Motivations of Parental Involvement in Children's Learning:
Voices from Urban African American Families of Preschoolers

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Introduction

Importance of Parental Involvement

A growing body of research supports the view that parents' attitudes, behaviors, and activities related to children's education influences students' learning and educational success. Specifically, many studies have indicated strong positive correlations between parental involvement in their child's learning and academic achievement, better behaviors, accountability, social skills, and attendance (Billman, Geddes, & Hedges, 2005; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Craft, 2003; Jeynes, 2005; Overstreet, Devine, Bevins & Efreom, 2005).

Additionally, Jeynes (2005) found that the positive correlation was stable across racial groups and gender. At the preschool level, several studies show long-term benefits of parental involvement, such as children being retained in grades less frequently and demonstrating greater reading improvement (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). Furthermore, parents also gained from their involvement. Their understanding and interaction with their children were improved as they became involved in the children's education (Castro et al.). Therefore, parental involvement creates a win-win situation for parents and their children.

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While parental involvement appears to be beneficial to parents and children, other research indicates that African American parents are often uninvolved in urban school settings (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Smith, Krohn, Chu, & Best, 2005). Abrams and Gibbs (2002) found that African American parents are more alienated from public school institutions than are White American parents. Although "moments of inclusion" occur when African American parents are encouraged to participate in school activities such as parent/teacher conferences and athletic events, interaction with African American parents often does not occur outside of these traditional invitations. Gardner and Miranda (2001) have contended that this gap between schools and parents prevents the two parties from understanding the requirements and expectations of the two environments, home and school, where the students must function.

Some research has stated that urban, African American parents' low involvement in their children's education has contributed to their children's lower academic achievement (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Roth & McCaul, 1993). African American children in urban schools tend to have lower reading achievement and often do not learn to read at levels comparable to their suburban, middle-class peers (Bartoli, 1996; Compton-Lilly, 2000). Additionally, society and the media often blame urban lower income African American families for their children's academic difficulties. A deficit perspective is taken that portrays these families as low achieving, lacking literacy, uninvolved, uninterested, and not valuing and encouraging their children's educational success (Compton-Lilly; Purcell-Gates, 1996).

In contrast, other studies challenge the negative images portrayed about African American, urban families' levels of parental involvement (Compton-Lilly, 2000; Nieto, 1996; Purcell-Gates, 1996). Some researchers (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Troutman, 2001) have found that African American parents value the educational success of their children. Several studies indicated that even parents who have little knowledge of school programs show interest in their child's schooling and learning how to help them at home (Nistler & Maiers, 1999; Smith, Krohn, Chu, & Best, 2005).

Furthermore, Nieto and Compton-Lilly identified many ways in which urban parents support their children in their schooling. They find that urban parents value children's education, care about their children's success in learning to read, actively seek ways to support their children, help their children to maneuver the challenges that lie ahead, and set high expectations for their children. Urban African American parents were recognized "players" in narrowing the achievement gap associated with their children.

Family Education Programs: Fostering Parental Involvement

Epstein (2001) developed a framework of six types of parental involvement which includes parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community. Within this framework, effective parental involvement practices are suggested to engage parents in children's learning. Examples of practices include family education pro-

grams, home visits, classroom volunteer programs, PTO/PTA involvement, and conferences. Among these practices, family education programs are widely used to encourage parental involvement in their children's learning (Brophy-Herb, Lee, Nievar, & Stollak, 2007; Cooke, 2006; Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Reglin, 2002; Green, Everhart, Gordon, & Gettman, 2006).

Kagan, Powell, Weissbourd, and Zigler (1987) indicated families who participate in their children's education prefer family education programs because of the tangible services offered (such as materials, respite child care), and the opportunities to meet and share with other families. Additionally, these programs allow parents to realize that they are not alone in having certain issues, and peer support provides them with opportunities to give as well as receive assistance (Zigler & Weiss, 1985). However, families vary tremendously in their structures, needs, and resources (Kagan et al.). These differences can also affect the way they participate and their perception of what constitutes a good program. Nistler and Maiers (1991) suggested that many programs developed for urban families are criticized and evaluated as being ineffective because of the low parent participation and their possible disinterest in helping their children. Therefore, understanding urban parents' need to be involved is essential.

