

# Engaging Parents of Eighth Grade Students in Parent–Teacher Bidirectional Communication

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## Abstract

This article describes the development and evaluation of a classroom-based, low-cost intervention to increase parents' involvement in their children's education. In Phase 1 of the study, 17 parents of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in a low-income, high immigrant and minority school district were interviewed to conduct a qualitative assessment of factors related to at-home and at-school parent involvement and to assess the feasibility and acceptability of the planned intervention. In Phase 2 of the study, 192 students in nine 8<sup>th</sup> grade English classes were given weekly homework for seven weeks that required parent–child interaction to complete the assignment. Three of these classes were randomly selected to receive teacher outreach to initiate parent–teacher bidirectional communication with students' parents. The main hypothesis was that teachers would have bidirectional conversations of at least five minutes duration with a greater proportion of intervention class parents than with control class parents. Additional hypotheses were that intervention class students would submit more homework assignments and have higher homework grades than control class students. These hypotheses were confirmed by chi-square analysis,  $p < .001$ . The study demonstrated that a low-cost intervention to improve parent involvement at home and at school among 8<sup>th</sup> grade students' parents is feasible, acceptable to all stakeholders, and effective.

Key Words: parent involvement, middle school, junior high, teachers, communication, interactive homework, role construction, self-efficacy, classroom, minority, immigrant, outreach, families, engagement

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to develop and evaluate a low-cost intervention to promote effective parent involvement among parents of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in a low-resource, high immigrant and minority population school district. Many studies and reviews of the literature report that increased parent involvement is associated with improved student achievement (Epstein et al., 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). A study by Parcel and Dufur (2001) of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that parent–teacher communication was positively associated with increased reading scores among children in Grades 1–8. These studies argue that there is a preponderance of evidence showing that increased parent involvement will result in improved student achievement. A second position agrees that there is a correlation, but argues that the hypothesis that parent involvement causally promotes student achievement has not been adequately supported by rigorous quantitative research (Agronick, Clark, O’Donnell, & Stueve, 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). However, the debate over whether the relationship between increased parent involvement and student achievement is causal or merely correlational is a moot point for educators of underachieving students if it is not possible to bring about an increase in parent involvement. Figure 1 illustrates the pathway by which programs to increase parent involvement are thought to improve student achievement.

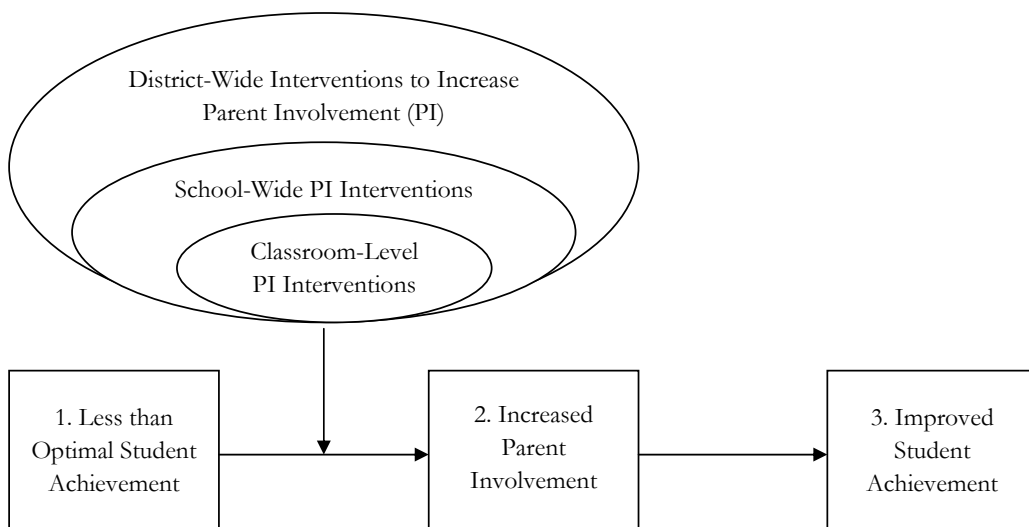


Figure 1. Interventions to Increase Parent Involvement and Improve Student Achievement

The experimental design study presented in this article primarily addresses the relationship between 1 and 2 in Figure 1, not the more widely researched and debated relationship between 2 and 3. The primary aim was to examine the effect of a classroom-level intervention on one type of parent involvement, and the secondary aim was to evaluate the intervention's effect on homework submissions as a limited measure of improved student achievement. Although strategies for increasing parent involvement have been published (Henderson et al., 2007; Epstein et al., 2009), there has been little quantitative evaluation of these approaches. In an overview of the parent involvement field, Agronick and colleagues (2009) stated, "There is little evidence that parent involvement strategies succeeded in increasing parent engagement" (p. 28); "Choices of what to implement to engage parents of students in middle school, and especially in high school, are limited by a lack of evidence of what works once students leave elementary school" (p. 23). Agronick et al.'s survey of nine school districts in four Northeastern states, including New York, found that parent involvement programs "did not necessarily target parent populations that have been difficult to engage or whose children may be at higher academic risk" (p. ii).

