among the most common forms of parent involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007) in elementary schools.

The research on parent involvement does not adequately address the important age-related changes in the parent involvement context. One issue is the fact that most parent involvement research has focused on elementary school samples, which limits researchers' ability to generalize parent involvement knowledge to populations of older children (Agronick, Clark, O'Donnell, & Stueve, 2009; Jeynes, 2012; Mattingly, Prislun, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). An additional limitation of the literature is that many studies of the middle school age group focus on parent involvement activities that occur at the school, in spite of the fact that schools become less accessible at this stage. Examples of these school-based measures

include volunteering, participation in parent-teacher organizations, and attending parent-teacher conferences (e.g., Gutman et al., 2002; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007). Several studies have found that such school-based parent involvement is not significantly related to academic achievement in middle school (Grolnick et al., 2000; Gutman et al., 2002; Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001; Reynolds & Gill, 1994). Others have even found negative effects of certain types of school-based parent involvement. For example, Muller (1995) used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) and found that although parent participation in parent-teacher organizations was positively associated with math achievement, parent volunteering at school was *negatively* associated with math achievement. McNeal (1999) documented the same negative effect of volunteering on achievement in the NELS data. Based on the above findings, school-based involvement may not be the best way for parents to promote academic achievement in early adolescence.

### **Home-Based Parent Involvement**

There are nevertheless a wide variety of ways for parents to be involved in their children's education without being physically present at the school. These include conveying high academic and behavioral expectations to children, monitoring children's behavior at home, and socializing children to value academic pursuits.

Parents' academic expectations have robust positive effects on a variety of academic outcomes and across studies of adolescents from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Bandura and colleagues found positive effects of parent academic expectations on early adolescents' academic self-efficacy, aspirations, and achievement in an Italian sample (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli, 1996). Similarly, Jodl and co-authors documented a positive effect of both mothers' and fathers' educational expectations on seventh-graders' belief that school was important for their futures (Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001). X. Fan (2001) examined the effects of parent involvement variables on the math, reading, social studies, and science achievement trajectories separately for four racial/ethnic groups, and

found that parent educational expectations were significantly associated with achievement in all domains for every group. Many other studies share similar findings (Juang & Silbereisen, 2002; Marchant et al., 2001; Peng & Wright, 1994; Reynolds & Gill, 1994).

Parents can also express their expectations for students' behavior at school, apart from students' academic achievement. Prior research with the data used in the present study examined the effects of an expectations measure which combined aspects of parents' academic and behavior expectations. Those studies found significant associations between expectations and grades, standardized test scores, and students' behavior at school (G. L. Bowen, Hopson, Rose, & Glennie, 2012; G. L. Bowen, Rose, Powers, & Glennie, 2008). Simons-Morton & Chen (2009) asked middle school students how upset their parents would be if they smoked, drank, misbehaved, or did poorly on a test, and found that this measure significantly predicted trajectories of school engagement from sixth to ninth grades. Despite these suggestive findings, few other studies in the parental involvement literature include a measure of parents' behavioral expectations.

A form of parent involvement that is similar to behavior expectations and more commonly studied is parental monitoring. Measures of monitoring may include parental supervision of homework completion, provision of educational resources, and establishment of rules about how children spend their time. Several studies have found positive effects of monitoring on academic outcomes, particularly when monitoring is student-reported (Altschul, 2012; Desimone, 1999; X. Fan, 2001; Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, & Schwab-Stone, 2009; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Desimone (1999) reported that the effect of family rules about time management, chores, and homework on academic achievement depended on the source: student-reported rules were positively associated with achievement, while parent-reported rules were *negatively* associated with achievement. While findings of these studies suggest that student perceptions of parental monitoring may be positively associated with achievement, they contradict what we might expect based on self-determination

theory. Specifically, we might hypothesize that monitoring strategies negatively affect students' sense of autonomy, resulting in reduced academic motivation. Consistent with the latter interpretation, McNeal (1999) found that although monitoring was negatively associated with truancy and school dropout, it was also negatively associated with academic achievement. McNeal's findings break with the pattern established across other studies in that he found negative effects even though parental monitoring was reported by students. Thus the current evidence on parental monitoring is contradictory, and additional research is needed to sort out the relevance of monitoring to middle school achievement.

Finally, Hill and Tyson (2009) describe a form of parent involvement that they call academic socialization. Academic socialization refers to parental behaviors that include expressing high educational expectations, teaching children about strategies for learning and the value of education, and discussing schoolwork, plans for the future, and the real-world relevance of children's studies (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Hill and Tyson (2009) argue that the changes experienced in middle school make academic socialization the most important form of parent educational involvement for early adolescents. Hill and Tyson (2009) reviewed a number of studies and categorized their parent involvement variables as measuring school-based involvement, home-based involvement, or academic socialization. Using meta-analytic techniques, they compared the effect sizes for each type of parent involvement and concluded that academic socialization had the strongest positive association with academic achievement. However, at least half of the studies that the authors categorized as containing evidence in favor of academic socialization reported effects of parent educational expectations alone (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Because the empirical support for educational expectations is so extensive, and few studies have measured the broader construct of academic socialization as defined by Hill and Tyson (2009), it remains to be seen whether academic socialization has explanatory power beyond the well-established effects of educational expectations.