To date, research studying parental involvement in their children's schooling included elementary through middle school aged populations (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2004; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Ritblatt, Beatty, Gronan, & Ochoa, 2002). There have been a few studies that explored parental involvement of preschoolers (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999; Fogle & Mendez, 2006; Reynolds, Ou, & Topitzes, 2004; Starkey & Klein, 2000). Yet relatively few studies have investigated the African American parents' motivation for involvement in their young children's education. This research intends to fill this gap. It explores parents' motivation to be involved in a family education program, and examines their views about their children's education. Because of the significance of parental involvement, it underscores the importance of continued attention to more research in this area and careful delineation of conceptual and theoretical foundations to inform educational practice (Hoover-Dempsey et al.). This research draws upon theory to support the findings. Recommendations are provided to further program effectiveness and practice, as well as encourage parental involvement, inform program development and strategic planning.

Methodology

The focus group is the method used in this study. It is a form of group interview guided by a skilled interviewer who facilitates a discussion on a particular topic among a selected set of people (Call & Borg, 2005; Glesne, 2006). The benefits of focus group research include gaining insights into people's shared understandings of everyday life and the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in a group situation (Kreuger, 1988). Within the dialogue, the participants can talk and listen to each other, and they are more likely to express feelings or opinions that might not emerge if they were interviewed individually. Two central questions guided the focus group:

1. What brought you to become involved in the Project LEAPS family literacy program?

2. What is your view regarding your children's education?

Participants

Participants consisted of parents of preschool children attending Head Start Programs in a large, mid-western urban city who participated in a federal funded project called Project LEAPS (Literacy Enrichment and Achievement for Preschool Success). Project LEAPS was a program designed to prepare preschool children to enter kindergarten with the language, cognitive, and early reading skills necessary for reading success. There were three components to this program— high quality literacy instruction (professional development), a print-rich and language-rich classroom environment (literacy environment), and supporting family literacy in the home (family literacy).

The family literacy program was a voluntary program and families could choose their level of involvement. In this program, families were offered regular family literacy workshops, on-site family literacy library, one-on-one support from family literacy specialists, and family literacy material packages. Participants chosen in this study were individuals who had full attendance in the family literacy workshops, received all the family literacy packages, and had taken advantage of the one-on-one support from the family literacy specialists.

Fifteen parents were invited and agreed to participate; however, four parents showed up for the focus group. McCracken (1988) explained that for qualitative methods the researcher should select a small sample, preferably fewer than eight participants. Neither the participants' real names nor any identifying information that could be used to locate has been used in the study.

At the time of the focus interview, all of the parents had either one or two children enrolled in Head Start Programs. Their experiences with the Head Start programs ranged from six months to a year and a half. Three out of four participants were women. Three participants graduated from high school and one obtained an associate degree. Their income level ranged from $16,600 to $30,200. They all lived in inner city neighborhoods with high crime rates. Participants' information is shown in Table 1.

Procedure

The focus group interview was semi-structured, purposeful, and focused to provide opportunities for information to emerge somewhat spontaneously from each participant. This allowed participants to talk in depth and elaborate on their views and experiences. Becker and Geer (1982) indicated that the more unstructured the interview, the more likely the researcher would obtain unexpected data. The interview was audiotaped and

Table 1: Participants' Information						
Name/ Sex	Children #/ Age	Age Range	Education Level	Income	Occupation	Marriage Situation
Felicia (F)	2 girls age 3 & 4	30-35	High School	16,600-20,000]	Homemaker	2nd Marriage
Regina (F)	4 children one on way ages 3-8	30-35	Assoc. Degree	26,800-30,200	Administrative Assistant	Married
Alyssa (F)	2 girls 1 mo. & 3	20-25	High School	16,600-20,000	Waitress	Unmarried
Gerry (M)	2 girls 1 mo. & 3	20-25	High School	16,600-20,000	Factory Worker	Unmarried

transcribed. The interview lasted for three and a half hours in length, and preliminary analysis of the transcript occurred as soon as it was completed.

