ABSTRACT
                This paper presents findings of a study that examined
African-American parents' beliefs about their relationships with
their children's schools. Telephone interviews were conducted with
147 parents of African-American children residing within the
boundaries of a unified school district in a resort community in
southern California. The study sought to understand how these parents
perceived their roles as partners, how satisfied they were with both
their own and the schools' efforts to build partnerships, and how
they believed their efforts related to their children's school
achievement and adjustment. Two major themes emerged from the data:
(1) the need for improved home-school communication; and (2) the need
for cultural awareness and sensitivity at the school site. The data
suggest support for the multicultural model of parent involvement,
which assumes that students learn best when the classroom curriculum
reflects the history and culture of the students. Findings also
reflect the germ of the full partnership model, which argues that
schools must radically restructure the roles and relationships of all
adults involved in the schooling of children. Contains 14 references.
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Home-School Partnerships Through The Eyes of Parents

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Running Head: HOME SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Abstract

This study was conducted to understand parents' beliefs about their relationships with their children's schools. The research surveyed parents of African-American children enrolled in public school in grades K-12. These children represent a small minority in a school district of Latino and Anglo students. We were interested in understanding how these parents perceived their roles as partners, how satisfied they were with both their own and the school's efforts to build partnerships, and how they believed their efforts related to their children's school achievement and adjustment. Based on a content analysis of interview protocols, responses were classified according to three broad themes: parents' beliefs about home-school relationships, parents' perceptions of their children's school experiences, and parents' satisfaction with the schools' performance in educating their child. The need for improved home-school communication was one of two major themes to emerge from this data; the second major theme was the need for cultural awareness and sensitivity at the school site. The data suggest that respondents, while endorsing the ideal of school site involvement, are much more likely to actually engage in home based activities than to participate at the school site. These findings are discussed relative to various models of parental involvement which have been put forth in the literature.

Introduction

   The evidence is beyond dispute that strong home-school relationships translate into higher academic achievement for students, more positive feelings about their profession for teachers, a nurturing, orderly climate for schools, and a greater sense of confidence for parents (Swap, 1993). However, conflicting beliefs about rights, expertise, abilities, and cultural stereotypes may cast teachers and parents into adversarial rather than co-operative relationships (Fine, 1993).

   Often, teachers develop opinions about a child's home life based on the child's classroom behavior. Conversely, the parent may develop beliefs about the efficacy of the teacher and the school based on the child's report of classroom experiences (Power, 1985). Thus the parent-teacher relationship may be shaped by perceptions drawn from incomplete or inconsistent information and mediated by an underlying, competitive force to prove which of the adults knows what is "best" for children (Power, 1985). This competition to demonstrate competence may be especially problematic when parents and teachers are communicating over the gulf of ethnic or cultural differences (Boutte, 1992).

   There is a consistent theme throughout the parent involvement literature that parents of poor and/or minority children are unlikely to participate in their children's schooling and are rarely if ever present in schools (Liontos, 1992). However, the majority of the data comes from the perspective of the school

(Fine, 1993). Conversely, parent survey data report that almost all parents, irrespective of ethnicity, income, or education, desire educational success for their children and want to work with schools to achieve that goal (Epstein, 1990). For example, a recent survey (Powell & Peete, 1992) from an urban, Midwest sample with 50% ethnic minority respondents indicated that 95% of parents think about their child's future success and 67% of them expected their child to earn a college degree or complete graduate studies. African-Americans in particular have historically used education as a shield against oppression and poverty (Anderson, 1988). However, empirical data from families of color is sparse and tends to confound ethnicity and class variables (Liontos, 1992).

The present study was conducted to ascertain parents' beliefs and concerns about their relationships with their children's schools. The research was conducted with parents of African-American children who are a small minority (3% of enrolled students) in a suburban, public school district composed of Latino and Anglo students. Thus the research presented here sought to depict an extremely understudied population: employed African-American families with at least one child in public school. We were interested in understanding how these parents perceived their roles as partners, how satisfied they were with both their own and the school's efforts to build partnerships, and how they believed their efforts related to their children's school achievement and adjustment.