To summarize, there are numerous ways for parents to be involved in the education of their early adolescent children without being physically present at the school, and the forms of home-based involvement have differing levels of empirical support. The positive effects of parents' educational expectations on a variety of academic outcomes are well-documented. The limited research on parents' behavioral expectations suggests that they may have positive effects on academic achievement. Parental monitoring has been demonstrated to have positive effects on academic outcomes, but theoretical considerations suggest that it may negatively affect academic motivation, which could mean that positive effects would be short lived. Finally, the limited research on academic socialization is provocative, but cannot currently differentiate its effects from those of parents' educational expectations.

### **Effects of School Context**

Although parents can affect students' academic achievement, schools share responsibility for these outcomes. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory outlines the complementary influences of individuals' immediate contexts (microsystems) on human development (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). Relatedly, in her persuasive arguments for the importance of parent involvement at school, Epstein (1995) notes that the ultimate goal is to create "school-like families" and "family-like schools" (p. 702). When considering students' academic motivation, it is possible that the negative effects of an unsupportive school environment could negate the positive effects of highly involved parents. Likewise, an extremely nurturing school environment may partially make up for the negative effect of uninvolved parents. Unfortunately, research often explores the effects of either parent involvement or the school social context in isolation (for example, Sakiz et al., 2012; Wentzel et al., 2010).

The existing research is strongly supportive of the effects of school social environment on student engagement. Roeser and colleagues (2000) report that students' sense of positive teacher regard and emotional support, and teachers' emphasis on academic mastery and effort



(as opposed to the relative ability of students) all contribute positively to students' development of academic valuing during middle school. Perry, Liu, and Pabian (2010) also found that teacher support (feeling respected, encouraged, and cared for by teachers) was positively associated with school engagement among middle and high school students. Other studies of middle school students have found that student perceptions of teacher support were significantly positively associated with academic enjoyment, effort, and self-efficacy (Sakiz et al., 2012), academic interest (Wentzel et al., 2010), behavior in school, and grades (Woolley et al., 2009).

An additional reason for exploring the simultaneous effects of school and home contexts is that research focusing solely on the effects of parent involvement may distract from the very real influence that school staff have on the social environment of a school, and by extension, student engagement. Illustrating the complementary effects of the two contexts can provide hope to school staff who are often frustrated by the limited influence they have over parent behaviors.

### **The Current Study**

This study addressed the lack of research on home-based parent involvement in middle school by focusing on involvement activities of middle school parents outside of the school setting. The following questions were examined using secondary data on a large sample of middle school students:

1. What are the effects of home-based parent involvement on school engagement in middle school?
2. What is the effect of school climate on engagement, controlling for parent involvement at home?
3. Does academic socialization predict school engagement beyond the effects of parent academic expectations?

As noted above, the present study used a measure of emotional engagement, which is conceptually similar to Ryan's and Deci's (2000) description of integrated or intrinsic

motivation. It cannot be considered a direct measure of motivation, however, because it does not address students' performance of academic behaviors or their reasons for doing so.

The study also investigated the potential effect of a school climate where all students and their abilities are valued. Of particular interest was the effect of this type of climate on student engagement when parent involvement variables were controlled for. This analysis should provide a sense of the influence a supportive school climate can have, even in the absence of substantial parent involvement.

The third research question was an extension of the work of Hill and Tyson (2009), which defined academic socialization and its effects. Because much of their evidence for the effects of academic socialization hinged on studies of academic expectations, it is useful to examine the added benefit of academic socialization beyond the effects of academic expectations. The data used here made it possible to explore this question because they included measures of academic expectations as well as indicators of other components of academic socialization such as parent-student discussions of school material, and plans for the future.

### **Methods**

Data were collected during the 2004-05 and 2005-06 academic years as part of a quasi-experimental, longitudinal evaluation of a school-wide intervention. The project was intended to evaluate the effects of an organizational intervention based on the School Success Profile (SSP). It was implemented at 11 middle schools in two North Carolina school districts (5 schools from a rural district and 6 from an urban district). Implementation fidelity was low in all schools; consequently, an earlier analysis indicated no effect of the intervention on student outcomes (Bowen, Rose, Powers, & Glennie, 2006). In addition, the parameter variance in the multilevel model would capture any residual variation between sites in implementation fidelity. For these reasons, the present investigation ignored the intervention context.

## **Data Collection**

The SSP was administered using a paper-and-pencil format in class to all sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students in fall 2004, and again one year later in fall 2005 (G. L. Bowen et al., 2012; G. L. Bowen et al., 2008). The SSP project used a passive consent procedure; parents received letters describing the study and were asked to return the form to their student's teacher if they did not want their child to participate. The overall response rate was 84%, and the total sample size was 9,297. Between the two survey administrations, a new set of sixth grade students entered the school and the majority of the original eighth grade students went on to high school. As a result there are two waves of data on 2,926 students who were in the participating schools in fall 2004 and remained there the following year. The majority of these students were in sixth and seventh grade in the first year of the study, but a few students who were in eighth grade for the first survey administration were retained and remained in participating schools for the second year.