In addition, the interviewer maintained an entry log of her opinions, reactions, and impression to reduce bias and prejudice in the data analysis (Bogan & Bilken, 2007). Reviewing and reflecting on the fieldnotes helped the interviewer set aside her bias and assumptions as much as possible, given the nature of qualitative research (Bogan & Bilken). Furthermore, the family literacy educators reviewed the transcripts, and provided a thick description of their observations of the interview process in order to increase the validity of the study (Bogan & Bilken).

Data Analysis

Guided by Patton's (2002) qualitative inquiry, researchers transcribed, coded notes, classified the coding, and identified the primary patterns in the data. In the first level of content analysis, both researchers independently analyzed the transcripts. The researchers met to compare and discuss the similarities and differences. Next, specific codes that closely matched the participants' words were developed. Some of the codes were building relationships, educational opportunities, competency building, time constraints, sacrifices, obstacles and challenges to education, environmental challenges, and advocating for effective education. Codes were then classified according to their commonalities, and similar codes were combined or refined in order to better manage the data. Through content analysis, the themes emerged. Finally, motivational theories were explored to provide a theoretical framework to support the findings (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Maslow, 1954; McClelland, 1987; Vroom, 1954). After reviewing the various motivational theories, the researchers used McClelland's (1987) theory to support the study as the three factors of intrinsic motivation are applicable and relevant when studying human behavior (Wong & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). The quotations presented were extracted from the transcript to assist readers in making decisions regarding the transferability of the results to other situations or populations (Patton).

Results

Parents' motivations to be involved in their children's learning evolved in three themes: (a) parents need to develop relationships; (b) parents need to influence their children's learning; and (c) educa-

tion is the key for children to achieve success.

Three types of motivational needs are depicted: (a) the need for affiliation (nAff), (b) the need for power (nPower), and (c) the need for achievement (nAch) (McClelland, 1987). According to McClelland, people have either one of these needs or a combination of these three needs, which motivate them toward a certain pattern of behavior.

Thus, in the following section, the participants' experiences are described in the context of their motivational need to be involved in their children's learning.

Affiliation: Developing Relationships

Affiliation with family literacy educators. Developing a relationship with the trainers in the family literacy workshop was important for all participants in this study. They expressed the need to build one-on-one relationships, and a desire to receive personal attention from the family literacy educator. This individualized attention helped parents gain valuable information regarding the program as well as the goals of the program. Regina stated,

> What really caught my attention what really made me want to attend was that Sue [family literacy educator]... I used to get phone calls from Sue...She talked to me about the program she talked to me one on one... Everyone loves that one-on-one time. She said you know we can get your kids reading hopefully before they leave Head Start. And I said reading, I mean reading.

Affiliation with the trainers in a variety of forms was also prevalent among all of participants interviewed.

Parents appreciated trainers' flexibility in working with them through various formats. For example, as a part of this family literacy program, trainers conducted home visits where they provided one-on-one interaction with the family. Based on parents' needs and their comfort level, the educators met with the family in a variety of ways beyond the home setting. To these parents, accommodation was an important aspect when considering participating in the program. Felicia appreciated the trainer's flexibility in respecting her time and needs by breaking from conventional contact visits at home to other communicating means.

> I have never actually had a home visit. Sam (the trainer) and I sat and talked in the lobby... I didn't even realize that that was what she was doing [interviewing] because it was so laid back. It caught my attention that she was asking me the questions which were key questions...So

as far as an actual home visit, it doesn't work for me because I am rarely at home, at the school, or at Janin's school... As far as it comes to home visit, I am better off doing it at school. The best way for me would be through email because I am always on the computer if I am at home.

Of greater importance was that the trainers were interested in fostering a relationship with the parents to help them feel connected to the program as well as building a relationship that is built upon respect for parents lifestyle needs.

