

# The Role of Skills-Based Interventions and Settings on the Engagement of Diverse Families

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## Abstract

Academic achievement for African American and Latino students is lower than for White and Asian students. To help overcome the achievement gap, policymakers and social scientists have focused on the relationships between student outcomes and family, community, and schools. Family, church, and community have always played significant roles in providing educational opportunities for diverse youth. In this multisite, mixed methods study, a skill building intervention for enhancing parents' engagement in their children's education was implemented with 107 families and its effectiveness analyzed using ANOVA and focus groups. Differences were found by setting as well as between parents of students receiving gifted education and parents of special education students.

Key Words: academic achievement, African American students, Latino students, skill-building interventions, parental engagement, home, family-school-community partnerships, churches, gifted, special education

## Introduction

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law in December 2015, embodies the nation's long-standing commitment to equal opportunities for all students. Two of the key provisions of ESSA are protections for disadvantaged students and support for local innovations, including evidenced-

based interventions. Two groups of students who would benefit from these specific provisions are African American and Latino students. These students have always had to overcome educational, economic, and social limitations on opportunities. Despite the protections they receive, many continue to demonstrate unique and unmet needs (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Sizemore, 2008). Therefore, educators look to evidenced-based interventions to close the achievement gap between these students and others.

Researchers have identified a number of key factors related to the achievement of diverse students, including parents' high expectations, family engagement in education, community partnerships, and various interventions (Fagan, 2006; Kunjufu, 2012; Sizemore, 2008; Ufimtseva, 2014). Recognizing the interrelationships among these factors, the current researcher developed an intervention that utilized community partnerships to enhance parents' engagement in their children's education. The intervention was designed and community partnerships selected to meet the specific needs and preferences of African American and Latino parents. This study was an examination of the effectiveness of the intervention implemented in these specific settings to increase parental involvement.

Throughout the study, the term *family* is used to honor the cultural beliefs held by African American and Latino families, who value close-knit social units that extend the idea of nuclear family to include aunts, uncles, godparents, cousins, grandparents, and church members. The term *Black church* is used to recognize that there was a time in U.S. history when those perceived as Black could not attend church with White people and to honor the fact that predominantly Black churches still exist.

### **Achievement Disparity**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2010), African American students score lower than their peers overall in mathematics and language arts (reading and writing) throughout elementary and secondary school. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a nationwide assessment of what students in the U.S. know, has documented this disparity in educational performance. NAEP results are reported for various subjects at each grade level according to three achievement levels: basic, proficient, and advanced. Proficient indicates a solid knowledge of grade-level skills. In 2007, only 14% of African American fourth graders scored at or above proficient on the reading assessments as compared to 46% of Pacific Islanders and 43% of White students (Aud et al., 2010). At the eighth grade level, only 13% of African American students were proficient on the reading assessments, and the disparities do not stop there. African American students also experienced

harsher punishments, more suspensions, and expulsions at three times the rate of their peers who engaged in similar behaviors (Delpit, 2012; Kunjufu, 2012). Harsh punishment is associated with identification for special education and dropping out of school; it also contributes to the achievement gap (Skiba et al., 2011).

An achievement gap, or education debt, is also present for Latino students; it is evident as early as preschool and kindergarten. In the 1998 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, one half as many Latino children as White children were in the top quartile in math and reading skills at the start of kindergarten, and twice as many were in the lowest quartile (Gándara, 2010). Jackson, Schatschneider, and Leacox (2014) compared the performance of Mexican-born immigrant children with the performance of children born in the U.S. to immigrant parents; subjects in both groups were identified as English language learners (ELLs). Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Cohort of 2002 ( $N = 22,782$ ), the researchers found that 50% of Latino fourth graders scored at or below basic in reading, and 75% of Mexican migrant mothers had less than a high school education. Immigrant children had the lowest number of opportunities for educational enrichment in their homes; they had fewer books and were read to less than their peers (Jackson et al., 2014).

Both African American and Latino students are overidentified for special education and underidentified for gifted education—also known as gifted and talented education (GATE)—and for advanced placement (AP) programs (Boone & King-Berry, 2007; Skiba et al., 2008). Popular literature refers to the differences between scores and treatment of White students and African American and Latino students as an achievement gap; the term implies that students need to do something to catch up. Ladson-Billings (2006) preferred to call the difference an education debt. She asserted that this debt has accumulated over time to African American and Latino families in almost every facet of society, including health, economics, housing, and the justice system, as well as education.