## **Sample**

The sample for these analyses is limited to those students who had two waves of data (31% of the total sample). Among students who had two waves of data, those who changed middle schools between survey years (6.3% of students) are excluded. The sample size for the analyses is 2,741. Demographics of the study sample are presented in Table 4.1. In year 1, about half of the students were in sixth grade and about half were in seventh grade. Less than 1 percent of the sample were 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in year 1 who were retained and completed the SSP again in year 2. The mean student age was 11.8 years in the first year of data collection. Most students were between 11 and 14 years old in the first year. There were a handful of students who were unusually young (younger than 11 years, n=13) or unusually old (older than 14 years, n=3) for their grade level. In year 1, the majority of students (84%) reported that they had received mostly A's, B's, and/or C's on their most recent report card. The sample is racially and

economically diverse. Forty-two percent of students were African American, while about 10 percent were Hispanic.

Table 4.1

*Sample Descriptive Characteristics*

	<b>n</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>
<b><i>Student Level (N = 2,741)</i></b>				
Grade Level				
6th grade	1259	46.1		
7th grade	1451	53.2		
8th grade	20	0.7		
Grades on last report card				
Mostly A's and B's	1509	55.6		
Mostly B's and C's	770	28.4		
Mostly C's	141	5.2		
Mostly C's and D's	230	8.5		
Mostly D's and F's	66	2.4		
Gender				
Male	1385	50.7		
Female	1348	49.3		
Race/Ethnicity				
White	1076	39.6		
African American	1135	41.7		
Hispanic	285	10.5		
Other Race/Ethnicity	223	8.2		
Age				
Less than 11 years old	13	0.5		
11 to 14 years old	2717	99.4		
More than 14 years old	3	0.1		
Family Composition				
Two-parent household	1744	64.1		
One-parent household or some other family situation	977	35.9		
At least one adult is employed	2535	93.5		
Receives free or reduced-price lunch	1574	60.0		
School engagement (Year 1)			1-3	2.24 (0.615)
School engagement (Year 2)			1-3	2.11 (0.623)
Trouble Avoidance			1-3	2.82 (0.263)

Academic Socialization	0-1	0.29 (0.270)
Academic Expectations	1-3	2.36 (0.497)
Monitoring	0-1	0.33 (0.293)
Behavior Expectations	1-3	2.68 (0.433)
<b><i>School Level (N = 11)</i></b>		
Racial / Ethnic Composition		
% White	0-78	31.8 (27.8)
% African American	14-98	48.1 (23.4)
% Hispanic	0-30	11.4 (10.3)
% Other Race/Ethnicity	2-28	8.6 (7.1)
% receiving free or reduced-price lunch	45-87	66.0 (15.5)
School Climate	0-1	0.80 (0.034)

Although 94 percent of students reported that at least one adult in their household was employed, 60 percent received free or reduced-price lunch. Thirty-six percent of students were not living in two-parent households at the time of the study.

## Measures

Measures used in analysis are described below. All constructs were assessed in the first year, except for school engagement, which was measured in both the first and second years and serves as the dependent variable. All measures were student-reported.

**Student-level variables.** The analysis includes several *demographic control variables*. These include dichotomous variables for *gender* (female = 1), receipt of *free or reduced lunch*, and *parental employment status* (any employed adult in the household = 1). A set of dummy variables represents students' *race/ethnicity*, including African American, Hispanic, or some other race/ethnicity. Non-Hispanic white is the omitted category. Analyses controlled for students' prior academic achievement using a five-point ordinal variable for self-reported grades, ranging from "mostly D's and F's" (1) to "mostly A's and B's" (5). Finally, analyses controlled for students' *family composition*, using a dichotomous variable to indicate

whether students *did not* live in a two-parent household (single-parent household or some other family arrangement = 1).

Analyses also controlled for *trouble avoidance*, or a student's school behavior. The variable is one of the standard SSP subscales, and is based on 8 items. The items ask how often in the past 30 days a student engaged in a range of disruptive behaviors, including whether they "cut at least one class," "showed up late for school (unexcused)," "got in a physical fight with another student," or "was given an out-of-school suspension." The students responded on a three-point scale, indicating that they engaged in the behavior "never," "once or twice," or "more than twice" in the past 30 days. The items were reverse coded and averaged, such that lower frequencies of problem behaviors result in higher scores. The variable was set to missing if students responded to fewer than 5 of the 8 items.

Items consistent with constructs in the recent parent involvement literature were taken from three existing SSP subscales and used to create four new parent involvement scales for this study (for more information on existing SSP subscales, see G. L. Bowen, Rose, & Bowen, 2005). The adequacy of the new subscales was tested using a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which is described in greater detail below.

*Academic socialization* is a measure of the extent to which parents socialize their children to value, discuss, and engage in intellectual pursuits. It is based on the work of Hill and Tyson (2009). Eight SSP items were used to measure this construct. Six of the items ask students to report whether, in the past 30 days, they discussed various topics with an adult in their home. Example topics include "selecting courses or programs at school," "things you've studied in class," and "politics or current events." Two additional items ask whether, in the past 30 days, an adult in their home "encouraged you to do well in school" and "praised or rewarded you for working hard on school work." Students responded yes or no to each item. Items were averaged to produce summary scores, and the variable was set to missing if students responded to fewer than 5 of the 8 items.

*Monitoring* is a measure of the ways that parents manage their children's time and set limits to ensure schoolwork is completed. It is based on 4 items asking students to report whether, in the past 30 days, an adult in their home has done things like "limited the amount of time you could spend watching TV," and "checked on whether you did your homework." Students responded yes or no to each item. The items were averaged, and the variable was set to missing if students responded to fewer than 3 items.