Affiliation with other parents. The family literacy program provided an avenue for parents to develop relationships with other parents. In a variety of ways, parents were motivated to establish close relations with other parents who shared similar backgrounds and experiences. For example, through the family literacy workshops, parents interacted and learned from each other. Felicia explained,

> It [program] gives me opportunity to interact with adults. It gives me a chance to learn some things from Regina that I don't get to talk to her during the day or from Alyssa who I really never got a chance to meet and see some of the things she did ... It gives a chance to learn from one another. It's like a fellowship. I mean we don't like to attend church a lot. What people do in church is also called fellowship when we just get together and spend time with one another. To me, it [LEAPS] feels like a fellowship.

Felicia used the word "fellowship" to describe the workshop activities and parents' relationship. Just as in church, she felt connected and supported from people in the program. To her, affiliating with other parents helped enhance her learning in the workshop. Additionally, working with others in the program helped these parents to be an active participant and expand their horizon in their learning. Regina stated,

> Working together on our different projects made you come out of your shell a little bit. [pause] For some people, it takes you out of your comfort zone. But at the same time, you see someone else come out of their [shell] so you kind of help them.

Power: Influencing Children's Learning

Competency building: Parents' learning. Participants in this study demonstrated a strong need to exert influence over their children's learning. Parents were motivated to empower themselves with knowledge (competency building), and enhance their children's learning. They most wanted to work with their children; however, they indicated they lacked family

literacy strategies to do so. This was one of the primary reasons they participated in the family literacy program.

Regina explained, "I just really wanted to look into it [family literacy program] and see what I can do on my end on how I can help my kids to learn." Alyssa elaborated further, "Mike has been learning different things and I don't know how to go about teaching, you know, the dialogue thing. The fundate [the name of the family literacy workshops] helped me learn how to help him."

Additionally, the program helped build parents' repertoire of skills and knowledge in family literacy as they became more confident in working with their children at home. For example, Felicia stated, "It [family literacy workshop] empowers you because it makes you feel like, oh yeah, I've already been doing this. So I can really keep doing it. I won't feel like I'm not teaching my children anything."

Influencing learning: Children's learning. Empowered with new family literacy skills and knowledge, parents were motivated to exert influence on children's literacy learning by incorporating what they learned into their daily routine. Regina described her experiences of applying the knowledge she learned to work with her children at home.

> Every time we had a fundate that you know, that week or the next few days or so, I would practice what we learned. I would try to keep that concept in front of me. For example, oral language is the subject, I would be like what can I do, what kind of oral language can I use or work on. Or the story telling. I really didn't think that that was going to go over well, cause my kids are too active to sit down. But it actually went well. I guess you got to try things, you know. We are going to do the story telling and felt boards and stuff like that, the stuff you guys just gave me and also the books [family literacy package]. I like opening them and start reading them, even the one that was a little bit advanced. I just took advantage of what I have learned and what was given and make good use of it.

At each family literacy workshop, every participating family would receive a family literacy package. The package included educational materials that directly related to what they had just learned at the workshop. Therefore, parents could practice and implement the strategies at home. Furthermore, parents indicated that they could see the impact of the strategy after their implementation. It was an empowering experience for parents to go through the process of learning, application, and perceiving the result. In the following

excerpt, Felicia stated how the family literacy strategies she learned infused into her family daily life.

> Instead of me just going in the kitchen cooking, I'll bring them in with me and say you tell me what comes next or if I skip a step, like French toast every Saturday-that's what we have every Saturday. So I line up the ingredients and we made up an acronym called MESS C.—Milk, eggs, sugar, salt, and cinnamon. And so I put it in order or I'll mix it up and they have to figure out what is wrong.

Learning from the family literacy workshop, Felicia involved her children in the daily cooking which transformed into a literacy learning experience for her children. This activity enhanced children's literacy skills in thinking, oral language, categorizing, and sequencing the cooking procedure. Furthermore, Alyssa attended a storytelling family literacy workshop learning various ways to create great storytelling learning experiences for children. Alyssa used the family literacy package given- storytelling felt board to enrich her child's learning at home. She described her experience,

> The felt board, she gets a kick out of being able to put the things up there. It helped her with her colors. We had to go out and get more of those things to put on there. That was something we could do together... she pays attention more when she's helping and included, than me just doing it. Including her is something I've learned to do.