Parent involvement interventions may take place at district, school, or classroom levels. Parent involvement practice and the parent involvement literature have been strongly influenced by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002). NCLB and Title I legislation supported broad-based parent involvement initiatives and research, particularly at the district and school levels. This historical focus is understandable: district- and school-level interventions intend to reach the largest number of students and families, and a wide menu of parent involvement components will give parents choices, may engage more parents than any single strategy, and may permit matching specific parent involvement components with specific needs of students and parents. At this point in history, the dominant parent involvement paradigm is to provide a comprehensive range of interventions at a district or school level. The leading school- and district-level parent involvement programs recommend the simultaneous use of multiple parent involvement strategies such as special events, volunteer opportunities, parent education, parent centers, and dedicated outreach staff (Epstein et al., 2009; Henderson et al., 2007). However, these large scale interventions require expenditures of money and personnel time that may be beyond the capacities of low-resource districts. Second, the individual components of the larger scale interventions have not been quantitatively evaluated. As Agronick and colleagues (2009) point out: "Schoolwide multi-component programs require randomization of a relatively large number of schools to treatment or comparison conditions, a costly undertaking" (p. 29).

The study described in this paper evaluated a classroom-level intervention to promote parent–teacher communication. The NCLB (2002) definition of parent involvement prioritizes communication: “the participation of parents in regular, two-way, meaningful communication involving students’ academic learning and other school activities...” (Part A, Section 9101[32]).

### **Prior Studies of Middle School Parent Involvement Interventions**

There are two published comparison group quantitative assessments of classroom-level parent involvement interventions for middle school students. In both studies, Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) homework (Epstein et al., 2009) was the independent variable, and student and parent reports of at-home parent involvement was a dependent variable. TIPS are structured, two-page worksheets that guide students to work together with a family member to complete a curriculum-based homework assignment. TIPS assignments do not require reference materials or a high level of subject matter knowledge. Both studies found that the intervention increased parent involvement with homework assistance. Balli, Demo, and Wedman (1998) reported a study in which a single 6<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher distributed handouts containing TIPS assignments to 74 White, middle-class students that required students to interact with a family member. One group of students received TIPS handouts with no prompts to involve a family member, a second group received handouts with prompts to involve a family member, and a third group received handouts that included the prompts, requested family member comments on the assignment, and requested a parent signature on the assignment sheet. Findings indicated that the second group had more family involvement than the first, and the third group had more family involvement than the second. The students were given 20 TIPS assignments over a 3-month period and had a 100% homework submission rate.

Van Voorhis (2003) conducted an intervention that used TIPS weekly interactive science class homework assignments with 253 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. The study population was 53% White, 36% African American, and 11% other. Classes in this school were segregated by five levels of student ability: inclusion, low-ability, average, honors, and gifted. The lowest inclusion and highest gifted level classes were not included in the study. Three teachers each taught both TIPS and non-TIPS classes. Students received weekly TIPS assignments for 18 weeks and had a 74% homework submission rate. The study found improved family involvement in homework and student achievement among 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students receiving TIPS assignments in comparison to 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students who received equivalent assignments that did not request the participation of a family member. Neither study sought to obtain or

measure teacher–parent bidirectional communication as a parent involvement outcome variable.

### Theoretical Explanations for Why Parents Are Involved

Using a psychological approach derived from Albert Bandura (1986, 1997), Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler, and colleagues (1995, 1997, 2005) argue that parent involvement is motivated by two belief systems: (a) how parents construct their role for parent involvement—defined as parents’ beliefs concerning what they should do and how they should do it, and (b) parents’ beliefs in how effective they can be in helping their children succeed in school—defined as their beliefs in their ability to produce the desired outcome. The model holds that both belief systems are socially constructed, and hence can be influenced by interventions to promote new beliefs about what parents should do, how they should do it, and how effective their efforts will be. In addition to role construction and self-efficacy, the model argues that parent involvement is also promoted by parent involvement invitations from the school, teachers, and the parent’s child. The model might explain the positive effects of a TIPS intervention by pointing out that invitations by the teacher and child to assist with homework create an expectation that parent homework involvement is desirable and normative. Also, all parents are asked to assist with homework, TIPS provides guidance on how parents should assist with homework, and the successful completion of the interactive homework assignment gives parents a sense of confidence and mastery in being involved in promoting their child’s educational achievement. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues also argue that parent involvement is influenced by a component of self-efficacy—perceived life context—defined as parents’ beliefs as to whether they have sufficient time and energy for parent involvement, parent awareness of involvement opportunities at the school, and parent skills and abilities sufficient to communicate with the teacher and with the child about schoolwork (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005).

The Hoover-Dempsey model does not include a parent involvement variable that Mapp (2003) found to be crucial: the parent’s perception that school staff are caring and can be trusted. Mapp conducted a qualitative study of a high-functioning Boston elementary school that included in-depth interviews with 18 involved parents. The parents Mapp interviewed said that they were involved at the school because they felt respected, they felt that the staff cared about their children, and they felt that they could trust the staff.