*Academic expectations* is a measure of students' perceptions of the level of academic performance their parents expect them to achieve. It is based on two items about how upset students believe the adults in their home would be if they knew "you received a D or an F on your report card," or "you turned in your homework late." Students responded using a 3-point scale with the following anchors: not upset, somewhat upset, or very upset. The items were averaged to produce a scale score. The variable was set to missing if students did not respond to both of the items. Higher scores indicate that parents would be more upset by the behaviors, and therefore hold higher expectations.

*Positive behavior expectations* is a measure of students' perceptions that their parents expect good behavior at school. The scale includes 6 items that ask how upset adults in the home would be if, for example, "you cut a class," "you were suspended from school," or "you got in a physical fight with another student." The scale used the same response options as the academic expectations scale. The scale score was an average of the items responses, and was set to missing if students responded to fewer than 4 items.

*School engagement* is the dependent variable and was measured in year 1 and year 2 of the study. The measure consists of 3 statements. Students were asked to indicate how well each of the statements describes them. Examples include "I find school fun and exciting," and "I look forward to learning new things at school." Students chose among three responses: not like me, a little like me, or a lot like me. Averages of the items were calculated to produce a summary score, which was set to missing if the student responded to fewer than 2 of the items.

**School-level variables.** *School climate* is a measure of students' sense of support at school and overall satisfaction with school. Items about school climate were drawn from two subscales of the SSP, and the new measure was included in the CFA described below. The measure is based on 18 true-false items that describe the students' school. Example statements include: "I enjoy going to this school," "My teachers really care about me," "Every student is important at this school," and "My teachers praise my efforts when I work hard." Students report whether they believe the statement is true or false. Individual ratings of school climate were generated by averaging across the students' responses to each of the 18 statements. A students' individual school climate rating was set to missing if the student responded to fewer than 10 of the school climate items. Overall school-level climate scores were created by averaging across all individual school climate ratings for students at that school. The school-level average (not the individual ratings) is the variable used in the analysis.

Estimates of *school-level demographics* were also generated from individual-level variables, by summing across all of the respondents within each school. This approach is defensible because the study targeted the entire population of students in each of the middle schools. A response rate of 84% was attained (G. L. Bowen et al., 2012).<sup>2</sup> School-level variables were created for the *proportion of students who were African American*, the *proportion who were Hispanic* students, the *proportion who were some other race/ethnicity*, and the *proportion who received free or reduced lunch*. The proportion of white students is excluded from analysis to avoid multicollinearity.

### **Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)**

The first step in the analysis was to confirm the adequacy of the measurement model. To do so, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using Mplus 6 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). Because all of the items are either binary or 3-point ordinal variables, categorical data analysis

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the analytic sample for this paper includes only those students who remained in the school for 2 years. Estimates of racial/ethnic composition and free lunch rates were also generated using the entire study sample and did not significantly differ from estimates based only on the analytic sample for this paper.



methods were used (i.e., the weighted least squares with mean and variance adjustment [WSLMV] estimator and a polychoric correlation matrix). The default Mplus procedure to correct for missing data was used, and clustering by school was accounted for. The measurement model was compared to common fit criteria, including a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of less than 0.05, and Tucker-Lewis and Comparative Fit Indices (TLI and CFI) greater than 0.95 (N. K. Bowen & Guo, 2012; Hoyle, 1995).

### **Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM)**

Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was used to account for the nested structure (students nested within schools) of the data. An unstructured error covariance matrix was specified, and restricted maximum likelihood estimation was used (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Independent variables were centered around their grand means. Analyses were run using Stata 12.1 (StataCorp, 2011). Models predicted school engagement from demographic covariates, parent involvement, and school climate.

First an unconditional model was run in order to calculate the amount of variance in school engagement explained between and within schools. The second model included only school-level predictors in order to determine what proportion of the variance at that level was accounted for. The third model included only student-level predictors. Finally, a model that included all predictors was run. In each of these models, a random effect of school on the individual intercept of school engagement was estimated.

Using the model that included all predictors at both levels, tests were conducted to arrive at the appropriate random effects structure. This was done by adding the random slope effect for one student-level variable at a time and comparing the model fit to a model with only a random effect for intercept. Model comparisons were based on likelihood-ratio tests. Random slope effects were removed if the model was not significantly different from the simpler model without the random effect. Based on this process, only one additional random effect was found to be statistically significant. Because it improved the model fit, the random slope effect for year 1

engagement was added to the model. The final model for individual  $i$  in school  $j$  is presented below.

**Level 1:** 
$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{Grades}) + \beta_{2j}(\text{Female}) + \beta_{3j}(\text{African American}) + \beta_{4j}(\text{Hispanic}) + \beta_{5j}(\text{Other Race}) + \beta_{6j}(\text{Single parent or other family arrangement}) + \beta_{7j}(\text{Employed}) + \beta_{8j}(\text{Free lunch}) + \beta_{9j}(\text{Year 1 School Engagement}) + \beta_{10j}(\text{Trouble Avoidance}) + \beta_{11j}(\text{Academic Socialization}) + \beta_{12j}(\text{Monitoring}) + \beta_{13j}(\text{Academic Expectations}) + \beta_{14j}(\text{Positive Behavior Expectations}) + r_{ij}$$

