Parenting Influences and School Engagement among African American Male Youth: A Personal Narrative

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Abstract

In general, African American males lag behind their White counterparts with regards to high school graduation, college completion and beyond. African American males residing in low resourced communities are especially vulnerable for such disadvantage. Existing literature suggests that parental factors and interactions can help to promote youth academic engagement (i.e., school motivation and educational attainment). However, there remains a dearth of studies on this topic as it pertains to low-income male African American youth. This paper briefly examines this literature and presents a personal narrative on how parental factors have influenced academic engagement from the perspectives of the author, students he has interacted with and peers. It concludes with practice and policy recommendations.

Keywords: School engagement, African American male youth, Academic success, Educational engagement, Parental influences

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1. Introduction

School engagement is critical to improving the life chances for youth, especially those who reside in high risk, low resourced communities (Young, 2006). African American youth, especially those who are males, often demonstrate lower academic attainment relative to their White counterparts (Ferguson, 2000). Therefore, more research is needed to better understand factors that may correlate with higher school engagement for these youth which is important to broadening the narrative from that of risk to resilience and supporting factors that can facilitate greater school motivation and grade attainment. Without question, parents matter in the life of youth, especially as it pertains to school engagement and research substantiates this assertion (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wentzel, 2002). However, more studies are needed that move beyond contrasting Black youth with peers who are White to better illuminate promotive factors that are associated with pathways to youth school engagement among this population.

Societal, community, school and peer factors are important factors that may influence school engagement for Black youth (Bishop, Leiber, & Johnson, 2010). It is equally true that many of these distal factors may influence school engagement through more proximal factors such as parenting practices (monitoring and discipline) and household resources (e.g., socioeconomic status, parents education and marital status) (Young, 2006). However, few studies have discussed this literature as it especially pertains to low-income African American males.

Therefore, this paper briefly examines the literature on parental factors that are associated with educational attainment among youth. It illuminates how some of these factors have influenced academic mobility from the perspective of the author, students he has interacted with and peers. The overall aim is to present a brief narrative account similar to what has been used in prior studies (Charon, 2004; Hopper, et al., 1997). It is commonly stated that more Black males enter the prison system than graduate from college. While these statistics are sometimes debatable, I recognize that I am among a minority of Black men completing a doctoral degree from a top tier research university. In this personal narrative, I highlight some parental factors that supported this educational

advancement. I also share observations on how parental factors were present or absent in the lives of peers and students as it pertained to school advancement.

2. Literature Review

School engagement is a multi-dimensional construct reflecting the degree to which students are invested emotionally, behaviorally and academically in school (Furlong & Christenson, 2008; Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007). Such engagement may include school attendance, forging strong student-teacher connections, achieving high grades, high school graduation, college enrollment, and college graduation (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). Youth who reside in low-resource communities are especially vulnerable for reporting lower school engagement (e.g., school motivation and educational attainment) and greater rates of high school dropout (Romo & Falbo, 2010). More specifically, students who attend school in disadvantaged and urban communities graduate high school at rates that are 15%-18% lower than their counterparts elsewhere (Chung, 2005), with such rates being highest amongst African-American males (Fry, 2010; Fall & Roberts, 2012). In addition, the intersection of poverty and race also matter in regards to academic achievement. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2014), White males had a high school dropout rate of 5.7%, while African-American and Latino males' dropout rates were 7.1% and 11.8%, respectively. Moreover, factors such as structural poverty, racism/marginalization, and the negative environmental risks of lower school achievement (e.g., school to prison pipeline, under employment and unemployment, illegal activity, etc.) are more likely to be detrimental for African American youth relative to their White male counterparts (Borges-Mendez, Denhardt, & Collett, 2013; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011; Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Bishop, Leiber, & Johnson, 2010).

