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AUTHOR Becker-Klein, Rachel  
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## ABSTRACT

Noting that many factors can influence the extent to which families are engaged in their children's education, this study examined the influence of family and school barriers as potential barriers to parent involvement. The sample was taken from a local site of the National Head Start/Public School Transition Demonstration Project. Participants included 151 families whose children were formerly in Head Start, and were in second grade at the time of the study. Family involvement was divided into involvement in children's education at home and involvement in school activities. Family contextual variables included family structure, employment, family resources, and parents' childhood experiences of school. School level variables consisted of school climate and family-school communication. A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the contributions of family and school level variables. Demographic variables were entered in the first block, followed by family structural barriers, and finally school level barriers. Regression results indicated that neither the family demographic variables nor the family structural variables, as a group, were significant predictors of parents' participation in their children's education at home. The school level variables block, however, was significant, with family-school communication positively related to participation in children's education at home. For parents' involvement in school activities, all three blocks were significant. Yet, the school level variables predicted involvement over and above the family level variables. Consequently, as some researchers have suggested, school practices seem to be as important--if not more so--as family factors in influencing family involvement. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/KB)

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## Family and School Level Barriers to Family Involvement

Rachel Becker-Klein

New York University

Symposium presented at SRCD 1999

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Family involvement in children's education is a multi-dimensional construct with multiple definitions. Firstly, the family part of the term must be defined. Most schools and much of the literature have actually emphasized parents (and possibly also legal guardian) as the focus of family involvement. Yet, extended family should also be included in this definition, especially for ethnic minority children. One dimension of family involvement includes participation in activities at the school, including school events, volunteering and school organizations, such as PTA/PTO. However, families can also be involved in their children's education at home, through educational activities, but also structuring the child's environment and providing opportunities for the child.

Family involvement is widely believed to be beneficial to children, families and schools. Family involvement is critical in children's academic and socio-emotional development (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Parents' involvement in schools has been associated with increases in children's academic performance as well as their self-esteem and attendance (Swap, 1993; Winters, 1993). Family participation is also advantageous to the families themselves. One study on Head Start families found that parents who were involved with schools, had less psychological symptomatology and more positive feelings of mastery and life satisfaction (Parker, Piotrkowski & Peay, 1987). Furthermore, positive interactions with school personnel were associated with an increase in families' appreciation of education (Winters, 1993).

Family involvement is also helpful to teachers and schools. Teachers gain greater insight into the cultures and communities from which their students come. This increased understanding leads them to develop more empathy for and insight into students' lives. Moreover, teachers stereotype families less often and see them as more positive (Epstein, 1996). Another noteworthy benefit is that family participation provides teachers with more support, and in turn they experience less isolation and have enhanced positive feelings about teaching. Increased family

involvement has also been associated with improved class climate and teacher efficacy (Haynes, Ben-Avie, Squires, Howley, Negrón, & Corbin, 1996). As for the schools themselves, an increase in parents' stake in their children's success is a powerful force that can be harnessed by the schools to promote positive change.

Many factors can influence the extent to which families are engaged in their children's education. Influences on family involvement range from parents' lack of resources to the school's physical environment. One way to categorize the nature of these influences is to group them into three types of factors: family demographic variables, family structural/contextual variables, and school-level variables.

Some family demographics have been found to be associated with levels of family involvement. In fact, many studies document the relationship between involvement and family characteristics, such as family income, parents' education level and ethnic background (Bradley, Caldwell, & Rock, 1988; Clark, 1983; Epstein, 1990). For instance, better-educated parents are often more involved, both at home and at school, than their less educated counterparts (Eccles & Harold, 1996).

Family contextual variables that have been related to family involvement include employment and family resources. For instance, working parents are less likely to be involved at school, but as likely as unemployed parents to be involved in their children's education at home (Dauber & Epstein, 1989). One concern with the changing family structure in American society, especially for minority families, is that there are more single parents (mainly mothers) who work long hours outside the home, yet still have dire economic concerns (Reglin, 1993). These economic dilemmas make it especially difficult for parents to be involved in the schools, both because they work during school hours, and because they have so many constraints on their time.

