Look! Listen! Learn! Parent Narratives and Grounded Theory Models of Parent Voice, Presence, and Engagement in K–12 Education

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Abstract

Educators' expectations and understandings of parental involvement in our nation's schools are often disconnected from the reality of students' home lives. This qualitative study purports that educators often lose opportunities to more fully understand and serve students, particularly when perceptions of parental involvement and home–school–community relationships are not accurate or expansive enough to appreciate the nuances of different cultural, economic, or geographic circumstances. Parent (or caregiver) engagement, as we define it, encapsulates both parent voice and parent presence. Parent voice implies not only that parents have ideas and opinions about their children, but also that educators are receptive to this voice, allowing for an open, multidirectional flow of communication. Similarly, parent presence refers to actions related to the voices of caregivers. Based on a grounded theory model of qualitative research, we used a small, theoretically derived sample of parents involved with a local parent education program to further understand parent engagement, presenting detailed descriptions of conversations and writing done by participants through focus groups and interviews. From these data, new models of parent voice and presence emerged. These models act as precursors to a reconfigured and more comprehensive model of parent engagement. Crucial to the final model is an understanding of parent participation in children's lives that is fluid, robust, and specific to context and culture. The final model presented herein is a combination of parent voice and parent presence, whereby children's well being is central to the interactions.

Key Words: parental involvement, model, engagement, voice, presence, cultural, grounded theory, qualitative, school partnerships, mothers, family

Introduction

"Because this is my thing—I know my child better than anybody else in this school...."

—Trina, mother and advocate[1]

"Don't assume that low income means low intelligence or low caring. I raise my children to the best of my ability…."

—Latisha, mother and advocate

Individuals naturally rely upon preexisting assumptions and predictions in order to glean meaning from the world around them, and educators are no exception to this rule. Educational environments, however, are inextricably linked to the diverse and rapidly changing demographics of the children and families they serve. Holding untested assumptions about children and families is a harmful place to begin when attempting to work out issues related to teaching, learning, and parent involvement. Educators' perceptions of parental involvement are, more often than not, situated in good faith and stem from well-meaning intentions but can misconstrue what many parents' expectations, participation, love, and care for their children look and feel like on a daily basis. Erroneous assumptions can be doubly harmful when put in the context of working with low-income and/or minority parents since, in many cases, these children have fewer opportunities to prove these assumptions wrong. Understandings of parent involvement must involve an expansive appreciation of the nuances of different cultural, economic, and geographic circumstances in order for schools to flourish (Delpit, 2006; Fine, 1993; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hong, 2011; Jeynes, 2011a; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valdez, 1996; Yosso, 2005). If we listen closely to parents—their wishes and dreams, fears and concerns—we find that there are lessons and suggestions that emanate from a deep sense of caring. Educators must be able to view such listening opportunities as an asset in order to be the best educators possible.

Popular models of parent (read also caregiver) involvement and the emergence of national and regional parent involvement coalitions brought parent engagement to the forefront of educational discourse over the last three decades (e.g., organizations such as Parents as Teachers, the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, the National Network of Partnership Schools, the School Community Network, and the Harvard Family Research Project).

In particular, the work of Joyce Epstein (see especially Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Epstein, 2009, 2011) moved the discussion about parent engagement into mainstream educational discourse across the United States. Supporting this trend, the first wave of modern research from the late 1980s on into the turn of the century regarding parent/caregiver involvement focused primarily on the efficacy and value of parent engagement as measured by student achievement along with the actions parents must take to be "involved" with their children's educations but fell short of fully explicating the cultural and social dimensions at play in parent and caregiver engagement efforts (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003; Keith et al., 1993; Steinberg, 1996). More recently, parent engagement literature is beginning to address the value of cultural, social, and economic facets of parent engagement (Auerbach, 2009, 2011, 2012; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes 2011a; Wong & Hughes, 2006). Still, many current home–school engagement practices seem predicated on the notion that parents do not naturally operate in ways that are caring and involved for their children. Common assumptions held by administrators and teachers, and often propagated in teacher education programs, are that educators must "teach" parents how to be involved and "train" them in ways of caring for children (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Ramirez, 2004). This is not only insensitive to the realities of different parenting styles and family constructs but is ultimately a nonproductive approach to the construction of successful models of engagement. In addition, many current research paradigms and engagement models suppose parents are actors whose role in schools, whenever a role exists, is to support the teacher and/or school, as opposed to participating in an integrated partnership with the goal of helping children develop their full potential.