**Level 2:** 
$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{School climate}) + \gamma_{02}(\text{Proportion African American}) + \gamma_{03}(\text{Proportion Hispanic}) + \gamma_{04}(\text{Proportion other race/ethnicity}) + \gamma_{05}(\text{Proportion receiving free lunch}) + u_{0j}$$
  

$$\beta_{9j} = \gamma_{90} + u_{9j}$$

In simple terms, the Level 1 model shows that each student's school engagement is a function of his or her individual and family demographics, as well as their parents' involvement, and an individual error term ( $r_{ij}$ ). The Level 2 models specify that the individual mean school engagement ( $\beta_{0j}$ ) is a function of the mean school engagement of the student's school ( $\gamma_{00}$ ), the effects of school climate and school demographics, and a random error term associated with the school a student attends ( $u_{0j}$ ). The effect of year 1 school engagement ( $\beta_{9j}$ ) is likewise predicted by the average effect of this variable across the population ( $\gamma_{90}$ ), plus a random error term associated with the student's school ( $u_{9j}$ ). There are no other random error terms included in the Level 2 models; the other individual-level predictors of school engagement ( $\beta_{1j}$  through  $\beta_{8j}$ ,  $\beta_{10j}$  through  $\beta_{14j}$ ) are equivalent to the average effects of these variables across the population and are not expected to vary by school.

Following estimation of the model, effect sizes were estimated for coefficients that were significant (at  $p < .05$ ), in order to ease interpretation and comparison of effects. Effect size calculations used formulas described in Strand (2004). For dichotomous predictors, effect sizes were calculated using the formula

$$ES = \beta_{xj} / SD(Y)$$

where  $\beta_{xj}$  is the estimated coefficient for independent variable X, and SD(Y) is the standard deviation of the dependent variable, or school engagement. For continuous predictors, effect sizes were calculated as

$$ES = (\beta_{xj}^2 * SD(X)) / SD(Y)$$

where SD(X) is the standard deviation of the independent variable X. In the case of individual-level predictors, SD(X) is the standard deviation across students (n=2,741). For school-level predictors, SD(X) is the standard deviation across schools (n=11). In all cases, the effect size is interpreted as the change in standard deviations of Y (school engagement), controlling for all other variables in the model.

## **Results**

### **CFA**

The measurement model consisted of the school climate measure, the four latent parent involvement variables, the student school engagement measure (years 1 and 2), and the trouble avoidance scale. The measurement model had excellent fit based on common fit criteria (N. K. Bowen & Guo, 2012; Hoyle, 1995). Items and factor loadings from the measurement model are presented in Table 4.2. All of the items load significantly ( $p < .001$ ) onto their hypothesized latent variables. Additionally, zero-order correlations between the parent involvement variables and student school engagement are presented in Table 4.3. All pair-wise correlations are significant at  $p < .001$ .

### **HLM**

To test for multicollinearity, an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was run predicting student engagement from all of the independent variables and estimating the variance inflation factor (VIF) for each independent variable. OLS regression was necessary because it is not possible to estimate VIF in the context of HLM when using Stata. The VIFs for all variables were less than 3, indicating that there was not a problem with multicollinearity (Kutner, Nachtsheim, & Neter, 2004).

Table 4.2

*Study Scales*

<b>Item number</b>	<b>Item text</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>	<b>Variance Explained by Latent Variable (R<sup>2</sup>)</b>
<b>School Climate</b>			
S9a	I enjoy going to this school.	0.737	0.544
S9b	I am getting a good education at this school.	0.703	0.495
S9c	I like the classes that I am taking.	0.714	0.510
S9d	Student needs come first at this school.	0.656	0.431
S9f	Every student is important at this school.	0.704	0.495
S9g	Teachers at this school seem to like young people.	0.693	0.481
S9h	Teachers at this school can be trusted.	0.740	0.548
S11a	My teachers really care about me.	0.851	0.724
S11b	I get along well with my teachers	0.797	0.636
S11c	My teachers really listen to what I have to say.	0.816	0.666
S11d	My teachers care whether or not I come to school.	0.596	0.355
S11e	My teachers are willing to work with me after school.	0.640	0.409
S11f	I receive a lot of encouragement from my teachers.	0.802	0.643
S11g	I am respected and appreciated by my teachers.	0.843	0.710
S11h	My teachers encourage me to do extra work when I don't understand something.	0.511	0.261
S11i	My teachers praise my efforts when I work hard.	0.730	0.532
S11j	My teachers care about the grades I make.	0.808	0.653
S11k	My teachers expect me to do my best all of the time.	0.782	0.611
<b>Trouble Avoidance</b>			
During the past 30 days, how often did any of the following things happen?			
S5a	I cut at least one class.	0.822	0.675
S5b	I cut the entire school day.	0.623	0.388
S5c	I showed up for school late (unexcused).	0.468	0.219
S5d	I was sent out of class because I misbehaved.	0.756	0.571
S5e	My parent(s)/guardian(s) received a warning about my attendance, grades or behavior.	0.647	0.419
S5g	I got in a physical fight with another	0.735	0.540

	student.		
S5h	I was put on in-school suspension.	0.780	0.608
S5i	I was given an out-of-school suspension.	0.813	0.660

### **Academic Socialization**

During the past 30 days, have you discussed the following with any adults who live in your home?