Although these family-level factors can reduce the level of family involvement, some researchers suggest that school practices are more important than family characteristics in predicting involvement (Epstein, 1996). School barriers could include teacher attitudes, as well as institutional atmosphere. If teachers feel that the classroom is their responsibility alone and they do not want parent interference, this could dissuade parents from participating (Reglin, 1993). However, teachers could also encourage involvement if they felt it would be beneficial to them and to the children. Some institutional barriers include limited resources to support parent participation and a school bureaucracy that is intimidating to parents (Calabrese, 1990).

The purpose of this study is to investigate potential barriers to family involvement. These barriers consist of obstacles, which the family must overcome, such as long hours of employment and financial strain, as well as the school climate itself, which might also hinder family involvement. I hypothesize that school level barriers will predict family involvement over and above family level predictors.

## Method

### Participants

The sample for this study was taken from a local site of the National Head Start/Public School Transition Project. This was a longitudinal evaluation of Head Start transition services that extended from Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Participants in this study included 151 families whose children were formerly in Head Start and in 2nd grade at the time of the study. The average age of the parents was 30 years. The ethnic breakdown of the sample was mainly African-American (82%), 15% Latino, 1% European-American, and 2% Other or missing. The majority of families (93%) are English speaking. Less than half of the families (40%) were employed at this

time, and 54% of families had at least a high school degree or GED. Many of the children (37%) lived in single-parent households (usually with mothers), but 25% lived in a nuclear family (mother with father, step-father, or significant other) and 27% with parent/s and extended family.

### Measures

#### Family Involvement:

Family involvement was measured through *Family Involvement in Children's Learning* (Civitan, UAB, 1995). This measure asks respondents (mostly parents) about their involvement in the school, communication with the school, and how families monitor their children's education at home. The indices considered in this study will include: participation in children's education at home, and involvement in school activities.

Family involvement in children's education at home: This factor (alpha = .73) consists of 5 items, in which parents were asked how often adults in the family do certain things (play, read books, discuss TV programs, etc.) with the child, and they could answer on a 5-point scale from "almost every day" to "almost never."

Family involvement in school activities: For the involvement in school activities index, parents were asked whether the school offered specific activities, and if so, whether adults in the family attended/participated in a number of school events (open house, student performances, etc.), volunteer opportunities (send treats, room parent, etc.) and school-based organization activities (PTA, served on committee, etc.).

Family demographics:

Demographic variables included parents' self-reports of age, ethnicity (African-American v. Latino), general health (poor to excellent), and level of education.

Family contextual variables:

Family structure: Family structure was defined as single-parent (mainly single mothers), nuclear family (mother with father, stepfather, or significant other), extended family, or other.

Employment: Employment was measured through self-report of the parent as to whether they were presently employed.

Family resources: Family resources were measured using the Family Resource Scale (Lee & Dunst, 1985). This scale asks about whether parents have adequate resources (time, money, energy, etc.) to meet the needs of their family. The respondent is asked, "To what extent are the following resources adequate for your family?" followed by such items as food for two meals a day, money to buy necessities, enough clothes for your family, etc.

Parents' childhood experiences of school: Parents' previous school experiences were taken from the Parent's School Memories subscale of Your Child's Adjustment to School (Reid & Landesman, 1988). This subscale consists of items 16-22 ( $\alpha=.82$ ). Sample items include, "Did you think your elementary school experience was a positive or negative experience," and "How did you feel about your relationship with your teachers in elementary school?"

School level variables:

School Climate: School climate was ascertained through parents' reports of the atmosphere of their children's school, as measured by the School Climate Survey (Kelley, Glover,

Keefe, Halderson, Sorenson, & Speth, 1986). This measure asks respondents what most people think about the school regarding different subscales. The subscales included are those most theoretically related to family involvement, and include: teacher-student relationships, security/maintenance of the school, and educational administration of the school.

