The Predictability Between Demographic and Institutional Variables of Texas High School Principals and Their Attitudes Towards Parental Involvement

Michael D. Milstead
Lamar Consolidated Independent School District

Nicole Walters
University of St. Thomas

Lillian Poats
Texas Southern University

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Over the past decades, the public school enterprise has been saturated with a myriad of social, political and academic ills. Problems such as reductions in state and federal funding, double digit percent student drop-outs, misidentification of students with learning disabilities, insufficient development of language skills in limited or non-English speaking students, shortage of highly qualified classroom teachers, unsafe schools, and students lacking college readiness are a few barriers to a student's success in school. Perhaps the most disturbing of these issues, however, is the high percentage of students from low income households who are not meeting academic standards on statewide assessments. According to the Southern Education Foundation (2015), approximately 51% of all students attending American public schools live in poverty. Research suggests that a large number of these students are ethnic minorities (De Fraga & Oliveira, 2010). Inasmuch, as these nuisances weigh heavily upon our educational system, it is a widely held belief that parental involvement is a reliable predictor of a student's academic success in school.

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2002* was passed by the U. S. Congress to establish a national education system that would address high academic attainments for all, regardless of race, gender and social economic status. This law provided a set of accountability measures and expectations to enhance student achievement (Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005).

Included in the *No Child Left Behind Act* was the practice of schools engaging parents in their children's education. The architects of this bill were undoubtedly clear in their belief that regardless of income or background parent involvement in education is crucial to a child's success in school.

The major focus of *No Child Left Behind* was to close the student achievement gap by providing all children with a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. In addition, the *Act* required each individual state to develop its own assessment and accountability plan. To receive federal school funding, states would have to administer these assessments to all students at select grade levels. The U.S. Department of Education (2002) emphasizes four pillars within the bill:

38

- Accountability: Ensured that those students who are disadvantaged can achieve academic proficiency.
- Flexibility: Allowed school districts flexibility in how they use federal education funds to improve student achievement.
- Research-based education: Emphasized educational programs and practices that were proven effective through scientific research.
- Parent options: Increased the choices available to the parents of students attending Title I schools. (www.K12.wa.us/ESEA/NCLB.aspx)

Under *NCLB*, schools that received federal funding through Title I were required to implement a parental involvement component in their current year's school plans and goals. Although much was stated in the law regarding the school's duty towards parental involvement at the elementary level, only assumptions could be made that the same would be required in secondary schools. According to Epstein (2001) parents tend to be less involved with their children during secondary school years than they are during elementary school. Crozier & Davis (2007) explained that the reason why parents are less involved during children's secondary level schooling is "possibly because most middle schools are relatively large and located at some distance from the neighborhood they serve" (p. 121). Additionally, Landreth and & Bratton (2006) found that both student's stage of development and growing interest in peers and others outside the family may lead to the low involvement of parents at the secondary level. Moreover, the lack of a planned approach to continue parents' involvement in secondary school activities and academics may aid in lowering the participation of parents in their children's academic and social life at school. Seminal research suggests that parental involvement actually declines as students grow older, so that by the time a child reaches secondary school, fewer parents remain active in the educational process (Epstein, 1995).). Flaxman & Inger (1992) acknowledge that parent involvement at all grade levels is important. "The benefits of parent involvement are not confined to early childhood or the elementary grades. There are strong positive effects from involving parents continuously through high school" (p.5), not only for enhancing the educational success of high school students but also because a number of social changes are occurring. The importance of parental involvement in adolescents' education has been identified repeatedly as a critical factor (Jeynes, 2007). For example, Engle (1989) concluded in his study of over 11,000 students that those who had engaged parents that were in involved in their secondary academic achievement and progress had a greater percentage of completing college.

On July 24, 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan introduced a milestone program entitled *Race to the Top*, a $4.35 billion fund, that could be used by states who can—if they want—submit applications and propose innovative programs for K-12 public schools. The goal was simple: make a difference in the future of America's education with creative and forward thinking programs which can impact all students and school communities. This in turn would provide the necessary focus of improving schools, supporting innovative teacher training, and development and increase student achievement. The program was funded by the *United States Department of Education Recovery Act* as part of the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009*. *Race to the Top* mandated that states be awarded points for satisfying certain educational policies, such as performance-based standards for teachers and principals, complying with *Common Core* standards, lifting caps on charter schools, improving the lowest performing schools, and building data systems. Many states competed to win these

39

grants; however, in 2010, only twelve entities were awarded the *Race to the Top* grant funding for a total of $4 billion to be spent in four years. Although the aim of the program was based on a philosophy of increasing the educational capacity of all students, it has not been widely accepted by all in the field of education, including some politicians, teachers' unions, policy analysts and school leaders. Critics say that high stakes testing is unreliable; charter schools weaken public education and that the federal government should not influence local schools (U. S. Dept. of Education, 2002). In explaining why Texas did not apply for the *Race to the Top* funding, former Governor Rick Perry did not feel that Texas should compete for the federal monies due to his belief that the Obama administration's plan was an unacceptable practice, limiting individual state control over education (Rapoport, 2010). *The Austin American Statesman* (2011) further reported that according to the National Education Association, the State of Texas ranked 44th in per student education expenditures (Selby, 2013). To further his commitment of enhanced avenues of education for all American school students, in 2014 President Obama created and expanded ladders of opportunity for boys and young men of color through *the My Brother's Keeper Initiative*. This effort was created to improve the educational and life expectancy outcomes in order to address the persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color (http:/www.whithouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper). Finally, the most recent referendum passed with the *No Child Left Behind* was replaced in 2015 with the *Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. *ESSA* returned legislative decision making back to states and challenges them with new accountability measures to rethink how they are supporting students and schools.