Existing models used to explain parent motivation for involvement have been developed with studies of parents who are already identified as involved in their children’s education. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005) state:

...we have focused on parents who *are* involved, in whatever degree, in their children's education. Our broader interests, of course, include all parents, because parents are an integral, usually primary, part of the social context that influences their children's educational outcomes. In fact, we strongly suggest that the model itself offers strong support for theory- and research-based interventions designed to test approaches to encouraging parents who have not been involved in their children's education to become so. However, to learn more about our interest in parents' motivations for involvement and the mechanisms that might explain their influence on students, we began with parents who were involved. This limits the generalizability of our review findings. (p. 124)

Although a few qualitative studies have sought to interview parents identified by staff of their children's schools as uninvolved or ineffectively involved (Larreau & Horvat, 1999; Lawson, 2003), the findings of these studies do not seem to have been used to develop quantitatively evaluated interventions to promote parent involvement among these parents.

The parent involvement literature distinguishes between *at-home* and *at-school* parent involvement. At-home parent involvement includes discussing school activities, helping with homework, monitoring the use of out-of-school time, or taking children to community cultural events. At-school parent involvement includes contacts with school staff, volunteering at the school, or attending school events (Ho & Willms, 1996; Trusty, 1999). A number of studies report less at-school parent involvement among parents who have less education, lower income, minority status, or immigrant status (Kim, 2009; Shumow, Lyutykh, & Schmidt, 2011; Turney & Kao, 2009). The intervention reported in this paper was designed to promote the specific type of at-school involvement of parent-teacher bidirectional communication among all parents.

## Method

### Phase 1 Study Design and Hypotheses

Phase 1 of this study used the theoretical constructs of role construction, self-efficacy, invitations, perceptions of school staff as caring and trustworthy, at-home parent involvement, and at-school parent involvement to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with parents identified by school staff as not engaged in at-school parent involvement. The interview instrument's validity is guided by its use of six theoretical constructs identified in the parent involvement literature. All parents interviewed readily understood these six constructs as aspects of parent involvement in their day-to-day lives. (The interview protocol is available from the author upon request.)

The researcher is an administrator in a low-resource, low-income, minority school district in downstate New York that has had underachieving secondary schools for several decades. Based upon factors such as attendance at parent–teacher nights and at PTA meetings, the predominant perception among secondary school teachers and administrators is that the large majority of parents are not involved in their children’s education. The purposes of the Phase 1 interviews were to understand current parent involvement attitudes and practices, identify barriers to parent involvement, and obtain information to plan and quantitatively evaluate a low-cost intervention that would engage parents as partners in promoting their children’s academic achievement. Phase 1 hypotheses were that homework assignments requiring parents’ assistance would be acceptable and feasible and that outreach by the teacher to have bidirectional communication with the parents would also be acceptable and feasible.

### **Phase 2 Study Design and Hypotheses**

In Phase 2, the researcher worked with three 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teachers to plan TIPS homework assignments that would require that students in all classes and their parents work together to complete the assignment. TIPS assignments had not been used previously in this district. For students in one randomly selected class for each teacher, the TIPS assignments were a basis for a teacher outreach intervention to parents to cultivate phone conversations between teacher and parent on student academic achievement. Hypotheses tested were: (a) a greater proportion of parents of intervention class students will have had bidirectional communication with the teacher by the end of the seven-week intervention period than parents of control class students; (b) intervention class students will complete more TIPS homework assignments than control class students; and (c) intervention class students will have higher homework grades than control class students. This is a quasi-experimental design since the study is randomized at the group level and outcomes are compared between subjects. Phase 1 was conducted with parents of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in the 2009–2010 academic year. Phase 2 was conducted with parents and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in the 2010–2011 academic year.

Initiation of the Phase 2 intervention with the TIPS assignments and the teacher outreach was delayed until November 2010 so that a prior indicator measurement of parent involvement at school could be obtained. The school held three events during September and October to which parents were invited. The district Parent Liaison supervised parent sign-in at each event. At the end of the study in December, data from the sign-in sheets were used to complete a yes/no box on the class data entry sheets if the parent attended at least one event.

## Definitions of Terms

This study used the following definitions:

*Parent:* Biological parent, guardian, other older relative, or substitute named by the parent to work with the student on the homework assignment.

*Interactive homework assignment:* TIPS is a parent involvement strategy that requires students and parents to work together to complete weekly homework assignments (Epstein et al., 2009). Assisting with homework is a specific type of at-home parent involvement. TIPS was chosen because it has been used to support parent involvement in a wide range of school and community settings. However, for the purpose of providing a basis for parent–teacher bidirectional communication, other types of parent–child interactive educational activities could be used.

*Teacher outreach:* Effort by the teacher using messages sent home with the child, messages sent by mail or email, or phone calls to request bidirectional communication with the parent.

*Parent–teacher bidirectional communication:* At least five minutes telephone or in-person conversation between the teacher and the parent. The conversational topics were the TIPS assignments and the child’s overall progress in the class. For the purpose of this study, this definition does not include school- or teacher-initiated communications that primarily concern deficiencies in behavior or attendance. Parent–teacher bidirectional communication is a specific type of at-school parent involvement.

*Low-cost:* The teacher averaged less than 30 minutes per student during the entire intervention on outreach and bidirectional communication. For a class of 22 students, this is 11 hours or less spent on teacher outreach over a seven-week outreach period, or an average of less than two hours per week.