However, not all African American youth are indifferent to school or susceptible to dropping out. Data shows that 52% of African American males who entered ninth grade in the 2006-2007 school year graduated in four years (Educational Testing Services, 2013). Identifying factors that promote positive school engagement represents an important research priority given that parenting influences such as a parent's involvement in their child's school, having aspirations for their youth, caregiver styles, and overall monitoring functions are important factors that can promote academic achievement and engagement (Wilder, 2014; Topor, Keane, Shelton, & Calkins, 2010; Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010).

I am a 28 year old 5'7" 190 pound cis-gender Black man with short curly black hair, brown eyes, and brown skin. I am originally from East St. Louis, Illinois but currently reside in Richton Park, Illinois (a south suburb of Chicago) for the past 2 years with my wife and 3 year old son. I grew up in a low-income family, my father was absent and mother was a certified nursing assistant (CNA). I have one younger sibling and he is currently pursuing his doctorate of philosophy at Northwestern University in Education and Social Policy. I attended public school in district 189, I attended the public University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for undergrad, I attended the private University of Chicago for my master's degree, I taught elementary and high school in Chicago for two years, I have mentored at schools or community centers for at least 7 years, I am currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Chicago, and I am both a Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences fellow and Illinois Board of Higher Education Diversifying Higher Education Faculty in Illinois Fellow. The majority of the close peers that I grew up with are either professionals in a trade, college graduates, teachers, business owners, or serving in the United States military. As a former elementary and high school teacher, the majority of youth attending the schools where I taught came from Black, low-income, and from single parent households.

2.1 Parental School Involvement and Youths' School Engagement

Parental school involvement matters with regards to the educational attainment of their youth. Parental school involvement can be defined as parent's interactions with schools and with their children in order to promote academic achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Cumulative findings indicated that various dimensions of involvement are expressed in the form of parents communicating with their children about school, checking homework, expectations for academic achievement, encouraging outside class reading, attending or participating in school functions, and household rules regarding school were major variables related to better academic achievement (i.e., grades, completing high school and onward admission to college) (Jeynes, 2003). According to a meta-analysis of 20 studies, conducted by Jeynes (2003), African-American students benefit from parental involvement in school. This positive effect held across all 20 studies analyzed and over a sample of 12,000 subjects. In another meta-analysis of 50 studies, overall findings indicated that particular types of parental involvement during middle school

were positively correlated with academic achievement (e.g., grades). More specifically, parental involvement that created an understanding about the purposes, goals, and meaning of academic performance; communicated expectations about involvement; and provided strategies that students can effectively use (i.e., academic socialization) had the strongest positive relation with school achievement. Involvement pertaining to homework assistance and supervising/checking homework was the only type of parental involvement that was not consistently related with achievement. However, school involvement (e.g. visiting, volunteering, and attending school events) was moderately positive in its association with achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Growing up in East St. Louis, IL and attending schools in district 189 was challenging on several fronts. While I was growing up, East St. Louis had been ranked as the number one most dangerous city in America for multiple years. Knowing that, my mother—Patricia Ann Wesley—is definitely my hero. When it comes to parental school involvement and an interest in youth academic success, no one did it better than my mother. Mom would show up at school randomly, sit in on my classes, help coach our athletic teams, volunteer, talk with teachers, supervise homework, and she did all this while holding a full time job as a Certified Nursing Assistant and taking care of home. However, this involvement transpired mostly during elementary school. Once my brother and I transitioned to middle school my mother reduced the time she spent interacting with our schools. She stopped showing up as often, she never attended events, she did pick us up from school but that was about it. In all honesty, it was perfect. She was so involved during the early years that she shaped how my brother and I were to engage education for the rest of our lives. In elementary school, under her supervision, we learned to take school seriously, that the school should work for us, and that academic success was the expectation. I recall one event that had a particularly intense impact on my academic identity. In elementary school we received report cards. We would go to the school on report card day with our parents and pick up the report cards. I noticed that my friends were getting money for good grades. In fact, one of my peers received $100 for straight A's. Of course, as any child would, I went to my mother to make my case to get money for my good grades. I explained to her what everyone else was getting, I was pretty good at making the case, and even offered suggestions for dollar amounts per letter grade. She let me talk and talk and talk and then finally responded at the conclusion of my pitch. My mother looked me squarely in the eyes and said to me "Darnell, you do not get money for getting good grades, getting good grades is just what you do". That was the end of that , but that moment has colored my academic identity for many years and still does today. My mother's involvement in my schooling not only set a standard for academic performance, but it also showed me that the school belongs to me. Moreover, my mother reducing her involvement in middle and high school allowed me to flex the identity that had been forged in elementary school