### **Achievement and Socioeconomic Status**

Contrary to popular belief, low socioeconomic status is not always a risk factor for low academic achievement, nor does it always explain the achievement gap. A study in a high-performing, affluent public school district in Southern California demonstrated that, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, African American males still achieved at a lower level than their White peers (Collins, 2008). Another study, involving the Minority Student Achievement Network, analyzed grade point averages of African American, Hispanic,

Asian, and White students across 15 middle- and high-income school districts throughout the U.S. The data demonstrated that even at higher socioeconomic levels a residual “unexplained” disparity existed between White students and African American and Latino students (Ferguson, 2002, p. 8).

The difference is also present at the lower end of the economic spectrum. Stuart and Hahnel (2011) examined the academic performance of White, Latino, and African American students who qualified for free and reduced-price lunches. They found significant achievement gaps in NAEP scores between White and Latino and White and African American students. Results of these studies suggest that reducing socioeconomic disparities will not necessarily narrow the achievement gap. A more effective approach may be to focus on parental involvement and student interventions.

## **Parent Involvement and Achievement**

Parent involvement has been identified as a key factor in student success. In this study, we define parent involvement as the voluntary actions parents take to support their children’s learning inside and outside of school to promote student success, as well as the specific methods school teachers and administrators use to involve parents in their children’s education (Alfaro, O’Reily-Diaz, & Lopez, 2014; Hill et al., 2004). Some studies suggest parent involvement is associated with identification for advanced placement, honors, and gifted programs; graduation; and improved outcomes in special education (Boone & King-Berry, 2007; Kunjufu 2012). However, this association has not always been true for Latino and African American students, who continue to be underrepresented in gifted and advanced placement programs and who experience the worst outcomes in special education despite parent involvement efforts.

There are traditional approaches to parent involvement, and there are practices that tend to be more culturally inclusive. Traditional approaches lean toward middle- and upper-class values and behaviors (Alfaro et al., 2014; Pushor, 2007). They tend to be centered on how families can help the school (e.g., providing homework support, meeting school expectations, volunteering, attending parent–teacher meetings, serving on committees, fundraising). These are important types of involvement, but an emphasis on these types of actions results in a lack of appreciation for other types of involvement and the devaluing of many groups (Aceves, 2014; Alfaro et al., 2014).

Non-traditional approaches, which are usually more culturally inclusive, recognize both school- and home-based involvement, including modeling, encouraging, communicating the value of education, sharing decision making, and using other non-dominant forms of cultural capital (Aceves, 2014;

Georgis, Gokiert, Ford, & Ali, 2014). Alfaro et al. (2014) pointed out, “Parental involvement across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines influences children’s educational experiences and trajectories in different and significant ways” (p. 11). Thus it is important for educators to understand how specific groups see parent involvement and to know that many types of involvement contribute to student success (Jeynes, 2012).

### **African American Approach to Parent Involvement**

African American families use various strategies to overcome academic and social barriers to education. Latunde and Louque (2016), examining the engagement practices of 130 African American parents, found that these parents spent a significant amount of time communicating with schools about how their children learned and how to support their children’s learning at home (94%). African American parents visited the schools on a weekly or monthly basis (94%) and were also active in campus-based parent groups (78.5%). Some were knowledgeable of school site councils (69.2%). A similar study (Louque & Latunde, 2014) found that one of the strategies African American families use is dependence on their churches or other faith-based organizations.

Latunde and Louque (2016) also found that the families identified church as a part of the “village” they often utilized to enhance their parenting and engagement with their children’s education. A Pew Research Center (2009) survey found that 84% of African Americans reported that church is an important part of their lives as compared to 62% of Latinos and 56% of Whites. Religious practice and church attendance are valued by the African American family and are of particular benefit to African American males (Kunjufu, 2012; Kusimo & Trulear, 2000). The church may be an underutilized resource for supporting schools among African Americans (Green-Powell, Hilton, & Joseph, 2011).

The impact of the Black church on the African American community in general and on the education of African American children in particular has been well-documented (Green-Powell et al., 2011). The agenda of the Black church from its earliest days included benevolence and education. By the 1900s, Black churches were supporting elementary schools and colleges financially. For example, the African Methodist church underwrote 32 postsecondary institutions (Childs, 2009). Predominately Black churches have also frequently provided tutoring, afterschool and summer educational programming, Bible camps, and parenting courses.