## Data Collection

In March 2010, the larger of two middle schools in this district provided the researcher with a list of more than 300 parents of 8<sup>th</sup> graders who were not known by school teachers or counselors to have had at-school parent involvement in the current school year. The objective was to conduct face-to-face audiotaped interviews with 15 to 20 parents. Forty of these parents were randomly chosen to receive an Institutional Review Board-approved letter inviting them to participate in an interview on parent involvement. Parents who did not respond to the letter received a phone call inviting them to participate in the study. A \$20 reimbursement was offered to each interview participant. In one case, the parent and family had moved out of the community at the time the letter was mailed. Of the 39 remaining parents, 21 were interviewed



by the researcher. Parents provided informed consent. With parent permission, each interview was audiotaped. Four interviews failed to record, but the responses of the parents in the four interviews that failed to record were not materially different from the responses in the recorded interviews. Data analysis was conducted using the 17 recorded interviews. The audiotapes were used to transcribe parent answers to demographic and other categorical questions, as well as significant comments. These abbreviated transcripts were reviewed to obtain summary demographic data, identify proportions of parents with specific answers, and identify common themes organized around the four parent motivation theoretical constructs.

For Phase 2 of the study, the researcher worked with the principal of the same middle school to engage three 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teachers to participate in the project. In the summer of 2010, the researcher worked with these English teachers to plan TIPS homework assignments to be administered during seven consecutive weeks in November and December 2010 (Van Voorhis & Epstein, 2002). In September, due to enrollment changes in the middle schools and teacher seniority policies, one of the three original teachers was transferred to the district's other middle school and was replaced by a different teacher who subsequently joined the project. The three teachers respectively taught four, three, and two 8<sup>th</sup> grade English classes. At the end of October 2010, each teacher had one class of students randomly chosen to receive the teacher-to-parent outreach intervention. Students in the teachers' other six classes did not receive the teacher-to-parent outreach intervention. All nine classes in the study received one TIPS homework assignment each week during November and December requiring that the student and a parent work together to complete the assignment. (Students in this study were informed that if a parent was not available, they could work on the TIPS assignments with after-school tutors, and a few did this.) Homework assignments were the same in all classes. Included with the first assignment was a cover letter explaining the purpose of the TIPS homework with a request that parents sign each submitted assignment. The cover letter for the intervention classes included the statement that the teacher intended to contact the parent or guardian to discuss the weekly assignments. Since the Phase 2 study was the evaluation of an educational classroom activity, it was granted an Institutional Review Board exemption from the requirement to obtain informed consent for research on human subjects.

For Phase 2 data collection, a data entry sheet was prepared for each study class that included student name, student gender, student race/ethnicity, a code for the class teacher, a code for the specific class period, seven data entry cells to indicate the completion of each weekly TIPS assignment and grade, and a data entry cell indicating whether the teacher at any time had a conversation of five

minutes or more with the parent concerning student academic achievement. Each teacher was instructed to spend no more than an average of three hours per week in the outreach effort.

Teacher log sheet data on student/race ethnicity were compared to student registration records, which report the parent's statement about student race/ethnicity. In accordance with New York State policy, the parent's statement is the race/ethnicity of record, and this was used to correct teacher data for approximately 20 students. These corrections increased the proportion of Hispanic students. At the end of the intervention period, data were entered into a database with each subject assigned a unique numerical identifier. Three control group students and one intervention group student who transferred out of their English classes during the study period were deleted from the data set.

Analyses of possible significant differences between intervention and control group students in five-minute parent conversation with the teacher, homework submissions, and parent attendance at a parent night were conducted to report the Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result, *p*-value, and, where appropriate, phi coefficient. Homework assignment grades were assigned to one of three categories: not submitted (grade = 0), partial credit (grade = between 3 and 8 clustering about 5), or full credit (grade = 9 to 10). The analysis of student grade data reports the chi-square test result and *p*-value for linear trend in proportions for the homework grade outcomes of not submitted, partial credit, and full credit. In March 2011, the researcher conducted debriefing interviews with the English teachers to obtain their overall assessment of the effectiveness of the TIPS assignments and the parent outreach intervention.

### Research Context

Both study phases were conducted at a middle school in a suburban community near New York City. The U.S. 2000 Census reported that 60% of the school district's 68,000 residents are African American, 29% are White, and 10% are Hispanic of any race. The district occupies only four square miles, and the community has historically had difficulty maintaining a tax base that is sufficient for its public services. Sixty-three percent of its housing units are renter occupied. The district's median household income of \$49,700 is about half the median household income for the suburban county in which the district is located. The district's secondary schools do not have a positive reputation in the community, and historically there has been a drop in district enrollment from 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 7<sup>th</sup> grade as parents transfer children to private schools. Recent audits by the New York State Department of Education identified numerous deficiencies in the district's secondary schools and resulted in mandated programs to remediate these deficiencies. This is a low-resource school district that has experienced repeated budget freezes and cuts.