Family-school communication: Communication ( $\alpha = .72$ ) includes five items, including, "Are there many ways for families to participate in this school?", and "I receive good information from my child's teacher about how my child is doing in school." Parents could respond on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

## Results

Preliminary analyses consisted of zero-order correlations between the predictor variables and the dependent variables (see Table 1). Some family variables, such as parent health and education, are associated with the dependent variables. More highly educated parents were more likely to participate in their children's education at home, and more likely to report involvement in school activities. Surprisingly, neither ethnicity (African-American or not) nor age was associated with any family involvement variables. Employed parents reported more participation at home and in school activities. Additionally, the more family resources a parent has, the more involvement in school activities. Parents' previous school experiences were positively associated with participation at home, and parents who remembered more positive school experiences reported more involvement in school-based activities. Contrary to much of the literature, family structure was not associated with family involvement in this sample.

School climate was related to family-school communication, such that parents who reported a more favorable climate, specifically better security/maintenance, and educational administration, also reported more participation in their children's education at home. Additionally, parents who reported better family-school communication also said they participated more in their children's education at home and marginally in school-based activities.

A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the contributions of family and school level variables. Demographic variables were entered in the first block, followed by family structural barriers and finally school level barriers.

#### Participation in Children's Education at Home:

Regression results indicated that neither the family demographic variables nor the family structural variables, as a group, were significant predictors of parents' participation in their children's education at home (See Table 2). Yet, at the final block, parents' experience in school when they were children was moderately associated with their participation at home. The school-level variables block, however, was significant. Specifically, family-school communication significantly was related to participation in children's education at home.

#### Involvement in School Activities:

For parents' involvement in school activities, all 3 blocks were significant (Table 3). Yet, the school-level variables predicted involvement over and above the family-level variables. In the final block, both parents' past school experiences and communication between family and school significantly predicted parent involvement in school activities.

One problem with the previous regression analyses is potential confounding of parents' reports of school climate and their reports of family involvement. Since both independent and dependent variables are measured on the level of the individual parent, there is some question as to whether family-school communication predicts parental involvement or whether parents who are more involved are also more likely to report better communication with the schools. One way that I attempted to address this issue was by using control variables that might be associated with both family involvement and family-school communication (the family demographic variables).

In order to further investigate the problem of direction of causality, 1-way ANCOVAs were performed, with school as the factor and school climate variables and family-school communication as the dependent variables, controlling for the family demographic variables. These analysis test for agreement between parents exposed to the same school environment versus differences for different school environments. None of the ANCOVAs were significant (see Table 4), but the family-school communication did approach significance, suggesting that there was some consensus among parents at schools on this particular variable.

### Discussion

The fact that family-school communication was predictive of family involvement over and above family factors is extremely important. Although family variables are still important to think about in considerations of family involvement, it is quite interesting that most of the demographic variables frequently associated with family involvement (i.e. ethnicity, family structure) were not related in this study. This could be because there was no European-American or middle-class comparison group. However, looking within mainly ethnic minority families living in poverty, the

primary family barrier seemed to be parents' previous school experiences. Although nothing much can be done to change the past, we can do a lot to influence the current experiences of students in schools, as well as the climate of schools, which was also highly important in predicting family involvement.

As some researchers have suggested, the school practices seem to be as, if not more, important than family factors in influencing family involvement. This finding suggests the importance of policy considerations as to how schools might change in order to encourage more family involvement, especially among ethnic minority families and families living in poverty. Since family-school communication was an important predictor of parental involvement, it would seem essential for schools to do whatever they can in attempting to communicate with families, especially those "hard-to-reach" families.

Another important factor that has been suggested in the literature is a redefining of family involvement. Firstly, we should broaden the definition of family to include more than just parents. It is widely recognized that African-American and Latino families, among others, depend heavily on their extended family network. Children are often raised or looked after by their grandparents or aunts and uncles, and older cousins frequently play a major role in helping children with school. Schools should begin to include these family members, along with fictive kin, in family activities both in and out of school. Furthermore, schools need to widen the range of involvement activities to encompass not only parent-teacher conferences or PTA meetings, but also other activities.