### **Latino Approach to Parental Involvement**

Latino families, which represented 29% of the current study's participants, use afterschool programs and school-based programs to enhance their engagement with their children's education (Afterschool Alliance, 2014b; Poza, Brooks, & Valdes, 2014). According to After School Alliance, another 57% of Latino families would participate in afterschool programs if available to them; in 2014, 89% of Latino parents were satisfied with their children's afterschool program. Alfaro et al. (2014), using a purposeful, extreme sampling strategy, interviewed nine Latino law students who employed a concept called *consejos* as a framework for understanding Latino parental involvement. *Consejos* are cultural narratives and nurturing advice. The researchers found that Latino parents not only provided verbal encouragement to demonstrate to their children their value of schooling and address school related issues, but they also exhibited optimism, determination, and motivation. These are all types of *consejos*.

Latino immigrant parents participate in their children's education in ways prescribed by schools and more (Poza et al., 2014; Stevens & Patel, 2015). A study (Poza et al., 2014) was done using snowball sampling and semistructured interviews with 24 Latino families recently immigrated to the U.S. The study found that in addition to common forms of involvement, Latino parents also asked questions, attended particular events or meetings, and altered/augmented their child's education by enrolling them in programs like afterschool or summer programs. Some of the barriers identified in that study were perceptions of bias and feeling unwelcome at school events.

### **Combined Approach**

Combining the efforts of community, family, and school has been shown to have greater positive effect on academic self-concept, achievement, and school behavior than independent efforts alone (Fulgham, 2013; Stevens & Patel, 2015). Epstein (2001), one of the most influential researchers on parental involvement, found that the more those who influence students share goals, information, and skills, the greater the benefit to students. Any interactions that increase the family's exposure to the school's curriculum, enhance social capital, and increase the effectiveness of involvement at home and school can benefit underserved students (Caldas & Cornigans, 2015; Epstein, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009).

### **Skill Building as a Tool for Family Involvement**

There are several ways to increase the overlap between what schools do and what parents know, including: building knowledge about school expectations, exposing families to the curriculum, and increasing their ability to help their

children at home. Improving student outcomes by building the capacities of the adults who influence children is not a new strategy, but is perhaps an underutilized one (Senechal, 2006). The benefits of parent-implemented academic interventions include low cost, convenience, relationship building, protection of classroom time, and reduction in unnecessary referrals for special education services. Families can be effective in providing academic interventions when trained and supported (Lane, Gresham, & O'Shaughnessy, 2010). Findings from a recent study of 33 children from an urban neighborhood who participated in a family literacy program for a two-year period suggested that teaching families specific ways to help their children at home (e.g., showing the children how to hold scissors, telling them the English names for common items, drawing with them, practicing writing their names) was effective in increasing immigrant children's early learning skills (Purcell-Gates, Lenters, McTavish, & Anderson, 2013). Interventions that help parents learn responsive behavior have also been moderately associated with better problem solving, language development, and acquisition of social/emotional skills (Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003; Senechal, 2006).

## **The Study**

Although assisting parents in building skills has been demonstrated to be associated with improved student achievement, accomplishing that has been a challenge for school personnel. Getting families to attend programming at the school site is often difficult, and teachers and administrators have not always seen or treated families as equal partners in education. This study was based on the hypothesis that skills-based trainings conducted in strategic settings, together with use of other evidenced-based practices, will positively impact the involvement of diverse parents in their children's education.

This mixed methods study examined whether providing skills-based training to diverse families in specific settings led to increased participation of the family members in their children's education. The project was guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent does setting impact parental involvement for parents of diverse students?
2. To what extent can skill-building programs increase capacity to support learning?

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Three theories formed the conceptual framework for this study: Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems

theory, and change theory. The first two explain why home–school collaboration is vital; the second provides a framework for understanding change that may impact family engagement and ultimately student success.

According to Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence (1987, 2001) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), the greater the overlap of the family, school, and community spheres, the stronger the partnership and greater the likelihood of improved student outcomes. School personnel and family members interested in effective home–school collaboration look for ways to work together to increase the overlap. Constituents in each sphere must be thoughtful and intentional with every interaction. Collaboration has been a unique challenge for schools and African American families, given a tumultuous history and distrust (Skiba et al., 2011; Thompson, 2003;). Whereas Latino families largely attend school events and meetings, African Americans' participation in traditional types of school involvement may be short lived (Thompson, 2003). Thompson (2003) found that African American parents were more dissatisfied with interactions with school personnel when compared to other groups and tended to end their participation in school events and meetings shortly after starting. Although parity among the spheres is implied, giving credence to the fundamental idea that family, school, and community should be equal partners in the education of a child, issues of power often go unchecked. A framework that acknowledges the need for parity among family, school, and community was important for this study, thus the use of the theory of overlapping spheres of influence.