## Research Participants

The study was conducted at the larger of the district’s two middle schools, with both schools having similar demographic profiles. Demographic data for 8th grade students at the study school are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Student Population Demographic Data

Characteristic	Study School
Total 8 <sup>th</sup> grade enrollment	349
African American Non-Hispanic	249 (71%)
Hispanic	68 (20%)
White Non-Hispanic	27 (8%)
Asian or other	5 (1%)
Male	161 (46%)
Female	188 (54%)
Special Education	74 (21%)
English Language Learner	33 (9%)
Homeless	15 (4%)
Average Daily Attendance (9/13/10 – 10/6/10)	92%

School classes are not tracked by student ability. Special Education students are mainstreamed into regular classes with support. The majority of students are first- or second-generation African American or Hispanic immigrants, predominantly from Caribbean and Latin American nations. In the study school, 70% of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students receive free or reduced price lunch. Many students enter 9<sup>th</sup> grade in the district’s high schools academically and socially unprepared for high school studies. In 2009–2010, the larger of the district’s two high schools had 575 9<sup>th</sup> graders and retained 258 (45%). The smaller high school had 244 9<sup>th</sup> graders and retained 78 (32%). District 9<sup>th</sup> grade enrollments are higher than district 8<sup>th</sup> grade enrollments because of 9<sup>th</sup> grade retentions from the previous year.

### *Phase 1 Study Participants*

Demographic data were collected regarding parent gender, age, race, number of children in the home, gender of child in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and years of residence in the community. Fifteen parents were African American, one was Hispanic, and one was White. Fourteen interviews were conducted with the student’s mother, one with the grandmother, and two with both mother and father. Six of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade children were female, and 11 were male. No family had more than three children in the home, and the mean length of community residency was 19.4 years.

*Phase 2 Study Participants*

A total of 192 students participated in the Phase 2 study. Table 2 presents student population demographic data for gender and race/ethnicity.

Table 2. Parent Intervention Project Student Demographic Data

Characteristic	Intervention	% Intervention	Control	% Control
Total Number Students	61		131	
Male	31	50.8%	38	29.0%
Female	30	49.2%	93	71.0%
African American Non-Hispanic	45	73.8%	89	67.9%
Hispanic	10	16.4%	32	24.4%
White Non-Hispanic	4	6.6%	9	6.9%
Asian	2	3.3%	1	0.8%

There were 61 students in the three intervention classes and 131 students in the six control group classes. The intervention group was evenly divided by gender, but the control group was majority female. The control and intervention groups were similar in race/ethnicity.

At the conclusion of the study, data on parent attendance at parent night events in September and October (before the intervention occurred) were analyzed to compare intervention class and control class parents. These data are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Parent Night Attendance

Group	Attended a Parent Night (%)	Did Not Attend a Parent Night (%)	Total
Intervention	23 (37.7%)	38 (62.3%)	61
Control	41 (31.3%)	90 (68.7%)	131
Total	64 (33.3%)	128 (66.7%)	192

The difference in proportions in parent night attendance early in the school year for intervention class parents and control group parents (37.7% vs. 31.3%) was not significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 0.76 (df = 1),  $p = 0.38$ ). The two groups of parents did not differ on the independently measured parent involvement variable of attendance at a school parent night.

**Results**

**Phase 1 Data Analysis and Findings**

Phase 1 of the study involved interviewing 17 parents to assess parent attitudes and practices toward at-home parent involvement and at-school parent

involvement, assessing the extent to which six theoretical constructs in the parent involvement literature were present among these parents, and using these data to help plan the Phase 2 intervention. Phase 1 hypotheses were that homework assignments that required parental assistance would be acceptable and feasible and that outreach by the teacher to have bidirectional communication with the parents would be acceptable and feasible. These hypotheses were confirmed. All parents reported a willingness to have telephone conversations with the teacher. A majority of parents reported regularly or occasionally helping with homework. Several of those who did not help with homework expressed frustration that their child did not bring any home, either because the child managed to complete homework at school, or because (it was suspected) the child did not complete homework assignments.

An unexpected finding was a dramatic difference between perceptions of school staff and of parents regarding parent involvement. School staff were asked to provide the researcher with a list of parents who were not known to have had at-school involvement in the previous year. Parents interviewed were randomly chosen from this list. However, nearly all parents interviewed reported some form of at-school involvement, and in most cases discussed specific episodes and the general character of their at-school involvement in some detail. The phenomenon of school staff underestimating parent involvement is mentioned frequently in the parent involvement literature (Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawson, 2003). In many cases, apparently, the school's teachers, principal, and guidance counselors did not recognize or remember their contact with the parent.

### *Interview Themes*

This section discusses the four parent motivation theoretical constructs as they emerged during the interviews.

*Role Construction.* All parents interviewed regarded involvement in their child's education as something that they should do and that all parents should do. Several parents said that the child needs to see evidence of parent involvement to believe that the parent cares about school achievement. The majority of parents had participated in some form of at-school parent involvement. Three-fourths reported talking to a teacher in the past year by phone or in person, and three-fourths reported attendance at some at-school event in the past year. The majority of parents described some form of at-home parent involvement. Two-thirds reported working with their child on homework in the past year. One-third included (as education at home) advising their child on attitude and behavior toward teachers and other students; one-third reported encouraging education by providing rewards for doing well in school; two said that participation in church and church-sponsored activities were educational

experiences; and one told her child to put school before games and took her child to “free stuff” in the community such as the library or the park. Two parents mentioned the adolescent need for increased autonomy as a reason why their at-home involvement was less than when the children were younger.