FM7a	Selecting courses or programs at school	0.612	0.374
FM7b	School activities or events that interest you	0.713	0.508
FM7c	Things you've studied in class	0.863	0.745
FM7d	Attendance, homework, or problems with a teacher	0.562	0.316
FM7e	Politics or current events	0.669	0.447
FM7f	Your plans for the future	0.630	0.397

During the past 30 days, have any of the adults in your home done any of the following?

FM8c	Encouraged you to do well in school	0.850	0.723
FM8g	Praised or rewarded you for working hard on school work	0.756	0.572

### **Monitoring**

During the past 30 days, have any of the adults in your home done any of the following?

FM8b	Checked on whether you did your homework	0.778	0.605
FM8d	Limited the amount of time you could spend watching TV	0.491	0.241
FM8e	Limited the amount of time you could go out with friends on school nights	0.564	0.318
FM8h	Offered to help you with a homework assignment	0.770	0.593

### **Academic Expectations**

How upset would the adults in your home be with you if they knew the following things happened at school?

FM12a	You received a D or F on your report card	0.787	0.620
FM12c	You turned in your homework late	0.676	0.458

### **Positive Behavior Expectations**

How upset would the adults in your home be with you if they knew the following things happened at school?

FM12b	You cut a class	0.843	0.711
FM12d	You were suspended from school	0.889	0.790
FM12e	You got in a physical fight with another student	0.766	0.587
FM12f	You misbehaved in class	0.804	0.646
FM12g	You got into an argument with a teacher	0.849	0.720
FM12h	You carried a weapon to school	0.907	0.822

### **School Engagement (Y1, Y2)**

S8a	I find school fun and exciting.	0.887, 0.908	0.787, 0.824
S8b	I look forward to learning new things at school.	0.814, 0.820	0.663, 0.673
S8c	I look forward to going to school.	0.831, 0.820	0.691, 0.673

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Note: STDY standardized coefficients are reported based on the Mplus user's guide's recommendation that this is the most appropriate standardization for binary predictors (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). All values are significant at  $p < .001$ .

Stata estimated the ICC for schools to be 0.029, meaning that only 2.9% of the variance in individual level school engagement was attributable to differences *between* schools. A model including only school climate and school-level demographics accounted for 72% of this small amount of variance between schools.

According to the unconditional model, the variance *within* schools was 0.378. A model including only demographic control variables and parent involvement reduced this value to 0.255, accounting for 32% of the variance in student-level engagement within schools. This final model included both school-level and individual-level predictors and tested all three of the study's hypotheses. Table 4.4 presents results of the final HLM, which included all independent variables. Year 1 school engagement had a significant positive effect on Year 2 school engagement ( $b = .535, p < .001$ ). As has been demonstrated in prior studies, being female was associated with higher school engagement ( $b = .069, p < .01$ ). Compared to non-Hispanic white students, African American students ( $b = .113$ ) and Hispanic students ( $b = .166$ ) had higher levels of school engagement (both  $p < .001$ ).

Table 4.3

*Correlations among Variables of Interest*

	<b>School Engagement (Y1)</b>	<b>School Engagement (Y2)</b>	<b>Academic Socialization</b>	<b>Monitoring</b>	<b>Behavior Expectations</b>	<b>Academic Expectations</b>
School Engagement (Y1)	1.000					
School Engagement (Y2)	0.5575	1.000				
Academic Socialization	-0.2941	-0.2223	1.000			
Monitoring	-0.2653	-0.2068	0.4947	1.000		
Behavior Expectations	0.1709	0.0903	-0.2630	-0.2551	1.000	
Academic Expectations	0.1763	0.1589	-0.2588	-0.2739	0.5360	1.000

Table 4.4

*Hierarchical linear model predicting student school engagement in year 2*

	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>Effect Size</b>
<b>Fixed Effects</b>		
Student Level		
Intercept	2.114 ***	
School engagement (Year 1)	0.535 ***	1.056
Trouble avoidance	-0.074	
Grades	-0.004	
Female	0.069 **	0.111
African American	0.113 ***	0.181
Hispanic	0.166 ***	0.266
Other race/ethnicity	0.029	
Single-parent or other family arrangement	0.006	
Parent employed	-0.011	
Free or reduced lunch	-0.040	
Academic socialization	-0.093 *	-0.080
Monitoring	-0.088 *	-0.083
Academic expectations	0.085 **	0.136
Positive behavior expectations	-0.078 *	-0.108
School Level		
School climate	1.222 *	0.133
Percent African American	-0.190	
Percent Hispanic	-0.097	
Percent other race/ethnicity	-0.266	
Percent free lunch	0.398 +	
<b>Random Effects (variance components)</b>		
Intercept	0.002 ***	
School engagement (Year 1)	0.003 ***	
Residual	0.254 ***	
N	2317	

+p < .10 \*p < .05 \*\*p < .01 \*\*\*p < .001

Note: All independent variables are centered around their grand means. Coefficients are unstandardized.

Of the four parent involvement variables, all were significantly associated with school engagement. Academic socialization ( $b = -0.093$ ,  $p < .05$ ), monitoring ( $b = -0.088$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and positive behavior expectations ( $b = -0.078$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were slightly *negatively* associated with



school engagement. The effect of high academic expectations on school engagement was positive and significant ( $b = 0.085, p < .01$ ).