On June 15, 2017, the 85th Texas Legislature passed *House Bill (HB) 22*. Labelled *A-F Accountability Rating System*, this legislation established three domains for measuring schools and districts students' academic performance on high stakes testing. The three areas in which the exams will be constructed are Student Achievement (college career and military readiness and graduation rates); Student Progress (student growth and relative performance) and Closing the Achievement Gap (Educational Equity). Student scores from these three domains will be combined per campus to compute a score ranging from 0-100. Schools and districts will receive a letter grade of A (90-100), B (80-89), C (70-79), D (60-69), or F0-59). Embedded in the examination instrument is the District Level Poverty Analysis which is a correlation between the rate of students eligible for free and reduced lunch and the district's overall A-F Rating. The new rating system is aligned with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's projection that by 2030 at least 60% of Texans ages 25-34 will have a certificate or degree. This rating system will officially begin for Texas campuses during the 2018-19 school year.

As researchers, educators, and practitioners continue to explore avenues to improve students' education, the consensus is that not only do parents need to be involved in the schools, but partnerships with the community are also effective measures at furthering the home school connection. School Partnerships has been widely used to describe the interactions of parents, community members, local businesses, community leaders, government officials, and civic organizations' involvement with schools and the continued education of students (Barge & Loges, 2003). Rogers (2006) further posits that educators, administrators, parents, community members, community leaders, and social service providers are responsible for also ensuring the best possible education for students who will be the foundation of society in the future. Lately, educators are hearing more about full-service community schools, which pair schools with other

40

community resources in pursuit of the long-term goal of improving students' academic performance. The concept that schools should support the social, physical, and economic needs of children and families is nothing new and has been referred by progressive educators as the schools being the "center." (Dewey, 1902).

Bagin and Gallagher (2008) suggest that parents, educators, and community members can create workable partnerships by supporting each other in their respective roles, maintaining open communication, participating in shared decision- making processes, and implementing collaborative and authentic activities for the students. Educators need to explore partnership possibilities for enhancing educational successes that educators aspire to accomplish (Flaxman & Inger 1992).

Accordingly, the role of the principal is crucial to the successful development and implementation of an effective parental involvement program. Administrators must consider ways to promote parent activity in the school community (Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988). The leadership of the principal sets the tone for the culture and climate of the campus. Therefore, to aid in implementing more effective parental development programs, building principals must establish a welcoming climate that is built on a foundation of open communication, support and trust to all parents, regardless of their socioeconomic status, race, gender, culture or language. Theoharis (2009) identified "creating a climate of belonging" as one of the seven keys of social justice leadership, as well as promoting a welcoming climate and intentionally reaching out to marginalized families. Principals should facilitate a family-friendly school climate, address barriers to participation, take part in action teams for planning, allocate resources for partnerships, and organize staff development on family engagement (Richardson, 2009). Hence, if building principals desire parent participation in their children's education, the principal must illustrate a model of what parent involvement should look like in the school. There are many ways in which the principal can involve parents, such as, supporting family involvement as an integral and funded part of the school's service at all levels, providing teachers with training and information to help them find ways to coordinate teacher-school schedules to work schedules of today's families, and emphasizing the early prevention of learning problems (Khan, 2004).

Not only is the role of the principal important in cultivating and creating a viable, visible and sustainable parental engagement program at the secondary level, the types of perceptions that principals hold towards this phenomenon is just as crucial. Research regarding the perceptions of principals towards parental involvement is limited when compared with studies of the perceptions of teachers and parents. An even greater dilemma regarding the perceptions of principals towards parental involvement is the lack of research on the effects of demographic and institutional factors on their perceptions. Studies reveal that gender and years of experience have no influence on principals' perceptions toward parental involvement (Batista, 2009). However, the variables, age and race have had a significant effect on principals' perceptions regarding parental involvement (Richardson, 2009 and Batista, 2009).

This study was designed to explore the predictability of selected demographic and institutional characteristics associated with high school principals on their perceptions regarding parental involvement. Specifically, this study sought to understand the relationship among the demographic and institutional characteristics of gender, ethnicity, years of experience, school

41

location, school size, the school accountability rating, and the perceptions of high school principals regarding determined aspects of parental involvement.