One weakness of this study is that the school level variable is measured on the individual level. This study attempted to address this issue, but was not able to fully eliminate the possibility that a causal relationship can not be inferred from the data. An alternative approach, which is extremely important to employ in future research, is to obtain ecological assessments of the

schools themselves. This alternative is very interesting to me. I have been unable to locate any such assessments in the literature, and think it important to pursue this line of research. An interesting study would be to utilize more objective measures of the school as independent variables, and see whether the same relationship exists.

Table 1.

Correlation between Independent and Dependent Variables<sup>a</sup> (N=151)

	Participation at home	School Based Activities
Parent health		
Education	.19*	.23**
Ethnicity		
Parent's age		
Employed	.17*	.19*
Single parent		
School experience	.20*	.35***
Family resources		.24**
Teacher/student rel		
Security/maintenance	.19*	
Administration	.20*	
Family-school com	.35***	.16†

<sup>a</sup> Only significant correlations will be reported.\*  $p < .05$     \*\*  $p < .01$     \*\*\*  $p < .001$     †  $p < .10$

Table 2:

## Hierarchical Linear Regression Analyses on Participation in Children's Education at Home

(N=151)

Variable	$\beta$	(95%CI)	R <sup>2</sup> cha	Fcha
Family Demographics			.06	1.61
Health	.03	(-0.95,0.75)		
Education	.12	(-0.85,0.23)		
Ethnicity	-.07	(-1.74,3.51)		
Age	.10	(-0.18,0.07)		
Family Structural			.05	1.31
Employed	.10	(-2.47,0.81)		
Single-parent	.03	(-0.99,0.70)		
School experiences	.23†	(-1.15,0.01)		
Family resources	-.09	(-0.03,0.08)		
School Variables			.09	2.73*
Administration	.10	(-0.24,0.09)		
Teacher/student relationship	.12	(-0.19,0.05)		
Security/maintenance	-.10	(-0.08,0.02)		
Family-School communication	.25*	(-0.56,-0.04)		

Note.  $\beta$ s standardized and taken from the final block.

\*  $p < .05$     \*\*  $p < .01$     \*\*\*  $p < .001$     †  $p < .10$

Table 3.

Hierarchical Linear Regression Analyses on Family Involvement in School Activities (N=151)

Variable	$\beta$	(95%CI)	R <sup>2</sup> cha	Fcha
Family Demographics			.12	3.71**
Health	-.09	(-1.62,0.60)		
Education	.14	(-0.20,1.22)		
Ethnicity	-.08	(-4.79,2.04)		
Age	.16	(-0.03,0.30)		
Family Structural			.13	4.11**
Employed	.01	(-2.06,2.20)		
Single-parent	.08	(-0.60,1.60)		
School experiences	.30**	(0.30,1.80)		
Family resources	.10	(-0.03,0.11)		
School Variables			.09	3.30*
Administration	.06	(-0.15,0.28)		
Teacher/student relationship	-.12	(-0.04,0.35)		
Security/maintenance	.16	(-0.04,0.35)		
Family-School communication	.26**	(0.11,0.79)		

Note.  $\beta$ s standardized and taken from the final block.

\*  $p < .05$     \*\*  $p < .01$     \*\*\*  $p < .001$     †  $p < .10$

Table 4. ANCOVAs for School Climate

School Climate Variable	F <sup>1</sup>
Administration	0.67
Security/Maintenance	0.95
Teacher-student relationship	1.09
Family-school communication	1.60*

\*  $p < .10$

<sup>1</sup> F of school, controlling for parental ethnicity, education, age and health

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## Abstract

This paper examines the influence of family and school barriers as potential barriers to the involvement of parents in their children's education. The sample for this study was taken from a local site of the National Head Start/Public School Transition Demonstration Project. Participants in the study included 151 families whose children were formerly in Head Start, and were in second grade at the time of this study. Family involvement was divided into involvement in children's education at home and involvement in school activities. Family contextual variables included family structure, employment, family resources, and parents' childhood experiences of school. School level variables consisted of school climate and family-school communication.

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