It was also important to utilize a framework that explains the process of change. The theory of change (Harris, 2005) examines the set of connected building blocks or pathways by which a goal is met. Families, schools, communities, and students are connected, and goals aimed towards improving the overall well being of students must consider the well being or needs of the family and the community. Therefore, the goals of this intervention (program) were to increase families' knowledge of what is expected of their children, increase their skills for supporting learning at home, and increase their ability to advocate for measures that meet their children's learning needs at school. The underlying assumption is that the more skilled and knowledgeable parents are about their children, pedagogy, and the curriculum, the more successful their children will be in school (Epstein, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Acknowledging that students are connected with adults who are responsible for their welfare, we examined a pathway by which student outcomes may be improved by improving the skills and knowledge of the adults responsible for the students. Student outcomes are a complex web of activities, and families represent one pathway to outcomes.



Theory of change permits a specific and measurable description of behavioral changes necessary for African American and Latino student success. In this case, the change is with family and also with the organizations that aim to support the family. The change process includes clear goals, backwards mapping, identification of interventions, indicators for assessing intervention, and a narrative that summarizes the moving parts of the theory. In the case of African American and Latino families, reliance is placed on the community resources of the churches, cultural organizations, schools, and afterschool programs to support parents' parenting and engagement with education. Change theory is also concerned with the health of the partnering organizations as they work to support families.

## **Methods**

The study was a multisite, 12-month project involving a purposive sample of 107 parents responsible for the education of school-age children. It was approved by the author's university Institutional Review Board. The study evaluated whether the intervention of a skill-building program was effective in increasing parental knowledge and involvement in their children's education. A mixed methods approach was used; a pretest and posttest survey collected quantitative data, and focus groups provided qualitative data.

### **The Intervention and Settings**

The intervention was a skills-based training designed to increase families' ability to help with learning at home, improve their ability to advocate for their children, and increase their understanding of classroom/school expectations. Three two-hour workshops were conducted over a 12-month period at each of eight sites during the 2014–2015 school year. The workshops covered changes to curriculum resulting from adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), learning styles, and utilizing children's strengths in the classroom and at home. Professionals knowledgeable about the content as well as the cultural nuances of parent engagement conducted the sessions. The training was based on adult learning theories, used real-world examples, included information about culture and race, and provided ideas for practical application. The settings for the intervention were important components of the research.

The research settings represented community partnerships. The program was conducted at eight sites in collaboration with Latino-serving groups, African American-serving organizations, churches, schools, and afterschool programs. The researcher contacted 12 sites with access to and a history of trust with target participants, but four declined participation. The eight participating sites

were grouped into three categories: churches ( $n = 2$ ), schools ( $n = 4$ ; includes PTA, English Language Advisory Committee), and community ( $n = 2$ ; African American Parent Council, afterschool program).

### **Participants**

This study targeted African American and Latino family members responsible for the education of K–12 children attending public schools in California. The participant pool consisted of parents of diverse students who were clients of afterschool programs, district parent groups, public schools, and churches in Southern and Central California. Inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) parent or guardian of a child with regular school attendance, (b) willingness to participate in three training sessions at the same site, and (c) age 18 years or older. From the large participant pool, 123 parents were selected for the study based solely on their meeting the inclusion criteria.

Although the study targeted African American and Latino families, the program was open to all K–12 parents affiliated with the selected sites. Of the participants, 59% identified themselves as African American, 22% as Latino, 7% as multiracial, 7% as White, 3% as Aramaic, and less than 1% as Asian/Indian. The majority (65%) reported English as their first language. Fewer than 8% of participants spoke only Spanish. Approximately 39% of the participants had children who had been identified for gifted education, whereas parents of children with special needs represented approximately 8% of participants. The majority of participants were female (81%). The mean age of participants was 43 years; the youngest was 27 and the oldest 72. Participants' self-reported annual income levels ranged from \$12,000 to \$200,000; mean household income was \$57,000. Many of the participants reported having completed some college (39%); 15% completed only high school or earned a GED, and 20% had BA degrees.

### **Tool for Measurement**

The researcher developed a survey for measuring knowledge about education and engagement with education. Creating an instrument was necessary because many of the parent engagement tools available were limited to traditional types of involvement and failed to address more subtle and less demonstrative forms of engagement (Jeynes, 2012). A small committee and current literature on African American and Latino involvement was used to develop the questions for the survey. The survey was a 13-item questionnaire marked on a five-point Likert-style scale. Participants chose the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Options were: (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) neither, (2) disagree, and (1) strongly disagree. Examples of statements

participants could demonstrate a level of agreement with included: “I am a member of a decision-making group at my child’s school;” “I communicate to the school how they can help my child learn.” The full survey is available from the author upon request. The survey was tested for reliability using Cronbach’s alpha for all items. Cronbach’s alpha was .87, indicating that the measure was reliable and items were well correlated.