Methodology

The target population of this study consisted of over 5500 high school principals who are members of the Texas Association of Secondary School Principals (TASSP). These principals are the chief administrative officers of their campuses and represent four geographical regions in the state. They are the High Plains region (Texas Panhandle), Mountains and Basins region (Western edge of the state), North Central Plains region (East of the High Plains) and the Gulf Coast Plains region (Borders Mexico and Louisiana).

TASSP is an organization that focuses on assessing various practices in school administration for the purpose of enhancing student learning. Also, it provides principals with a public forum to build an active network of educators who are responsible for the quality of school leadership. Moreover, TASSP provides school principals with current training in administration to assist them in solving problems in their schools. The organization helps school principals to develop a keen awareness of critical issues facing educational leadership as well as to develop and implement strategies to improve relationships among all stakeholders of the public school enterprise.

The random sample consisted of 204 high school principals who participated in this study. Thirty-nine (39%) of the principals were at schools with over 1500 students, while fifty-five (55%) of their schools were rated as *"Academically Acceptable"*. A large percentage of the principals (69%) indicated their schools were in urban settings. Tables 1-3 indicate the principal's gender, years of experience, and ethnicity

Table 1
Principals by Gender

Male	62.7%
Female	37.3%

Table 2
Principals by Years of Experience

Five Years >	78%
Six to Ten Years	34.3%
Eleven to Nineteen Years	18.1%
Over Nineteen Years	9.3%

42

Table 3
Principals by Ethnicity

White	48.5%
African American	27.5%
Hispanic	17.6%
Other	6.4%

For the purposes of this study, a self-identified survey, *Parent Involvement: Perspectives of Texas Public High School Principals* was sent to the participants and consisted of two major sections. The aspects of parental involvement, which were measured, includes formal and informal communication, environmental and external factors, student learning and academic success, and school and home collaboration

Findings and Discussion

One of the most pertinent findings of the present study was the significant impact of the variables gender, ethnicity and years of experience on the perceptions of high school principals regarding the various aspects of parental involvement. High school principals' gender, ethnicity and years of experience combined were found to be related to their perceptions regarding parental involvement. Batista (2009) conducted a similar empirical investigation with Pennysvlania High School principals. These findings are not consistent with those of Batista (2009). Batista found that attitudes of high school principals toward parental involvement were not related to the principals' gender and years of experience.

On the other hand, as a group, when the demographic characteristics of the principals were controlled, the findings of Batista (2009), Richardson (2009) and Burge and Loges (2003) were consistent with those of the present study. In all the above studies, secondary principals' perceptions are favorable to parental involvement, particularly in the area of student learning and achievement and communication and collaborating.

Batista found that all the principals surveyed agreed that creating a partnership between the parents and school had a positive impact on students' grades. All the principals in Batista's study supported collaboration and communication with parents. However, an overwhelming majority of the principals did not support parental involvement in terms of the school budgetary process, hiring practices, and curriculum issues. Batista's findings were supported by Richardson (2009) and Burge and Loges (2003).

In this study, the ethnicity and school experiences of the principals parallel those of the parents with regard to parental involvement in the school and made an impact but the literature regarding this is limited. Abdul-Adil and Farmer (2006) found that very few studies have been done on the parental involvement of African- American parents as it relates to the experiences with school leaders of the same ethnic background. There is literature that does support how teachers who have a different ethnic background than the parents relate to them and their

43

children. Henfield and Washington (2012) shared how African American parents are perceived by White teachers and the implications it raises within the home-school connection. Finally, Hong and Ho (2005) and Yan and Lin (2005) found that White, Asian, and Hispanic parents are more involved in school activities, specifically in the areas of student learning and communication.

The present study also found an influence of institutional factors on the perceptions of high school principals on the various aspects of parental involvement. A positive correlation was found between school location, school size, school accountability rating and formal and informal communication as well as environmental and external factors. A significant linear relationship was found between school location, school size, school accountability rating and formal and informal communication as well as environmental and external factors. However, a linear relationship was not found between the three aforementioned predictors and student learning and academic success nor school and home collaboration.

The current findings did not parallel those of Batista (2009). In Batista's study of secondary principals, he found that school location and school size were not significantly related to their perceptions regarding parental involvement. Additionally, the present findings are favorable to those of Batista (2009) and Richardson (2009) when principals as a group were surveyed. Both of the above researchers found that secondary principals had favorable perceptions toward various aspects of parental involvement. An explanation for the current findings might be that principals' institutional characteristics are significant factors in how they perceive parental involvement.

The research involving parental involvement and its impact on student success consistently suggests that when parents are involved in their child's education, students perform better in school. In this era of high stakes testing across all school levels in the United States, parent involvement can play an important role in students' academic success. The principal, as the most important person in the school, has the responsibility to pursue every possibility of fostering high educational achievement for all students. Establishing open and transparent communication as well as promoting school environments that are welcoming and non-threating are just a few initiatives that principals can take to include parents in schools. Armed with this information, it is apparent that schools and students benefit greatly when principals lead the effort to develop innovative and creative avenues of involving parents in their child's education.

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45

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46