Conceptual Framework

Constructing knowledge of home-school relations requires an understanding of how power and responsibility are parceled out to the various groups. A number of models have been proposed to describe the relationship between schools and parents. The protective model (Swap, 1993), still perhaps ascendant in American public education (Davies, 1992), assumes that schools have the primary responsibility for educating students and parents' efforts should be confined to school rituals such as open house. The goal is to protect the professionals from the unwanted intrusion of less competent parents (Power, 1985). The school focused model assumes that the role of parents is to endorse and support the values and objectives identified as significant by the school (Irvine, 1992). The goal of this model, prominent in the education of minority and other "at-risk" children, is the remediation of students' deficient home environments. The multicultural model assumes that students learn best when the classroom curriculum reflects the history and culture of the students (Ogbu, 1990). The goal of this model is to enlist the expertise of parents in expanding the curricular offerings. The partnership model (Comer, 1990) assumes that schools must radically restructure the roles and relationships of all adults who are involved in the schooling of children. The goal is to join educators, parents, and community members in the common mission of overseeing the education and development of all children.

Each of these models presents advantages and disadvantages to both parents and school personnel. We are concerned here with how one group of parents perceived he structure of their own relationships with schools, and how that relationship affected their child's schooling.

Method

Sample. Participants were 147 parents of African-American children residing within the boundaries of a unified school district in a resort community in Southern California. Parents were recruited through phone contacts. Volunteers in a local, community based organization contacted every household that school records identified as enrolling at least one African-American child in public school in grades K-12 (N=552) and invited them to participate. Only one parent per household served as a respondent.

The majority of respondents were female (88%) and the biological mother (83%) of the target child or children in the household. Two-thirds of the sample had resided in the local community for more than 10 years. To preserve confidentiality, respondents were not required to specify the gender of the children. However, 29% of respondents voluntarily identified a child in the household as female, and 35% identified a child as male.

Procedures. Those who initially agreed to participate were interviewed by one of five trained, African-American female graduate students. Interviews occurred over a two month period

during the winter of 1993; they were conducted by phone, each lasting from 35-60 minutes. The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of 24 questions (Attachment 1). Three questions elicited demographic information and the balance assessed perceptions of respondent's roles in their children's education (e.g., In what ways do you think parents should help with the schooling of their children?).

Data Analysis

A content analysis of interview protocols was initially conducted by each of the experimenters for her own respondents. Analyses were subsequently integrated into a set of core categories representing the full data set in a series of research team meetings. Using Strauss' (1987) guidelines, the analysis employed a concept-indicator model, which derives conceptual categories directly from the data. Attributes are first deduced around which specific responses are seen to cluster (e.g., conditions, consequences); next the clusters are analyzed to assess the relationships among them. Those which coalesce into an emergent concept are assigned a conceptual code. The data, or indicators, are then compared to the emergent category to fully saturate, or define the properties of the conceptual category. Thus each protocol was read and coded by at least two researchers. Disagreements were resolved by the input of a third researcher.

Results

Interview protocol items were classified according to three

broad themes: parents' beliefs about home-school relationships, parents' perceptions of their children's school experiences, and parents' satisfaction with the schools' performance in educating their child.

Home-school relationships. The majority (62%) of respondents stated that ideally, parents should take the initiative to communicate with the school, and 59% stated that parents should become involved at the school site ("take a prominent role", "help teachers in the class; they are overworked"). Of those endorsing an active partnership, 45% felt parents must serve as advocates for their children's interests. Another 20% identified themselves as role models for all children, a necessary means to enhance ethnic understanding ("These kids have all white teachers"). A majority of parents (66%) also urged schools to be more proactive in their efforts to communicate with parents (See Table 1). There was repeated mention of the need for two-way communication ("teachers need to listen, not just tell parents what to do").