As a teacher I witnessed the importance of parents being involved in the educational lives of their students. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and the like would stop by the elementary school I worked at the check on the progress of their students. A lot of this happened after school during student pickup but some happened during school hours. However, the parents I saw the most were the parents who repeatedly came to the school because of their child's behavior. I say this because I think this is a problem, a problem for administration. Teachers and administration were quick to call a parent about a child's behavioral problems but slower to contact a parent about the academic success of their child. This focus on engaging parents around consequences for negative behavior as opposed to providing praise, cultivated an environment that seemed to welcome hostility and tension into the hallways of our school as opposed to praise and shared academic success. Nonetheless, parental involvement seemed to play a key role in youth engagement, either as a deterrent or as an encouragement. I did not see this type of involvement from parents when I taught at the high school . Given my own experience, this could be a good thing.

2.2 Parental Monitoring and Youth School Engagement

Parental monitoring has also been identified as another important factor associated with youth school engagement or achievement. Monitoring is often defined as knowing a child's whereabouts and providing supervision; this is often recognized as an important facet of parenting (Lopez-Tamayo, LaVome Robinson, Lambert, Jason, & Ialongo, 2016; Castro, Expósito-Casas, López-Martín, Lizasoain, Navarro-Asencio, & Gaviria, 2015). More specifically, a qualitative study of 60 low-income middle school parents and students ages 13 to 16 years documented that parental monitoring was positively related to student achievement (i.e., grades) and also showed that closer monitoring or the perception of being monitored were related to better school success (Wilson, 2009). Another way that parental monitoring promotes educational achievement is by caregivers' monitoring their youths' after-school activities, such as monitoring the completion of homework, supervising activities with peers, and checking on school progress (Spera, 2005). A study of 138 low-income urban African American adolescents, documented that parental

monitoring had the clearest association with school attachment and academic achievement (Chilenski, Ty, Bequette, & Caldwell, 2015). More recently, a study of 683 low-income African American youth documented that parental monitoring was one of the significant constructs that distinguished youth who reported high versus low school bonding (Voisin, Kim, & Sung, 2016).

Back to my mom, she watched us like a hawk when we were young (elementary and middle school). My mother would not allow us to spend the night over other people's houses, go beyond our street where she could not see us, or hang with children she felt would be negative influences on us. She had strict rules about what we watched on tv—mostly cartoons, natural geographic, and wrestling (yes WWF!, my mom is awesome)—and what we were exposed to. However, she did let us spend a great deal of time with my beautiful, strong grandma and auntie. Family was trusted to do right by use but other than that we were under the watchful eye of mom. That said, I cannot go forward without stressing the point that all three of these women taught us what it meant to be decent, driven, committed, intelligent, loving, thoughtful…you get the point. They raised us and they raised us in love…and supervision. That said, again, once I got to high school my mother stopped monitoring me closely. Of course she always knew my whereabouts but I went where I wanted, which was usually to church or to see my girlfriend. The only stipulations I had to meet in relation to supervision in high school was to let her know where I was, and be there if she came looking, and to be home by curfew. Again, freedom allowed me to blossom. Having autonomy and some independence in high school was everything to me. I got to be my own person, learn my own lessons (a lot of mistakes were made), and grow at my own pace. As I sit here and reflect, I am sure that I was a much better high school student because I was free to be me and had little pressure to conform to standards of academic excellence, standards I practiced and mastered in elementary school. My mother laid the foundation and let me build.