One of the five school-level variables was significantly related to students' engagement. Students who attended schools with more positive school climates also had higher levels of school engagement ( $b = 1.222, p < .05$ ). The racial-ethnic and income composition of a school were not significantly related to school engagement. The final model (total unexplained variance = .254) accounted for 33% of the total unexplained variance in the unconditional model (.378).

Effect sizes are also reported in Table 4.4, and demonstrate that, among predictors included in the model, year 1 engagement has the largest effect on year 2 engagement ( $ES = 1.056$ ). Race/ethnicity also has a sizeable effect on engagement (Hispanic  $ES = 0.266$ , African American  $ES = 0.181$ ). The social context variables (parent involvement and school climate) have slightly smaller effects. Academic expectations ( $ES = 0.136$ ) and school climate ( $ES = 0.133$ ) appear to be the most important of these, while behavior expectations ( $ES = -0.108$ ), monitoring ( $ES = -0.083$ ), and academic socialization ( $ES = -0.080$ ) each have effects equivalent to one-tenth of a standard deviation in school engagement, or less.

## **Discussion**

This study examined the effects of home-based parent involvement on the school engagement of middle school students. Analyses explored the effects of academic socialization, academic expectations, behavior expectations, and monitoring, as well as the effect of overall school climate.

An important contribution of this paper is that it demonstrates the importance of considering home and school contexts simultaneously. Both were predictive of school engagement, with school climate and parent academic expectations in particular proving to be significantly positively associated with the outcome. Considering both variables in the same model, and calculating effect sizes, also enables us to see that school climate and parent academic expectations have roughly equal effects on student school engagement. This finding

supports the earlier suggestion that a supportive school social environment may have the potential to make up for a less supportive home academic environment, and vice versa. Additionally, although the types of home-based parent involvement (academic socialization, monitoring, and behavior expectations) had slight negative effects on engagement, the model illustrates the importance of school climate, even when controlling for parent involvement at home. This perspective would be lost if the two contexts were not considered simultaneously.

With regard to the finding that three types of home-based parent involvement were negatively associated with school engagement, there are several points to consider. First, it is important to note that the effect sizes for each of these variables was fairly small, equivalent to a change of about one-tenth of a standard deviation. It is, nevertheless, somewhat unexpected that any of the parent involvement variables would be significantly negatively associated with engagement, as each of them has some literature supporting its positive relationship with academic achievement or behavior (G. L. Bowen et al., 2012; Desimone, 1999; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009). The negative effect of monitoring may be the least surprising, given that the research on its association with achievement is contradictory, with some studies showing positive effects and others showing negative effects (for example, Desimone, 1999; McNeal, 1999). Self-determination theory also suggests that parental monitoring in particular may increase extrinsic academic motivation by increasing external pressures to perform, without actually improving a student's affective response to school (the outcome measure used in this study).

Additionally, one must remember that these negative effects were found while controlling for academic expectations. Prior research on the positive effects of behavior expectations used measures that included aspects of academic expectations. For example, Bowen and colleagues used the same data set used in this study and found effects of behavior expectations on grades, standardized test scores, and students' behavior at school (G. L. Bowen et al., 2012; G. L. Bowen et al., 2008); their measure included the items that were separated into

an academic expectations scale for this study. The limited research on academic socialization suffers from a similar problem, where academic expectations were subsumed under the construct of academic socialization. In this study, academic expectations were set apart, and found to be positively and significantly associated with school engagement. To summarize, *when parental academic expectations are held constant*, an increase in monitoring, behavior expectations, or academic socialization may have a slight negative effect on engagement.

Overall, the study reinforces the need for continued research on the effects of parent involvement and school social context in the middle school population. In particular, researchers should continue to investigate the effects of various forms of parent involvement on diverse academic outcomes. As this study demonstrated, parent involvement operates differently in middle school families, and may not affect motivation, behavior, and achievement in the same ways (for an example of this, see McNeal, 1999). Additionally, this study explored the contribution of academic socialization in addition to the well-documented positive effect of academic expectations. The finding that academic socialization was not as strongly predictive of engagement as academic expectations represents a step forward in research on the topic, because prior research was based on meta-analysis of other studies that were not designed to measure the construct of academic socialization. Although this study developed a statistically sound measure of academic socialization, the data used were not originally intended to measure this construct. The next step in research on academic socialization will be to collect data specifically intended for this purpose.

An important conclusion of this study is that there is reason to be hopeful about the ability of schools and parents to influence students' level of engagement at school. School staff, who are often discouraged by the lack of parent involvement and their inability to influence parent behaviors, should be comforted to know that they can have important effects on student engagement simply by creating an environment where students feel cared for, respected, and encouraged. Likewise, this study adds to the already large body of research demonstrating that

parents can have a significant influence on their child's academic achievement just by expressing the expectation that children complete their schoolwork and excel.

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## CHAPTER 5: INTEGRATIVE SUMMARY

This series of papers addresses two major limitations in the current literature on parent involvement. First, parent involvement research has largely been conducted from the perspective of educators, and has emphasized parental responsibility for involvement without considering the perspectives of parents. Second, parent involvement research has emphasized elementary school samples and school-based involvement, largely ignoring the needs of adolescents, for whom school-based involvement may be less relevant.