Over half of the respondents (61%) reported attending at least the primary school ritual, open house, in the past year. Only 12% reported spending time in the classroom setting (e.g., room volunteer, career day speaker), and the majority of these responses came from parents of elementary school students. When asked what specific activities parents wanted initiated at the school site, a plurality of respondents (30%) did not see the need for more school based events. Parents who identified a need for more school events

identified a wide variety of activities including multicultural events, PTA meetings parent education, and student education activities.

It is of note that half of the respondents specified a number of activities that should take place within the home to facilitate their children's education. They felt that their children's education should be comprised of learning experiences beyond those provided by the school. Cultural events, (museum visits), ethnic awareness activities (African-American history lessons), and career exploration projects (visiting a friend's workplace) were frequently mentioned home-based efforts that parents felt to be their responsibility.

The data suggest that respondents do not endorse a protective model of home-school relations. Rather, specific responses support school focused, multicultural, and partnership models, with no one of these models seemingly able to adequately characterize the data. In evaluating the data as a function of grade level, parents of elementary school children most often responded consistent with a school focused model. They were more likely to show an interest in parent education activities at the school, to serve as parent volunteers in the classroom, and attend open house at the school. However, consistent with a partnership model, all of the responses expressing an interest in participating in school governance (n= 9) came from parents of elementary school students.

Perceptions of adjustment. Children are perceived as

performing well in school; over half of the responses concerning school performance were either "excellent" or "above average" (see Table 1). The proportion of responses in the excellent category declined from elementary to high school, while responses in the below average category increased with level of schooling. This pattern was duplicated for parental perceptions of their child(ren)'s satisfaction with school. Although a majority of respondents felt their child liked school, this proportion declined from elementary to secondary school. Parents of high school students were most likely to report that their children do not like school. However, parents of students at all three levels of education were equally likely to report that their children had many or some friends at school.

The definite decline in parents' perceptions of their children's school adjustment across the grade levels is not seen as a function of peer rejection. One possible explanation may rest with perceptions of teacher-student relationships. When asked if teachers generally had positive interactions with their children, 77% of elementary parents responded yes, while 67% of high school parents responded affirmatively. Further, 80% of elementary parents and only 48% of high school parents reported that teachers seemed to be interested in their children's educational progress.

Satisfaction with schools' efforts. Parental satisfaction overall appears mixed. Approximately one in four parents responded that they have no concerns (question #4) and no problems (question

#18) regarding their children's schools (see Table 2). Among the concerns and problems that were identified, lack of academic help, lack of ethnic sensitivity and awareness, and poor home-school communication were cited repeatedly by respondents. Moreover, when specifically asked, fully 90% of the respondents could suggest changes in the schools that would be desirable. Suggested changes included greater diversity in the staff, curriculum, and student population, as well as improvements in site staff performance and responsiveness to both students and parents. Although 63% of respondents felt that their opinions were valued and respected by the schools, very few parents (18%), reported that the school solicited their opinions and input. The quality of academic instruction is considered satisfactory by a clear majority (60%) of respondents; however, this category of responses declined substantially from elementary to high school.

Discussion

This group of parents espouses the importance of active participation, yet their self-reported levels of involvement at the school site do not mirror that belief. However, the majority of parents also supported providing educational enrichment activities in the home. Apparently, these parents are more likely to engage in activities outside of the traditional, school defined boundaries of parent involvement. Prior data from parents of ethnically diverse samples also reports that parental involvement activities are more likely to occur outside of school (Stallworth & Williams,

1982). The data reported here suggests that respondents, while endorsing the ideal of school site involvement, are much more likely to actually engage in home based activities than to participate at the school site.

The single exception to this trend is attendance at school open house. The need for improved home-school communication is one of two major themes to emerge from this data, and that venerable tradition may be a vital conduit of communication between home and school. The partnership model of parent involvement (Comer, 1990) relies on authentic, two-way communication to incorporate parents as full partners in the education of their children. All too often, communication from school is information (Epstein, 1986), a one way set of directives telling parents where to be and when to arrive to participate in activities dictated by the schools. However, the parents surveyed here are clearly looking for communication as defined by a partnership model of involvement. Perhaps the face-to face interaction available at open house is the least restricted channel of communication presently in place.