In addition to the materials provided in the family literacy package, Alyssa went a step further and purchased additional supplies in order to reinforce her children's literacy learning. She was motivated to actively exert influence on her child's learning beyond what the program had offered.

Exerting Influence by Selecting Appropriate Environments. Parents also indicated their motivation to select the appropriate environment for their children. For instance, in the family literacy workshop, "Many Pathways to Literacy," it focused on how learning takes place everywhere including home, school, and community. Parents shared their experiences regarding their concern over environmental influences on their children's learning. Regina spoke about the home environment.

> I have a challenge in my home. I have a challenge with my husband and his rap music. We just went out of town and I had to listen to Boyz in the Hood. And I don't listen to that kind of music. We were raised with the same type of family values but every body has to become an adult and make their own decisions. I've

told him time and time again, this is not the kind of music I want our kids to listen to. This is not the kind of language I want around our kids.

Felicia voiced her concern over the people who interacted with her children.

> There are certain places I can't take them. Someone may say "shut up"... So we have to really monitor where we send our children. People do offer to baby-sit but what are you going to do with my babies? My babies like to be read to, they like to write, they like to role play. In the morning, they like to play dentist when they're doing their teeth brushing. And they want to pretend like they have a cavity. So every morning it's like "Good morning, miss dentist. How are you?" They're not going to get that everywhere.

Felicia also talked about her daughter's school environment.

> The things that they played at the school carnival… The music was fine for me as a 30-year-old woman, but not for a 5-year-old child…I had to go to the principal and said that you can not play this type of music, please. My three-year-old said, "Oh Mommy, that's inappropriate. I don't want to listen to this"… And some of the things in the classrooms [pause] I heard that one of the teachers had rock pop radio station on in the classroom all day.

In sum, parents entered the family literacy program with a base knowledge of methods to enhance their children's literacy skills and provide appropriate environments for children's learning. However, the program expanded these parents' family literacy knowledge and skills. Consequently, parents were empowered with new ways of supporting and influencing their children's learning.

Achievement: Education is the Key for Children to Achieve Success

Regarding parents' views about their children's education, they indicated that their children were not born into a legacy of success. However, they believed that through education, their children would have the opportunity to build their own legacy. McClelland (1987) stated that individuals with a high need for achievement like situations in which they take personal responsibility for finding solutions to problems. Similarly, these parents strive to be involved in their children's education and make things better for them. By attending the family literacy workshops and learning various methods, they believed that their children's educational attainment can be increased.

These parents were motivated to find

educational opportunities to help children achieve successfully through several means, such as seeking out supplemental educational resources, evaluating school curriculum, and searching schools for quality education. They believed education as means for their children's success. Felicia noted,

> Some people were born into a legacy of being successful. They can go on to be council persons or president just because of the family into which they were born. And you know, that's not representative of my community. But I do want at least, I want them to know it's [the opportunity] available to them and it's available through education. … I want for them [children] something different or at least the opportunity for something different. If they want to be a guitarist, fine, but I want them to have that education there.

Felicia took an active role in seeking opportunities and information that would enhance her children's learning, such as additional educational resources and attended to the school curriculum.

> I went on the internet and looked up what children are supposed to know by first grade. I did it on my own… I would ask the teacher: "Are you going to cover this?" and she was honest. She was like "No, it is not in my curriculum. If you give me the information I'll work it into one of our centers." "The squeaky wheel gets the oil."

All parents in this study expressed concerns over the quality of public school system in the city. They indicated that their children's educational opportunities and achievement were shadowed by the downward trend in the public educational system. They voiced a lack of faith and confidence in the educational system because the system had failed – failed to keep quality teachers, failed to help students pass proficiency tests, failed to set high academic expectation for students, and failed to secure proper funding to educate children.

Felicia talked about the issue of lack of funding which would affect quality of education and children's future.

> One of the things I worry about in [city withheld] is for my school system. I voted yes on issue three [to raise local taxes to support school funding]. It didn't pass. We chose to send our children to public school but we may end up pulling them out … cut the funding in the schools then you've cut the quality of education. And you see people who can't get jobs and turn to crime and drugs. They can't even fill out a job application.