### **Summary of Findings**

The first paper (Chapter 2) integrated the traditional approach to parent involvement with a more critical perspective. Paper 1 revealed that parents do not necessarily disagree with schools' definition of parent involvement, but they also consider a wider range of behaviors to be important aspects of their involvement in their children's education. Additionally, parents are more concerned with the broader goals of their involvement than with the specific tasks and behaviors emphasized by schools. Parents' involvement practices are also affected by the quality of their relationship with schools and the relative power that they hold in the school environment. In addition to the obvious practical limitations of the traditional approach to parent involvement, Paper 1 argued that the principles of social exchange theory also support the consideration of family-school relationship quality in research on parent involvement.

Paper 2 (Chapter 3) addressed questions about the nature of family-school relationships with a qualitative study of African American and Hispanic parents. Parents described their approaches to involvement at the school, their reasons for being involved, and the school factors that contributed to positive and negative relationships. Findings indicated that parents' involvement focused on their children's well-being, although many parents were also motivated

to prove to educators that they cared about their children's education. Respondents seemed well aware that school staff tended to negatively judge parents who were not often physically present at the school, and they worried that if their involvement was judged as lacking their children would suffer. Perhaps the most important finding was that parents desired a collaborative relationship with schools. Poor relationships developed between parents and educators when parents felt excluded from important information and decisions, or when they felt that the school was not taking their family's needs seriously.

The findings from Paper 2 support the conclusions of Paper 1, in that family-school relationship quality was a major concern for parents and had important consequences for their involvement and their children's well-being. Additionally, parents wanted collaborative student-focused relationships with schools, as in the model proposed in Paper 1, based on social exchange theory.

Paper 3 (Chapter 4) addressed the second major limitation of parent involvement literature, namely that empirical research has overemphasized samples of elementary school students as well as school-based involvement. In response, the third paper used a sample of middle school students and focused on parents' at-home involvement activities. Additionally, and in keeping with the focus on family-school relationships, the study explored the effects of school climate on student outcomes. Paper 3 focused on four types of home-based parent involvement: academic socialization, high academic expectations, positive behavior expectations, and monitoring. Of those four, only academic expectations had significant positive effects on student engagement. Behavior expectations, monitoring, and academic socialization actually had significant *negative* effects. These findings were explained in terms of motivational theory. Parents' high educational expectations may promote internalized academic motivation for students, while parents' focus on behavior (expressed through behavior expectations and monitoring) may provide only external motivation for academics, and therefore reduce engagement.

## **Implications for Practice**

Findings from the three papers have implications for social work practice in school settings. Conceptions of parent involvement must be expanded to focus on building collaborative relationships between educators and families. This is a difficult task, particularly in secondary schools where teachers are responsible for many more students. School social workers, who are trained to work within the mesosystem and to build connections between institutions like homes and schools, are uniquely suited to lead this work in schools.

Innovative approaches to teacher education may also be necessary. A few scholars have developed and tested teacher training programs designed to strengthen home-school relationships (Dotger, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). Social workers, with their expertise in working across cultural, racial-ethnic, and socioeconomic differences, could be instrumental in designing and implementing such interventions.

The findings of Paper 3 in particular demonstrate that parent involvement at home continues to be important in middle school, but that parents' high academic expectations may have more influence on students' motivation than their efforts to control students' behavior. Educators should encourage parents to hold high expectations for their students. In the context of collaborative family-school relationships, parents and school staff can present a united front, with consistent expectations across home and school. This consistency of expectations is one of the primary explanations many scholars give for why parent involvement in education is important (e.g., Coleman, 1988).

## **Limitations of the Research**

The research presented here has a few notable limitations. The qualitative research is based on a sample of parents who self-selected into a parent involvement program, and many (but not all) had existing relationships with school social workers. As a result, they do not represent parents generally. That said, not all of the parents successfully completed the parent

involvement program, and they certainly varied in the quality of their relationships with schools. Additionally, limited external validity is a feature of nearly all qualitative studies, and the results generated by the analysis in Paper 2 should be the subject of future quantitative study.

The HLM analysis described in Paper 3 is limited by the fact that it is based on only two time points, and all variables are reported by students. It would be preferable for parents to report their own behaviors, and to examine longer-term effects of parent involvement. Nevertheless, the use of two time points strengthens the ability to make causal inferences. Furthermore, the analysis controls for past academic achievement and student social behavior, which is not often the case in other studies of the effects of parent involvement on student outcomes.

### **Next Steps**

Several additional research questions follow from the findings summarized here. For one, the ideas developed in Papers 1 and 2 should be explored in a quantitative study. Is frequent, positive, and responsive communication between parents and educators associated with family-school relationship quality? Are strong, positive family-school relationships associated with school-based parent involvement?

With regard to the findings of Paper 3, questions remain regarding the relationship between academic socialization (which was not positively associated with student engagement) and academic expectations. Do academic expectations mediate the relationship between socialization and engagement? Further questions about academic socialization should be explored using data collected for that purpose.

Additional research on the effects of home and school variables on middle school students is necessary. The study reported in Chapter 4 did not find positive effects of most of the parent involvement variables investigated. What forms of parent involvement are important to academic success in middle school? Are school characteristics ultimately more important than family characteristics during this period of development?

Overall, future parent involvement research should make a serious effort to incorporate measures of family-school relationship quality and school climate. The research thus far has accomplished a great deal in calling attention to the importance of parent involvement in education, but we can do more to demonstrate the influence that schools have in promoting meaningful involvement.

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