One parent volunteered that as part of her educational involvement she told her son that “For him to be a Black man he has to be ten steps ahead of everyone else.” This is an example of a parent involvement role construction described by Sanders (1997) who interviewed 28 African American 8<sup>th</sup> graders and found:

...many African Americans possess an achievement ethos that demands commitment to excellence for both individual and collective mobility... which allows African American students to respond to racial discrimination in ways that are conducive rather than detrimental to academic success. (p. 85)

*Self-Efficacy.* In terms of parental self-efficacy for homework, eight parents reported that they had difficulty with some subjects, including one who had another adult in the home help with math. Six reported other problems related to homework, such as a child with poor grades never bringing home any homework or the child’s inability to bring reference books home. In terms of self-efficacy for at-school parent involvement, a majority said that they were comfortable asking teachers and staff questions. Parents with limited or no involvement at school cited factors such as not being able to drive, lack of proximity to the school, difficulty in attending events between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m., having two jobs, notices about events that arrive after the event has occurred, and involvement at a sibling’s school. Eleven parents said that they were pressed for time to be involved, although they still made the effort to be involved. Eight parents emphasized that more parent–teacher communication was needed and that it should be as early as possible if there are problems with the student’s work or behavior.

*Invitations.* Approximately half the parents reported receiving invitations for involvement or attendance at an event from the school, from a teacher, or from the child. There did not seem to be a consistent pattern of invitations from the children or from the teachers. Parents stated that some teachers issue written or verbal invitations, and other teachers do not. A few parents indicated that they were only contacted by a teacher when the child had a behavior problem. Although all parents should receive invitations to events from the school, a number of parents said that they did not recall receiving school invitations. Either these invitations were not received by the parents, or the parents did not remember them.

*Care, Respect, Trust.* More than half the parents interviewed indicated that school staff were adequate or better in caring for children, being trustworthy in terms of providing a safe and effective educational environment, and in respecting parents and listening to parents. Some parents spoke of appreciating a teacher who had an understanding of their child as an individual. One-third said that some teachers and staff just go through the motions to collect the paycheck. “Some care, and some don’t” was a common refrain. Several said that some teachers and staff were lacking in respect for parents and in a willingness to listen to parents and to students. Several stated that in their personal experience, they had received respect and a willingness to listen, but indicated that this may not be true of all parents. One-third of the parents were very critical. The critical parents often said that school staff did not promptly identify and respond to children’s problems. Three parents said that parent involvement is necessary because the school cannot be relied upon to do things right. Two parents said that school staff are consistently negative about their child.

### *Phase 1 Preliminary Conclusions*

Certain conclusions were drawn for the purpose of guiding the implementation of the intervention used in Phase 2. The teachers were informed that the two main hypotheses of Phase 1 were confirmed so that they would conduct the intervention with enthusiasm and confidence. Parents wanted the opportunity to assist with homework, particularly if the assignments could be given out with sufficient completion time so that the parents could fit in the homework help session at their convenience. The intervention asked that teachers move out of their comfort zone—they were asked to be active rather than passive in engaging parents in bidirectional communication. The finding that all parents wanted this contact was reported to the teachers to help overcome any reluctance. The teachers were told that parents appreciated a teacher who could discuss their child as an individual. The teachers were also told that some parents stated that some teachers were unwilling to listen to parents, so two-way conversations were encouraged. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2002) hypothesized that teachers would be more effective at increasing parent involvement if they had positive beliefs about the efficacy of specific parent involvement strategies. TIPS was presented as an effective strategy for increasing the at-home parent involvement of helping with homework. Although Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues do not discuss a concept of “parent invitation to the teacher” (as opposed to child, teacher, or school invitation to the parent), the Phase 1 study was used to create a sense that parents were inviting outreach from teachers for bidirectional communication.

## Phase 2 Data Analysis and Findings

The main hypothesis tested was that (a) the teacher would have a bidirectional conversation of at least five minutes duration with a greater proportion of intervention class parents than with control class parents. Additional hypotheses tested were that (b) intervention class students would submit a greater proportion of their homework assignments, and (c) intervention class students would have higher grades on the homework assignments. Table 4 presents the data for the main hypothesis that the teacher would have a bidirectional conversation of at least five minutes with a greater proportion of intervention class parents than with control class parents.

Table 4. Parent–Teacher Bidirectional Communication

Group	Teacher 5-Minute Conversation with Parent (%)	No Teacher 5-Minute Conversation with Parent (%)	Total
Intervention	55 (90.2%)	6 (9.8%)	61
Control	33 (25.2%)	98 (74.8%)	131
Total	88 (45.8%)	104 (54.2%)	192

The main hypothesis was confirmed: The difference between the proportions of intervention class parents and control class parents (90.2% vs. 25.2%) who had bidirectional conversations with the teacher was significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 70.40 (df = 1),  $p < .001$ , phi coefficient = .607). Table 5 presents the data for the second hypothesis: Intervention class students would submit a greater proportion of their homework assignments.

Table 5. Homework Assignment Submissions

Group	HW Assignment Submitted (%)	HW Assignment Not Submitted (%)	Total
Intervention	272 (63.7%)	155 (36.3%)	427
Control	410 (44.7%)	507 (55.3%)	917
Total	682 (50.7%)	662 (49.3%)	1,344

The second hypothesis was confirmed: The difference between the proportions of homework assignments submitted by intervention class students and by control class students (63.7% vs. 44.7%) was significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 42.0 (df = 1),  $p < .001$ , phi coefficient = .177). Table 6 presents the data for the third hypothesis: Intervention class students would have higher grades on their homework assignments.