I had peers in my school whose parents, based on their own assertions, did not monitor them so well. They watched what they wanted to watch, stayed out as long as they wanted, and had few rules or expectations to meet. These children were considered "cool" in middle and high school but most of them did not do well academically and some even where killed. To put it in perspective, my freshman class included 1000 students, we graduated 300. I am not entirely sure that monitoring alone was the issue. As stated above, my mother laid an educational foundation for me that allowed me to be monitored less in high school and still succeed. I believe the interaction of an academic identity not formed in excelling but in what appears to be a lack of concern and the absence of parental monitoring is a recipe for disaster in the lives of students. Some of my peers treated school as nothing more than a social club, which it was, but it was also a place of learning, which some never accepted.

2.3 Parents' and Youths' Aspirations and School Engagement

The primary way parents socialize their children to educational attainment is by communicating the goals they want for them with regards to school, career, and life. Such aspirations are effectively communicated with hopes that their youth will embrace these ideas (Wentzel, 2002). With respect to school engagement, several studies have shown that parental aspirations, goals, and values are related to their children's setting of academic goals, persistence in school, course enrollment, intellectual accomplishments, and attendance of college (Fan, Williams, & Wolters, 2012; Areepattamannil, 2010). In addition, studies have documented that parents' values towards education are significantly and positively correlated to their children's educational attainment, persistence, and performance (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Less research, however, has analyzed the impact of youths' educational aspirations on their academic engagement. This represents an important gap in the extant literature because it is highly likely that youth school completion is motivated by a combination of parent, school and youth characteristics (Center for Public Education , 2007). Research documented that self-efficacy, ethnic identity, and maternal support are strong predictors of future education efficacy (Nyarko, 2011). While these factors might mediate youth aspirations, research shows that youths' own school aspirations are correlated with their academic success (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008).

My mother's only academic aspiration for me was that I did my best. Indeed, I did my best and I continue to do my best. That expectation laid the groundwork for tremendous feats of overcoming. Stated differently, her standard laid the foundation by which I formed my own aspirations which allowed me to do what 70% of my peers in high school did not, graduate. As a teacher, I did not know my students' parents well enough to gauge their aspirations for their children but I talked to my students multiple times a week about their aspirations. I had students, particularly in high school, that desired to be athletes, performers, managers, entrepreneurs, designers, dancers and the list goes on. I did not particularly see any connection between their aspirations and their academic success but as their teacher I

stressed the importance of understanding how education supports their professional and personal goals. I will say, none of my students ever came back to me and said, "Mr. Leatherwood, your pep talk really made me try harder academically because if I do better academically I may be situated to take better advantage of professional opportunities". I have not had that conversation but maybe I will in the future, once some of my young men--I taught at an all-male high school—graduate from college.

As a student in East St. Louis, my peers and I never talked about what we wanted to be when we grew up. As stated above, my mother never pushed me in any particular direction, she just asked that I do my best. I think this was the case for a lot of us back then. Therefore, we treated high school almost as a final stage in our academic journeys. We only had a few conversations about college with our counselors, and no conversations about careers. I guess you can say we were focused on being high school students and only high school students; that's all we knew. Some of us just happened to be good students, I guess you call that luck.