Other parents indicated their concerns regarding large class size, high teacher turnover rate, and testing.

> I want my kids in a school with a very high

reaching curriculum, small class sizes, and something that's close to home. [pause] You got 30 to 40 kids in a classroom. The teacher can't reach all them. (Gerry)

> Stability [pause] I mean in my sisters' school last year part way, they lost five teachers. So she went from class to class. I mean that's crazy. They [students] don't know what they know. How do you expect them to learn? Kids need to be on a schedule, you know. How can they [students] do that if the school is not together? (Alyssa)

> State puts pressure on schools and teachers to prepare students to pass the proficiency tests, but I don't think the teachers have the proper training to teach the kids how to pass these tests… I really don't want my daughter in the [city withheld] schools. I just graduated not too long ago and the proficiency test was a huge issue. I passed 4 out of the 5 parts. (Alyssa)

With their frustrations regarding urban education, some parents sought alternative ways to provide opportunities and help their children achieve. Regina found charter schools as an option for her children; therefore, decided to enroll her older children.

> Charter schools base their curriculum on getting those kids ready for the tests. Every month I get a report on how they are doing. I like that the focus is on teaching these kids what they need to do and know how to pass these tests which is teaching them how to get ready for college. I have a priority that I want for my kids. I don't want them to ever look at a test and feel how I felt.

Felicia thought about extra tutoring and relocation as possible alternatives to provide better educational environment for her two children.

> I want them [her children] to be challenged. I want them to have every educational opportunity that's available. That's why I'm considering Sylvan Learning Center [a for-profit tutoring center]. I don't want them to get behind. It's so hard to catch up when you're behind.

> They want to go to China so bad because they saw something on Zoom [a children's TV program] one time… I have got to get these children to China, and I don't know how because I don't know a bit of Chinese. I want them to have those opportunities. If they want to go I want to make it possible so we consider moving to New York for them to go to that school in New York where the children are learning Chinese during the day or in the evening or visa versa. [Felicia knew about this school through a news report].

The aforementioned excerpts address the second central question of the study

regarding parents' views of their children's education. Parents indicated how the quality of education shaped their children's success. In other words, they were driven to find alternative avenues in providing their children with opportunities to achieve in academics even though the environment was difficult and challenging.

Discussions and Suggested Practices

This research contributes to a growing number of studies regarding urban parental involvement in their children's education. Supported by McClelland's (1987) theory of intrinsic motivation, the findings indicate that parents' motivation for involvement in the family literacy program and their children's education consist of three types of needs. These were parents' needs for establishing relationship with others, acquiring strategies to influence their children's learning, and finding educational opportunities to ensure their children's academic success. The following section discusses the findings as well as provides suggestions for future practice.

The Need for Affiliation

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and Bandura (1997) suggested that one of the primary motivators of parental involvement is an invitation from important others such as teachers and schools have an impact on parent's sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school (Bandura). This research found that these parents' involvement was influenced and fostered by family educators as well as other parents in the program.

Through building rapport with other parents, parental involvement in the family education program was enhanced. One parent described the family literacy workshop as a place of "fellowship." Just as church is a place where people come together to worship and learn about God, the family literacy program is a place where parents gather together to learn strategies and activities that will help reinforce their children's learning at home.

Participants in this study suggested that working with other parents and family educators who share similar goals was essential for their involvement in the program. The sense of togetherness helped create an intimate and safe environment for parents to support and learn from each other. This finding is consistent with McClelland's (1987) position that individuals with a need for affiliation with others will seek the companionship of others and take steps to be liked by them as well as

cherish positive experiences in the relationship. Therefore, it is essential to design a family program which provides families with more opportunities to interact, connect, and support each other. To support parents' needs for affiliation with others, some suggestions are offered:

(a) Implement a book club where parents can work on literacy and support one another. The book club, facilitated by family educators, can encourage their pleasure of reading literature and modeling literacy behaviors for their children. For example, the majority of families in our program are African Americans; therefore, educators consider selecting books written by African American authors or books that relate to parents' cultural background.