Table 6. Homework Assignment Grades

Group	Not Submitted (%)	Partial Credit (%)	Full Credit (%)	Total
All Intervention	155 (36.3%)	88 (20.6%)	184 (43.1%)	427
All Control	507 (55.3%)	93 (10.1%)	317 (34.6%)	917
Male Intervention	99 (45.6%)	53 (24.4%)	65 (30.0%)	217
Male Control	165 (62.3%)	39 (14.7%)	61 (23.0%)	265
Female Intervention	56 (26.7%)	35 (16.7%)	119 (56.7%)	210
Female Control	342 (52.5%)	53 (8.1%)	257 (39.4%)	652

The third hypothesis was confirmed: Intervention class students had higher homework grades than control class students (chi-square test for linear trend in proportions = 62.96 (df = 2),  $p < .001$ ). The chi-square test for linear trend in proportions was also conducted for both male students and female students. Male intervention students had higher grades than male control students (chi-square = 9.10 (df = 2),  $p = .003$ ), and female intervention students had higher grades than female control students (chi-square = 32.75 (df = 2),  $p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

### Phase 1 Findings

Many students at this middle school are perceived by school staff as having uninvolved parents, as evidenced by the staff-generated list of 300 parents perceived as uninvolved in a school with 349 8th grade students. Phase 1 of the study suggested that the parents of many of these students are involved both at home and at school. Although it is possible that some or all of the 18 parents who did not respond to the request for interviews are truly uninvolved, the parents who were interviewed all take active steps to assist their children's educational progress. All parents interviewed had a positive role construction for parent involvement. Although Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005) suggest that some parents may need education on parent involvement role construction, the experience of this study suggested that role construction education may be desirable for school staff. One of the three teachers initially needed to be encouraged to initiate bidirectional communication with parents. Existing role construction for many school staff members includes the belief, "Our role is to send letters inviting parents to events. If the parents respond, we will provide bidirectional communication." This is a role construction that leads to a low level of perceived at-school parent involvement. Of the parents interviewed in Phase 1 who reported positive bidirectional communication with their children's teachers, the communication was nearly always initiated by the

parent. The interviews indicated that parents welcomed teacher-initiated conversations concerning students' academics.

Parents in Phase 1 often described their parent involvement self-efficacy as being constrained by a range of inhibiting factors: difficulty with subject matter in assisting with homework, children not bringing homework to the home, lack of reference materials, transportation or scheduling conflicts for attendance at school events, poor information about school-parent events, poorly organized school-parent events, lack of time and energy due to other responsibilities, and lack of timely information about student problems at school that need a parental response. The Phase 2 intervention showed that, for many parents, these barriers to parent involvement may be overcome by interactive assignments which do not require reference materials or a high level of subject matter knowledge and by teacher initiated phone calls that take place when a parent has available time. School personnel can be more effective at responding to parental needs for parent involvement self-efficacy.

The study was conducted in a school district with a history of distrust by many parents and community members. One-third of Phase 1 parents were highly critical of the school, and a number of the other parents volunteered that they knew parents who had had "bad experiences." A purpose of the Mapp study (2003) was to identify best parent involvement practices in a high functioning elementary school that served a minority, low-income population. Her conclusion was that despite the school's many parent involvement activities, the strongest factor promoting parent involvement was the parents' perceptions of the school staff as caring, respectful, and trustworthy. Although the limited size and scope of this study prevented pre- and post-measurement of parent and school staff attitudes, a goal was to design an intervention that would promote more positive attitudes between parents and school staff. The TIPS assignments and the teacher-parent dialogues were intended to provide the parent with a constructive experience with the school and to provide teachers with positive experiences with the parents.

### **Phase 2 Findings**

The intervention had a positive effect on promoting parent-teacher bidirectional communication, student homework submissions, and student homework grades. Phase 2 confirmed the Phase 1 statement by parents that they would welcome greater communication with their child's teacher.

Homework submission rates were 63.7% for all TIPS assignments among intervention class students and 44.7% for all TIPS assignments among control class students. (Nearly 85% of all students submitted at least one of the seven TIPS assignments.) These rates are much less than what one would hope, although they are not unusual for homework assignments at this grade level in

this district. This study was about the evaluation of an intervention to promote parent–teacher bidirectional communication and used TIPS as a means to achieve this goal. However, if the intervention were to be used as a regular practice, it would be desirable to identify ways to increase homework submissions. A possible factor for the low overall rates is that some students apparently do little or no homework for any classes. Altering this ingrained behavior may require a special intervention. The initiation of the intervention was delayed so that the independent measure of at-school parent involvement of parent attendance at parent nights could be obtained. Teachers stated that they would have liked to have started TIPS at the beginning of the school term, and perhaps that change would improve the homework submission rate.

Teachers were not able to engage 10% of intervention group parents in conversations. Some of these cases involved recent changes in phone numbers or parents not having access to a phone on the job. In the district in which the study presented in this paper was conducted, there is a small but significant percentage of parents, typically immigrants, and often the single parent in the family, who may work 60, 80, or more hours a week at one, two, or three low-wage jobs. Some parents are home health aides who may work five continuous days as live-in attendants at their employers' homes and then return to their own homes. Teachers reported that parents who work long hours were among the more difficult to engage in this study's Phase 2 intervention. They may also be more difficult for the student to engage in homework help.