2.4 Parenting Styles and School Engagement

Early, well-known work on parenting identified three primary parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive (Baumrind, 1971, 1978, 1989). These parenting styles capture dimensions such as acceptance, warmth, responsiveness, democracy, strictness, detachment, avoidance (Baumrind, 1971). A number of research studies have found a positive relationship between authoritative parenting styles and student achievement (Shute, Hansen, Underwood, Razzouk, 2011; Kordi & Baharudin, 2010). For instance, recent findings documented that Iranian children of authoritative parents were more mature, independent, prosocial, active, and achievement-oriented than children of non-authoritative parents. On the other hand, Iranian children of permissive parents scored lowest on measures of self-reliance, self-control, and academic competence (Dehyadegary, Yaacob, Juhari, & Talib, 2012). More recent studies have noted that parents who displayed higher levels of authoritative parenting by providing their children with warmth, autonomy, and high maturity demands had children with higher achievement levels (Nyarko, 2011). In another study, Wang, Hill, and Hofkens (2014) found that authoritative parenting was related to adolescent grade point average (GPA) and school engagement.

My mother was an authoritarian and I thank her for it now. We didn't debate her rules and I had no say so in the expectations she set. I was simply expected to execute. I often make the joke that my mother would have been the best marine corps drill sergeant in history. At points in my adolescence I thought my mother hated me, but now I know that she loved me so much that she was unwilling to be my friend. She was and is my mother and to this day I respect that. To be honest, her demeanor and strength was a deterrent to negative behavior. Given the context of East St. Louis I am glad she was tough. She was far tougher than the streets and raised a man willing and able to navigate the world with boldness and integrity. Thank God for tough Mom.

Growing up in East St. Louis and teaching in majority Black schools I noticed that most of the parents I encountered where similar to my mother, "no nonsense". The only real difference I see is that my mother involved herself in our academics early on in a way that far exceeded the involvement of the parents of my peers or my students. My mother was tough but she was also present. I knew that everywhere I went I represented her and our home and I "bet not" embarrass either. She knew my teachers, she knew the neighbors, she knew the bus driver, she knew the administration…there was nowhere for me to act out, so I had plenty of time to practice good behavior in elementary school. Again, this was foundational. For my peers and my students it appeared that they could escape their parents in the schools. They acted as if they knew they were safe and that no one was watching. This allowed them the freedom to develop habits that were not conducive to academic progress. They would play, get kicked out of class, talk back to teachers, fight, and all this before lunch. I could have been one of those kids, but my mother would have taken me out. My life was too valuable to give up in return for the freedom of being an unruly student.

2.5 Contributions of This Current Review and Commentary

To date, a significant body of research on the school engagement for African American and Latino males has focused on their underachievement when compared to their White male counterparts (Ferguson, 2000; Polite & Davis, 1999; Ford, Moore, & Whiting, 2006; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Henderson-Hubbard, 2013). Consequently, there has been an overemphasis on risk factors rather than illuminating factors that are associated with academic achievement and resiliency.

Parenting styles are critical in regards to school engagement (Kordi & Baharudin, 2010). However, some findings reveal mixed results and it is the often the case that racial minorities have been underrepresented in the data (Johnson, 2011). This significantly limits the generalizability of these findings to African American and Latino male

youth (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). Moreover, in addition to well-known established parental constructs (i.e., parenting monitoring, school involvement and styles) that are positively correlated with school engagement, youth factors such as personal aspirations for school success are also likely to play an important role in school engagement. Only a few studies have assessed youth educational aspirations along with parental influences in the same study, and few have attempted to understand how these factors may be interrelated with regards to school engagement especially for low-income African American and Latino male youth. In addition, the extant literature has focused primarily on children and pre-teens rather than adolescents (Jeynes, 2003).

Finally from a methodological perspective, findings showing that parental influences on better school engagement among youth are not always based on longitudinal data (for reviews see Jeynes, 2003). This limits a clearer understanding of the temporal order among these variables leading to lack of understanding on whether some relationships are bi-directional. For instance, higher levels of parental school involvement could be correlated with higher youth school engagement. It is also possible that lower levels of school engagement might also correlate with lower parental school involvement. Consequently, more studies that utilize longitudinal designs are needed to better tease out the temporal order among major constructs and study findings.