(b) Provide "Parents' Night Out" activities. These activities can offer parents with opportunities to build relationships, share parenting experiences, and take a break from the monotonous routine of daily life. In other words, parents can take time out for themselves in order to rejuvenate their mind, body, and soul.

(c) Include a "Family Featured" section in the school newsletter. This offers opportunities for families to get to know each other and create a sense of community through prints. Additionally, parents can be part of the newsletter team that reports on the featured family.

The Need for Power

In contrast to some literature (Gavin & Geenfield, 1998; Roth, McCual, & Barnes, 1993; Thornburg, Hoffman, & Remeika, 1991), parents in this study indicated that they were motivated to involve in children's learning, but lacked the knowledge to do so. These parents, like many others, are worried that they don't know how or aren't "teaching" their children. The decline in parental involvement is noted to be linked to parents' perceptions that their knowledge base is not sufficient (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Based on McClelland's (1987) theory, individuals spend time thinking about how to obtain and exercise influence over others as well as inspire people to achieve, attain happiness, and learn. Consistent with Hoover-Dempsey et al. findings, this research showed that parents' level of involvement related to their knowledge and ability to help their children succeed in school. Therefore, providing parents appropriate

knowledge and resources is important to parental involvement.

In addition to parents' knowledge and skills, parental involvement also relates to family's contextual factors, such as the time and energy that they bring to the possibilities of involvement. These factors are influenced by the fact that lower SES parents' work often involves inflexible schedules and long or unpredictable hours (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Gerry, one of the parents in this study, indicated that his work schedule often hinders his ability to be more involved in his children's education. Therefore, it is important that programs consider parental involvement opportunities that fit within the demands parents routinely experience.

There are many avenues in which parents can obtain literacy resources such as workshops, parent education courses, family support programs, home visits, parent meetings, parent-teacher conferences, regular take-home folders, parent organizations, and classroom volunteers to name a few (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003; Coleman & Wallinga, 2000; Epstein, et al., 2002).

To accommodate parents' needs, we suggest that programs develop an accessible on-site family library. For example, the family library would open at 7:30 a.m. for working parents to allow parents ample time to find appropriate materials for their family. For those parents who do not have time to visit the family library, they could use the library resource list to check out materials without being present. This way, the materials would be ready for them to pick up when they return to pick-up their children from preschool. To accommodate family's diverse needs, the family library should include resources that would go beyond children's literature. Some suggestions are community resources, state content standard information, children's educational websites, on-line resources for parents, hands-on learning activity books, and parenting related resources.

The Need for Achievement

Parents in this study indicated their motivation to seek educational opportunities and help their children achieve successfully in their learning. Parents set learning goals, took calculated risks, and made every effort to make things better for their children to reach academic success (McClelland, 1987). While all of the parents were motivated to be involved in their children's education, they were concerned regarding the quality of public education their children would receive. Parents indicated several variables such as funding, teacher qualification, curriculum,

standardized testing, accountability, class size, teacher shortages, and parental school options as indicators that impact urban public education as well as the achievement gap in urban schools.

These concerns are consistent with previous research (Bracey, 2002; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Haycock, Jerald & Huang, 2001; Mier & Wood, 2004). It is clear that these parents took personal responsibility to address their concerns by finding solutions such as communicating with teachers, seeking educational resources, and finding alternative schooling options to help alleviate some of the educational concerns.

These aforementioned issues have escalated under the enactment of the new educational reform, No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, which has impacted public school systems across the nation (Belfiore & Auld, 2005; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Mier & Wood, 2004). The goal of NCLB is to ensure that all children have an equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. Based on the data from U.S. Department of Education (2004), there is some progress in closing the K-12 academic achievement gap. However, reading and mathematics scores continue to show a gap between national and large urban city public schools (Belfiore & Auld; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). These findings indicate that urban schools continue to struggle and under perform.

In the past few years, many issues have surfaced due to NCLB implementation which was reflected in these parents' concerns mentioned previously. The issue of lack of funding is prevalent across the nation (Belfiore & Auld, 2005; Mier & Wood, 2004). Students are expected to perform at grade level without sufficient funding and resources to help schools meet its objective. However, to close the academic gap, sufficient funding is important to support teachers and schools to establish a rich learning and challenging environment. Insufficient funding has also caused teacher layoffs, school closures, and increases in class size.