Parents with multiple or extended hour low-wage jobs are largely missing from the parent involvement literature. For example, a widely cited study by Muller (1995) used data concerning 8<sup>th</sup> grade students from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study to find that mothers employed part-time, as compared to mothers not employed or employed full-time, tended to be in families with higher family incomes, greater parental education, greater percentage of two-parent families, greater maternal involvement in their children's education, and children with higher 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics test scores. The survey had three categories for maternal employment status: 35 or more hours per week, part-time, or not employed outside the home. It did not have a separate category to capture parents who work very long hours. A qualitative study by Ji and Koblinsky (2009) interviewed 29 Chinese American recent immigrant parents in Washington, DC, who primarily worked in restaurants and hotels. The majority of study participants worked six days a week for more than eight hours a day, and had low family income even though both parents worked in 25 of the 29 families. Forty-one percent reported spending less than one hour per day with their children, and 69% stated that demanding work schedules were barriers to greater involvement in their children's education.

Phase 2 had a number of unanticipated results according to teacher comments after the study was completed. Many intervention group parents had multiple or lengthy conversations with the teacher and continued to have conversations after the seven-week study period ended. The teachers continued to use TIPS assignments after the study period ended. Teachers reported that “parents we had never seen before” attended parent night events at the beginning of the spring term in early 2011, and the parents and teachers were able to match faces with voices. Some parents in the control group or parents of students in other grades heard about the phone calls and asked school administrators why they had not received the calls. A response that might be anticipated, but was nonetheless gratifying, was that at the beginning of the intervention all teachers remarked, “I’m talking to parents I never talked to before.” An additional unanticipated finding of the teachers’ conversations is that a number of parents described arranging for someone else to work with their child on the TIPS assignment because of their own limited reading abilities. Some parents interviewed in Phase 1 mentioned lack of subject matter knowledge as a barrier to helping with homework, but the barrier of parent literacy level did not emerge until the Phase 2 parent–teacher conversations.

## **Limitations of the Study**

### **Phase 1 Study Limitations**

School staff were asked to provide a list of parents who were not known to have had at-school involvement in the previous year. However, nearly all parents interviewed reported some form of at-school involvement and in most cases discussed their involvement in some detail. The inaccurate identification of uninvolved parents affected the study’s ability to identify and interview truly uninvolved parents. It is possible that the sample of 21 was not representative and that the remaining 18 parents included parents who were truly uninvolved.

Of 17 parents with recorded interviews, 11 had male children who were 8<sup>th</sup> graders and 6 had female 8<sup>th</sup> graders, which raises the possibility that the interviews are more reflective of parent involvement with male children than with female children. However, interview data showed that parents of children of both genders raised similar concerns. None of the families interviewed reported more than three children in the home. It is possible that parents with a greater number of children had greater difficulty participating in the interviews. The mean length of parent residency in the community was 19.4 years among parents who were interviewed, with the four newest families having three, five, six, and nine years residence in the community. The study intended to capture a representative range of parents, but did not interview parents

who were new to the community. It is possible that longer-term community residents are more comfortable with at-school parent involvement, such as participation in Phase 1 of the study.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher, who is a well-known senior administrator in the district office. This may have affected the interviewees' responses, although estimating the effect is not straightforward. Some possible biases are toward positive interview content. Some parents may have given positive answers in the attempt to please the interviewer or to avoid conflict. Other factors may have biased the interview toward negative content. Some parents used the interview as an opportunity to express specific grievances or make requests for assistance with specific problems. The opportunity to do so may have had an effect on encouraging parents with these concerns to participate in the study.

### **Phase 2 Study Limitations**

Teachers entered data on their own performance in terms of conversing with the parent for at least five minutes on the TIPS assignments and student academic progress. Self-reports are subject to bias. It would have been a stronger study to have recorded the conversations and had an independent rater measure the length and assess the content. Attendance at parent–teacher nights is a limited measure of prior parent at-school involvement, as it does not include activities such as attendance at a sports event. An additional limitation is that although the English teachers were instructed to record any in-person or phone contact with students' parents, the study did not seek to measure parent contacts during the study period with teachers of other subjects.

A Phase 2 limitation is that the intervention was conducted for a seven-week period. Other studies of TIPS administered the assignments over a longer period of time and found modest improvements in student achievement as measured by student grades or raters' assessments of writing samples (Van Voorhis, 2003; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997). This was not attempted in the present study because the intervention to achieve bidirectional communication was short in duration and would be unlikely to produce a measurable improvement in marking period grades or test scores. An evaluation of this intervention over a longer period of time could measure changes in student achievement and also measure student behavior to see if increased parent involvement is associated with improved student behavior. Researchers may also wish to evaluate variations on the grade level and subject matter and whether this type of intervention on a larger scale would improve school organizational climate in terms of teacher–parent perceptions of each other.

## Conclusion

A low-cost intervention in a low-income, high-minority school district to increase middle school parent involvement at home and at school is feasible, acceptable, and effective. Most parents have a parent involvement role construction, but schools can assist in overcoming limitations related to self-efficacy, invitations, and perceived lack of respect, care, and trustworthiness. School staff often underestimate the willingness of parents to be involved and are likely to find a much greater response than they might anticipate by initiating outreach for parent–teacher bidirectional communication.

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