The survey was piloted with the assistance of two principals, five teachers, four congregational leaders, and eight family members. As a result of the pilot, 10 of the original questions were revised slightly for greater clarity. For example, the item that read “My child is interested in STEM” was revised to read “My child is interested in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.” Questions about Title I funding, school choice, and resources were added as a result of the pilot. A question related to visiting schools was deleted after the committee determined it was irrelevant; previous research (Jeynes, 2003; Thompson, 2003) found that visiting schools was a given for most African American and Latino families. After some discussion with the piloting committee, the survey questions were determined to have construct validity for measuring knowledge of and engagement with education.

In addition to the survey, responses from focus groups were used to measure participants’ knowledge about and engagement with education. A focus group was held after each parent training session. Each focus group was limited to six participants and lasted approximately 35–60 minutes. Discussions were moderated to ensure equal opportunities to speak. Notes were taken, and the discussions were videotaped with all participants’ consent.

### **Procedures**

The skills-based training program was made available to any K–12 families, but the researcher chose settings likely to attract Latino and African American families. The researcher presented representatives at each site with a proposal outlining the program’s objectives, general content, incentives, and procedures. Initial meetings and scheduling took approximately two to four months. The researcher worked with each site to arrange space, childcare, refreshments, dinner, materials, and audiovisual support, while also collaborating with local school principals to understand the curriculum and local needs. Anticipating that some participants would be Spanish-speaking only, arrangements were made for Spanish interpreters, and all materials, handouts, and presentations were prepared in Spanish as well as English. Scheduling of the program varied by site.

Once site representatives settled on dates and times, the researcher and site representatives collaborated to advertise the program. The researcher provided

both electronic and printed flyers. The eight sites used different strategies for advertising the program. Churches made announcements during regularly scheduled meeting times and placed posters in high-traffic areas. School groups recruited participants through e-flyers and e-blasts. Parent leaders made announcements during school assemblies to garner interest in the program. For afterschool programs that served large Latino and African American populations, flyers were distributed, and afterschool program staff called families.

For those participating in the study, the purpose of the study was explained, including the nature of the trainings and time commitment. Participants were assured confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were given consent forms, and they communicated agreement to the terms by signing in for each session and completing the questionnaires. Verbal agreement was also used to ensure that participants understood they could end their participation in the program at any time. Incentives in the form of \$25 gift cards were offered at the end of the third session, one per family who had attended all three sessions.

Three training sessions were conducted between February 1, 2014 and June 1, 2015 at each of eight locations. Lapses in time were due to scheduling issues. Sessions were also intentionally spaced to give participants enough time to process the information and prepare questions for the following sessions. A total of 123 parents started the training; however, a total of 107 families completed the program and submitted usable assessment questionnaires. To maintain participation, the researcher worked through partners to remind participants of upcoming trainings. This was done largely with phone calls and flyers. After each session at each site, up to six participants also took part in a focus group (total of 24 focus groups). In the focus groups, participants were asked to comment on their experience with the program content. Interpreters were available for participants who did not speak English as their native language.

Participants' knowledge about and engagement with education were measured at intake with a pretest and 11–12 months after intake with a posttest. Although some families had more than one family member participate, only one questionnaire per family was used for the study. The first few assessment items were read with participants to ensure the instructions were understood. The pre/posttest questionnaires were collected prior to the start of the first training and at the end of the last training; they were coded and set aside for analysis. Focus group data were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

JMP statistical software was used to analyze the data from the questionnaires. A Shapiro-Wilks test with  $p$ -value  $< .05$  was performed; thus non-parametric

statistics were used to analyze the data. Non-parametric tests can be as useful as parametric tests (Fagerland, 2012). The Shapiro-Wilks test was appropriate in the absence of a normal distribution because the design met the following criteria: differences were continuous, distribution of differences was symmetric, differences all had a mean, and differences were mutually independent. A one-way ANOVA using Wilcoxon and Kruskal-Wallis tests was used to analyze differences between groups, rank the differences in absolute value, and average to obtain a mean rank. Pre and post data were also analyzed using Fisher exact tests to determine relationships between location and participants' responses to specific survey items.

In addition to the pre/post data, data were also obtained from the focus groups held after each training session. Participants' comments were documented and analyzed using qualitative data reduction techniques to categorize and interpret the data to identify themes (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). A thematic approach was used to identify common, interesting, and unexpected responses. This approach is appropriate when analyzing perceptions, experiences, and feelings (Charmaz, 2006). Responses were sorted and axial coding was used to generate categories. A constant comparative analysis was used as a final review, and reanalysis of the categories and descriptive statements produced the following themes: increased knowledge, engagement, and concerns.