In 2005-2006, this Midwestern, urban city school district laid off more than a thousand teachers and staff due to budget cuts. It resulted in increasing teacher-pupil ratios (Center on Education Policy, 2006). It is not unusual to have a kindergarten classroom with 30 students in this urban city (Center on Education Policy). Larger class sizes make it difficult for teachers to give all students the attention they need which impacts the quality of education children receive.

An overemphasis on testing is another issue for the NCLB policy implementation.

In this study, parents were very aware of the testing and standards implemented at the school. They believed that the standards and testing would hold schools and teachers accountable as well as be more responsive to children's learning and education. Moreover, parents stressed that it was important for teachers to prepare students to pass the test. However, they were concerned whether teachers had received sufficient training and were qualified to teach children to pass the test. For instance, Alyssa said,

> Teachers need to prepare students to pass the proficiency tests. But I don't think whether teachers have the proper training to teach the kids how to pass these tests… I just graduated from high school not too long ago. I wasn't prepared. The proficiency test was a huge issue.

Testing and assessment are important to help educators understand children's learning outcomes. However, should testing be the primary indicator for children's achievement? Bracey (2002) and Giroux and Schmidt (2004) stated that overemphasis on testing has nothing to say about urban students' achievement, who attend overcrowded classrooms, lack adequate school supplies and resources, and are taught by inexperienced teachers. In order for children to pass the test, teachers and parents would have to focus on test preparation. This overemphasis has affected teacher's instruction and parents' perception about their children's learning (Vang, 2006). These parents' concern raises valid questions about the issues of teaching to the test, which potentially, can create a culture of learning that has lost children's enthusiasm for the love of learning.

Overall, parents' motivation for involvement in children's education and learning was essential for these parents. They felt it was their duty, as parents, to ensure their children would be exposed to as many educational opportunities available to them. Although these parents are acutely aware of the many educational road blocks ahead that would impact their children's academic achievement, they were motivated to involve and to increase their children's chances to be successful academically.

Conclusion

Although this research revealed insights regarding parents' motivations for involvement, there are noted limitations. The sample obtained in this study was a purposeful sample and small from which to conduct analyses. Furthermore, the researchers only selected parents who had full attendance at the family literacy program. Additionally, the intention of this study was not to generalize the results and findings to other populations; rather, to further the researchers' understanding regarding these parents' views and experiences with their children's learning. It also provides insights into family education programs' development and practices.

Lastly, there are many indicators for parental involvement (Epstein, 2001). Parents' participation in a family education program was used as the primary indicator for parental involvement. Further research is needed to enhance educators and researchers' comprehensive understanding of parental involvement in all areas. Additionally, future studies could explore how the school system impacts urban African American parents' level and motivation for involvement in their children's education.

Despite these limitations, this article provides a better understanding of urban African American families' motivations for involvement. The findings of this study suggest that parents are motivated to be involved in their children's learning based upon the needs to build relationships with others, to exert influence over their children's learning, and to ensure children's academic success.

In contrast to previous research (Compton-Lilly, 2000; Roth & McCaul, 1993; Thornburg & Hoffman, 1991), the researchers in this study learned that parents did not fit the negative portrayals and assumptions that urban African American parents are disinterested or uncaring. Conversely, these parents perceived themselves as key "players" who were concerned and actively involved in their children's education.

The significance of this study informs family education programs to recruit more parents to participate in workshops and activities that will enhance their children's learning as well as their love for reading. To develop an effective family education program, it is critical to understand and meet parents' motivational needs for involvement and address their concerns in their children's education.

Thus, family education programs are encouraged to develop workshops and activities that meet parents' needs to develop relationships, to influence their children's learning, and to provide educational opportunities that will help their children achieve success. The family education program should be flexible in visitations and scheduling; involve building community among participants; provide materials that reinforce oral and written literacy skills; and help parents and their children what they learned into their everyday lives. As parents begin to build their knowledge and skill competency, the greater the chance they can exert influence on their children's learning and become empowered to be involved in their children's learning.

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