The theoretical underpinnings supporting this focus on parental influences and youth academic achievement is supported by social control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). In part, social control states that positive bonds to conventional societal norms are represented by four elements: attachment to others, commitment to conventional institutions, involvement in conventional activities, and belief in conventional values (Chen & Jacobson, 2013; Fagan et al., 2013). Therefore, when youth achieve academically this could be one indication of a positive bond to teachers, parents, and conventional societal norms. As it relates to academic achievement, effective parenting in the form of monitoring, having high aspirations for their youth, and being involved in school (also considered as academic press) would theoretically lead to youth having better school engagement, ultimately resulting in youth's own school engagement and achieving higher education levels.

When exploring the questions above, it is important to control for potential confounders such as son's age, race/ethnicity, mother's education, socioeconomic status, and marital status. Prior empirical research has indicated that there are race/ethnic differences in academic achievement and parenting styles (Steinberg et al., 1992). In addition, maternal capital such as education, socioeconomic status, and marital status have significant implications for youth academic achievement (Kelley, Power, & Wimbush 1992).

5. Discussion and Future Directions

African American adolescent males, especially those who reside in low-income communities are at high risk for low school engagement and dropping out (Romo & Falbo, 2010; Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, & Chen, 2012). However, fewer studies focus on parent factors and youth factors that may promote positive school engagement. Therefore, this review and commentary engaged how parenting practices and aspirations were related to youth school engagement and how youth educational aspirations might mediate this relationship.

Prior findings have shown that parental factors such as monitoring were related to academic engagement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). However, those findings were based on young children. That said, a focus on adolescents, and especially those who are residing in poorly resourced low-income communities, may yield important findings. In addition, prior findings based on Latino middle school students have shown that parental monitoring of educational issues were directly associated with student reports of teacher support and were indirectly linked to school behavior and satisfaction (Woolley, Kol & Bowen, 2009). Below we discuss directions for future research.

Study findings have several implications for promoting school engagement for low-income African American youth. Related research has shown that positive future orientation is an important factor that promotes better student-teacher relationships and school motivation among minority youth (So, Voisin, Burnside, & Gaylord-Harden, 2016). Therefore, parents need support in order to have higher standards of life and educational aspirations for their youth, especially in the face of poverty and harsh community settings. Many of these expectations might transcend the education levels their parents have achieved themselves. This illustrates the importance of helping parents and their youth develop various methods of coping to manage their environments, in order to promote a high future orientation (So, Gaylord-Harden, Voisin, & Scott, 2015) and inspire hope and possibilities.

Additionally, providing informational and group support for caregivers in low-income communities that can help promote life aspirations for both parents and youth might be beneficial. Providing credible positive ethnic reflections—persons from similar neighborhoods who have succeeded in achieving their personal and professional

goals—can be one effective approach to fostering a sense of high future orientation and fostering life aspirations for both parents and youth living in poorly resourced communities. Another important strategy for promoting high future orientation and supporting life aspirations would be for program planners and youth workers to expose low-income youth to job opportunities, culturally sensitive mentoring programs, and other social developmental programs that foster and promote positive youth development (So, Gaylord-Harden, Voisin, & Scott, 2015). Finally, some minority parents have indicated that exposing their youth to other life circumstances and possibilities—taking their youth outside of their often insulated, segregated and high crime communities—and showing them alternative living conditions and realities are other effective strategies for fostering a sense of hope and future orientation (Voisin, Berringer, Takahashi, Kuhnen, & Burr, 2016), and we would add having life aspirations. This review and commentary document several parental factors that continue to be significant in the lives of their youth and might be especially critical for low-income Black and Latino youth as it relates to educational engagement and their own educational aspirations.

In summary, positive parental involvement mattered for me when it came to rising above the educational challenges I was faced as a Black male growing up in what many people refer to as "living in an at-risk environment." My mother was not able to provide me with the informational support given her own educational limitations. However, I received the academic press that was needed to traverse the tapestry of factors that impeded the academic success of peers and students alike from similar circumstances.

Acknowledgment

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