## Findings

The research data were analyzed to determine whether setting of the skills-based training intervention impacted parental involvement and if the skill-building intervention increased parents' capacity to support their children's learning. The results as measured by questionnaire responses indicated some differences by setting, and the focus group data revealed three themes: increased knowledge, enhanced involvement, and family concerns.

### Impact of Setting

The first research question asked: To what extent does setting impact parental involvement for parents of diverse students? Survey data indicated that 84% of the African American participants, representing 59% of the study's participants, attended the race-based or church-based programs, while 87% of the Latino participants attended the school-based trainings. Preprogram data analysis indicated a significant difference in assessment scores by location. Median assessment scores were different for participants surveyed in the community (27), schools (37), and churches (21). According to the Wilcoxon Rank Sum tests, the median assessment score differed significantly between community

and schools ( $p = .03$ ), and also between schools and churches ( $p > .05$ ). The mean score for participants in the school setting was 22.93 compared to the community mean of 14.78. There were notable differences from the Fisher's exact test indicating a strong relationship between location and participants' responses to Items 1 and 6: "I am a member of a decision-making group at my child's school," and "My child is interested in a career in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)." For Item 1, approximately 38% of participants attending the school location agreed or strongly agreed they were a member of a decision-making group at their child's school, when compared to approximately 10% of church participants that agreed or strongly agreed to the same statement. Approximately 15% of church participants strongly disagreed or disagreed with question number one. Median assessment pretest scores also differed ( $\chi^2 < .05$ ) on all items (1–13) between parents of children in gifted education (32) programs and other parents (22). Parents of gifted education students started the study with higher levels on involvement and knowledge overall.

Posttest data revealed no significant difference in assessment scores by location: community (25), school (30), and church (20). The Wilcoxon Rank Sums test revealed a difference in median assessment scores between church (16) and school (24). A significant relationship was found by location for Item 13: "I work with school personnel to make changes." Comparison of pre- and posttest data showed a decrease in assessment mean for each group: community (-2), school (-7), and church (-1). The largest decrease in mean scores was for the participants in the school setting. School setting participants' mean score was 37 in the pretest. For this item, the majority of church participants responded as neutral, whereas a majority of the participants attending the school and community locations agreed. Posttests also revealed differences between parents of gifted education students and parents of children with special needs ( $p = .03$ ). Parents of students with special needs students were more likely to disagree (18%) that they were working with school personnel to make change compared to 16% of parents of students participating in gifted education.

### Increased Knowledge

The second research question asked: To what extent can skill-building programs increase capacity to support learning? Qualitative data from focus groups revealed that, overall, families communicated increased knowledge after the intervention, although survey data suggested a slight decrease in post knowledge and involvement. Comments such as "great session" and "I learned so much" were written on 52% of surveys and expressed verbally in the focus groups. Parents felt they had not been informed previously about many things that

were happening in school. One commented, “We need someone to keep us informed; we don’t know anything.” The families expressed feeling overwhelmed before the training but hopeful after each session: “You provided concrete and specific ways to support our children in Common Core.”

When they learned the role strengths could play in their children’s education, participants were encouraged: “The strengths session gave me hope. I was feeling like all of these changes would be impossible.” Families thought teachers should have utilized the information on strengths in the classroom. Many shared that they had observed a lack of consideration for student strengths both at home and in school.

### **Enhanced Involvement**

Participants demonstrated enhanced involvement with their children’s education during implementation of the intervention. After each session, the researcher received emails (which were not a part of the original study design) with follow-up questions about communicating strengths in the Individualized Education Program (IEP), about resources, and about upcoming sessions. These emails indicate that families were thinking about how to use the information shared in the intervention. Many participants (43%) returned to each session with specific questions, having reviewed the Common Core standards and considered their children’s strengths. Questions such as “If something is looking as if it isn’t a strength, how do we know if they need more exposure to it or more support?” signaled to the researcher that the intervention had encouraged interaction with standards, promoted thought about how strengths may be used, encouraged family discussions about strengths and how to develop and use them, and encouraged visits to the classroom. One participant volunteered, “I said to myself, ‘Yes, I need to make time to visit the classroom. I need to pick up learning strategies.’”