The second major theme to emerge was the need for cultural awareness and sensitivity at the school site. The data suggest that parents desire changes in patterns of interaction and instruction in the schools to better accommodate the unique needs of African-American children. Such changes might be implemented by enhancing curriculum offerings and intensifying recruitment practices. These appear to be goals that can be addressed given

sufficient commitment and will on the part of school district officials. The data suggest favorable opportunities for change are now present. These parents perceive their input to be valued in general by the schools, indicating that the door for authentic communication around these important issues may yet be open. What may now be needed is concerted community action to bring these issues to the forefront of the debate on education.

The data suggest that these parents do not perceive themselves to be shut out by a protective model of parent involvement. Rather, school focused and multicultural efforts predominate. These parents support a multicultural model of parent involvement; perhaps this is a reflection of their extremely small numbers in the total population. However, the germ of full partnership is present in such expressed desires as increased cultural awareness activities for staff and a more visible presence for minorities in the ranks of the district's educators. The next question is: What can be done to foster among all parties a belief in shared and overlapping responsibility for the education and optimal development of every child?

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TABLE 1
PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD'S ADJUSTMENT

1. QUESTION #9: How well is your child doing in school?
34% excellent 22% above average 18% average 14% below average
    12% unsure

3. QUESTION f`: How do you think you child feels about school?
64% likes, enjoys 21% child is not happy
    15% enjoys somewhat or some aspects only

4. QUESTION #6: Do your children have many friends at school?
67% yes 18% no 9% some or few 6% don't know

THE HOME—SCHOOL CONNECTION

1. QUESTION #16: How can parents and schools work together?
66% schools become more proactive in reaching out
62% parents must work actively to communicate with schools
37% increase racial sensitivity and eliminate racism
21% provide more academic tutoring support
 4% parents respond to school suggestions

2. QUESTION #13: In what ways should parents help with the schooling of their children?
59% take the initiative to become involved at the school
50% provide enrichment, encouragement, monitoring, discipline, etc
     in the home

3. QUESTION #22: What kinds of parent functions have you attended at school?
61% open house, back to school night
32% parent conferences
18% social events (picnics, teas, etc)
12% student programs (awards nights, plays)
12% volunteer in classroom or school
 8% parent education programs
 7% sports
 6% no attendance

4. QUESTION #23: What kinds of functions would you be interested in attending?
30% no additional
16% more parent education or parent support groups
19% more multicultural events
12% more open house, conference days, etc
12% more student education activities
11% more social interactions (parent-teacher-student)
 6% more participation in school governance

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<u>TABLE 2</u>

LEVEL OF SATISFACTION

1. QUESTION #4: Tell me about the worries and concerns you have about your children's schools:

27% none
27% problems with school safety and discipline
26% lack of multicultural curricula
24% lack of ethnic diversity/sensitivity
19% poor home-school communication
17% lack of concern on the part of teachers
 8% lack of adequate school resources

2.   QUESTION #8:   Are you satisfied with the educational opportunities provided in the schools?

60% yes   15% somewhat only   21% no   4% no response

3. QUESTION #18:   What help with school problems would you like that you are not getting now?

23% none or no problems
31% more tutorial assistance
22% increased ethnic sensitivity
12% improving home-school communication
 9% more parent education

4. QUESTION #19:   If you could change anything in the school to help your child have a more positive school experience:

 9% nothing
27% changes in school staff performance (more prompt communication with parents, improved teaching, more concern for students, stricter discipline)
24%   greater diversity in the schools (staff, multicultural curriculum, students)
16% improved resources (smaller classes, better maintenance)

5. QUESTION #20:   Do you think your opinions are valued and respected by the school staff?

63% yes   14% no   14% not sure   9% sometimes or some staff