### **Family Concerns**

Data from the focus groups revealed participants had more questions than answers about the new standards for California. Among the participants were four teachers; they too expressed confusion about the standards and the new expectations. Participants wanted to know what they could do to help at home with math and language arts. Although some participants had attended at least one district-sponsored CCSS session, they expressed frustration with the information shared there. One commented, “This session [that is, the intervention] provided more concrete information on how to support my child than the three sessions I have attended with the district.” When asked to elaborate, participants reported that the district provided information on processes used to

develop the CCSS and why it was good, but little information about student expectations and how families can support them. After the program parents felt empowered, as the following two examples of feedback illustrates: “We got our son [9th grade] started on studying prefixes.” “I am a teacher [of 25 years], and I have never [before] learned anything on differentiation.”

Participants expressed concern about the implementation of CCSS and worry about their children meeting the new expectations. One participant shared, “I have already seen the changes, and the expectations are ridiculous.” African American families (30% of participants) disproportionately shared more concerns about CCSS. More than a few participants stated that they noticed that students who were normally good students were struggling and receiving lower grades. Participants said that they did not know whether to blame the student, the teacher, or curriculum changes.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Research suggests that building academic engagement skills in parents can improve student outcomes (Harris, 2005; Kazdin, 1987). Parent trainings have been especially effective in reducing students’ antisocial behaviors and dropout rates and in improving attendance, reading proficiency, and the mental health of students (Lane et al., 2010). Historically, schools have not provided adequate parent training even though parent training has been shown to effectively address multiple risk factors and build links between home and school (Lane et al., 2010). This study’s findings that suggest a significant association between location of the training and parent participation offer a means of improving parent participation in school-provided training.

### **Setting**

When conducted in communities parents know and trust, trainings have natural supports for participating families (Latunde & Louque, 2016). The current study demonstrated that different ethnic or cultural groups may be comfortable in different settings. Latino families appear to prefer school- and community-based programs that are culturally competent (Purcell-Gates et al., 2014); the majority of Latino study participants utilized the school and community sites. Schools are especially good training sites for families of English language learners, who culturally tend to see educators as authorities on education (Aceves, 2014). African American families consider church a part of the village they depend on for information and support (Kunjufu, 2012; Kusimo & Trulear, 2000; Latunde & Louque, 2016); the majority of African American study participants utilized church and race-based organizational settings.



Unconscious ethnocentrism often leaves leaders confused about low participation in what appear to be helpful programs. Research on best practices for working with culturally and linguistically diverse families suggests that schools work with families to identify their values, priorities, and hopes for their children (Aceves, 2014; Alfaro et al., 2014). This research elicited such information from study participants, most likely due to the fact that it was conducted in specific community settings preferred by the intended participants.

For both Latino and African American families, trainings held in churches and race-based organizations offer additional benefits. They can be very effective in improving outcomes because of better access, convenient location, low cost, and hospitality (Green-Powell et al., 2011; Kusimo & Trulear, 2000; Louque & Latunde, 2014). Also, because religious activities are beneficial to at-risk youth (Fagan, 2006; Fulgham, 2013), churches are positioned to do more to intentionally offset the limited educational opportunities of African American and Latino youth (Fagan, 2006). Two areas of opportunity for school–church partnerships are summer and afterschool programs. Summer is an optimal time to provide families with trainings and build their skills to help their children with math and reading. If churches also provided educational programs for students during the summers and after school, they could positively impact K–12 education in their communities. A study of 30,000 U.S. families (1,500 African American) found that 24% of African American students utilized afterschool programs, but another 57% would use the services if they had access to them (Afterschool Alliance, 2014a). Provision of transportation is critical as many African American families not utilizing the services cited lack of a safe method for getting their children to the program as a top barrier (Afterschool Alliance, 2014b). Sadly, churches in the neediest communities often share the economic struggles of the communities, thus making it difficult for them to make positive change for the families they serve. They need the reciprocal support of schools and the larger community.

### **Family Knowledge and Engagement**

Although survey scores did not demonstrate significant change in families' knowledge about education or engagement in their children's education, qualitative results from the focus groups and unsolicited follow-up have important implications for educators. Participants reported they felt they had learned a great deal. They asked the trainers to give them more information that would help them provide more support to their children. These responses suggest that providing training in more culturally appropriate settings increases families' confidence in their ability to engage in their children's education and their initiative in doing so.

Participants also reported they learned information they had not received before, despite having attended previous trainings. This result, together with participants' perception of increased knowledge despite survey results to the contrary, suggests that families learned things they considered valuable to their children's education. Educators, especially educators from cultural backgrounds different from their students, may not realize how diverse families support their children's learning. Many African American and Latino families are engaged with their children's education and contribute to improved student outcomes in unique ways (Kunjufu, 2012; Latunde & Louque, 2016). Traditional parental involvement frameworks diminish these contributions. Schools must look for ways to build upon the engagement methods of African American and Latino families using evidenced-based best practices. Based on change theory, implementing such practices in conjunction with genuine valuing of diverse families results in positive student outcomes (Harris, 2005).

### **Families of Gifted and Special Needs Students**

The differences between parents of students in gifted education and other parents also has implications for educators. Parents of gifted students started the study with a higher overall mean for all items on the survey. For Item 13, parents of students in gifted education were more likely than parents of students with special needs to be working with school personnel to make changes. This difference makes sense because gifted education students are usually involved in accelerated school activities and exceed grade-level expectations; they are likely to be advanced in one or more academic areas. Gifted education students' parents tend to not only be more familiar with the general curriculum, but also to have greater knowledge of school expectations; thus they may be better able to support their children in exceeding grade-level expectations. Parents of children in gifted education are more likely to have researched programs, curriculum, and activities that challenge their students beyond the normal classroom offerings because their children may become easily bored (Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005).

Although the difference in knowledge (assessment mean scores) about the school between the two groups of parents may seem logical, it indicates a need educators must address. Parents of children with special needs may have specialized knowledge, but given that 80% of students with learning disabilities are served in the general education classroom (NCES, 2016), these parents may need more information on the general curriculum. They would benefit from exposure to the general curriculum expectations as well as information on modifications, learning strategies, parent engagement, and accommodations. The low participation of parents of children with disabilities in this study may also be indicative of increased responsibilities and a lack of time.

## Conclusion

The literature on family involvement in children's education demonstrates clearly that family engagement increases graduation rates and advanced placements and decreases unnecessary referrals to special education (Childs, 2009). Thus educators must seek to increase family involvement. Research, including this study, suggests that Latino families rely heavily on school and community resources, whereas African American families more frequently utilize churches and race-based organizations to enhance their engagement with education (Latunde & Louque, 2016).

Currently, however, there is little overlap of the home and school spheres for some African American and Latino families. Developing collaborative partnerships with churches and community-based organizations makes sense. School personnel are experts on the curriculum and school expectations, but they often lack access to as well as the trust of their students' families. Community-based organizations can often provide the access and trust, but they do not have information on school standards, assessments, and policies. In order to form partnerships, school leaders need to see the value in the partnerships, be effective communicators, have clear objectives, and increase their cultural competency (Harry & Klingner, 2005; Louque & Latunde, 2015).

In light of the persistent education debt of many students, society owes it to African American and Latino families to learn what works best for them and implement it. Anything that can be done to support and build upon the existing engagement of families of diverse students will ultimately benefit K–12 schools and students' respective communities. This study demonstrates that it is not always what programs schools offer that matter, but how and where the programs are offered.

## Limitations of the Study and Future Directions

An obvious limitation of this study was the lack of a normal distribution. To offset this lack, non-parametric tests were used and found to be helpful in examining the behaviors and knowledge of families. Some items lacked posttest data because 16 (of the 123) participants did not complete the program. In this study, the attrition rate was 15%. Interventions that work occur over a period of time, but the year-long time frame of this study resulted in a loss of participants. Demographic information was missing for eight participants. Participants may not have felt comfortable answering questions about age and income even though the information was confidential. Historically, underserved groups have been forced to share sensitive information before receiving critical services, and thus they may feel very strongly about keeping

information confidential. Relationship building, trust, and ethical behavior are essential in making partnerships work, and good partnerships require both time and invitations from insiders.

The literature on the effects of parent training on student outcomes is mixed. This study assumed that when families were given information, student outcomes would improve. The results of this study could not confirm or refute that assumption because student data was not collected. Opportunities for active practice of skills and giving immediate feedback were limited in the program design. The training might have benefited from inclusion of opportunities for families to use the information gained to brainstorm solutions and provide feedback (Senechal, 2006). Qualitative data did suggest the intervention increased participants' knowledge; however, the data do not show how the students were affected by the intervention. Although median scores between parents of children with disabilities and other parents differed, the number of participating parents with children with disabilities ( $n = 8$ ) was too small to allow any conclusions.

The purpose of the study was to explore the impact of training setting on involvement. Future research should examine the effects of interventions in different settings on student outcomes. Both qualitative and quantitative studies could observe the impact of parent training on parental behaviors and on student learning by directly assessing students. A longitudinal study may reveal the impact of increased knowledge and skills on behaviors over time. The intervention in this study focused on reading and writing; other interventions might examine the effect of parent training on other academic subjects. Future studies could directly monitor students and their families over time to see if (a) families' knowledge increases, (b) family behaviors change, and (c) family and student changes impact student learning. More research is also needed on the significance of the setting of the intervention on its effectiveness.

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