We posit that the role of the parent and the relationships between parents and schools must be reconsidered. Parent engagement must include two central components: parent voice and parent presence. This work serves as a direct response to Jeynes's (2011a) call to revisit outdated and insufficient notions of parent involvement and is supported by Auerbach's (2009) recent research on family engagement from the perspective of school administrators. It is also buoyed by Yosso's (2005) well-reasoned examination of dominant forms of cultural capital. Jeynes's charge led us to explore the possibility of a new model of parent engagement that includes parent voice *and* parent presence, components seldom seen as part of a larger whole. Support for these new components is found in this small but in-depth examination of the perspectives of eight parents' understandings of parent engagement, bound in a grounded theory model of qualitative research. Ultimately, this work leads us to a hypothetical model of parent engagement that we argue should act as the basis for future

research. Crucial to this hypothetical model is the notion that parent voice and parent presence are equal and central tenets of parent engagement. Understanding parent participation in children's lives as a fluid and culturally sensitive combination of parent voice and parent presence, in both the home and school contexts, could foster a much needed, modern, and comprehensive model of parent engagement that all educational stakeholders might use and which should prove especially helpful to classroom teachers. Within this new framework, the discursive semantics of parent involvement are particularly important. Thus, in addition to the presentation of models of parent voice, parent presence, and engagement, we seek to clarify the meanings and expectations that accompany much of the writing and thinking on parent involvement.

Parent Voice and Parent Presence Defined

Parent voice and parent presence require clear definitions in order for the data herein to be optimally analyzed and understood. Defining these key terms helps to ensure that this work results in clear and useful information across applications. These definitions emerged during the methodological design process and were confirmed as data were analyzed. The definitions, while echoing sentiments from other parent involvement researchers are, in the end, unique to this project (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Epstein, 2011; Jeynes, 2011a).

Parent voice, as we define it, is the right and opportunity for parents and caregivers to express their thinking and understandings about their children's and families' everyday lives and educational experiences in and out of school. Ideally, these understandings have weight within educational settings and ultimately have a positive influence on the educational experiences of children. Parent voice may consist of parents' desires, dreams, goals, and hopes for their children, information traditionally lacking acknowledgement in educational circles. Parent voice may also come in the form of frustration, concern, or anger over isolation, exclusion, or disrespect within the educational process.

Parent presence refers to a parent or caregiver's actions and involvement in their children's education, whether through formal school spaces and traditional activities or "in more personal, informal spaces, including spaces created by parents themselves"(Carreón et al., 2005, p. 466.) Traditional activities include helping with homework, attending school-sponsored events, being a member of the PTA, or responding to notes or queries from the school. Unconventional, more personal spaces of involvement in school might include finding ways to engage the educational world despite language barriers, cooking food or working behind the scenes at a school event, being a consistent weekly presence in a classroom, or negotiating safe living and transportation options related to schooling (Carreón et al., 2005). Moreover, moving beyond

the classroom and school contexts, parent presence includes all facets of caregiver involvement that supports and allows a child's educational success. It is through parent presence that acts of care are observed, noticed, and integrated into the educational experience of each child. The goal of parent presence is to build the social and cultural capital of children, both inside and outside of formal educational environments. Parent voice and parent presence are related and, at times, overlapping components of parent engagement. Neither of the two, however, seem to be fully understood by educators and therefore merit additional examination.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is built upon a triad of beliefs. First, the philosophy of educational care (Noddings, 1984) forms the foundation of our framework. Similarly, sociocultural theory (Lareau, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978) and critical race theory (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) inform our work from the vantage point of the design, implementation, and implications of the research for practitioners. Noddings's philosophy of educational care dictates that educators must be willing to have an ongoing, receptive, reciprocal, and motivated relationship with their students and, by extension, their families. This relationship occurs through modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation of appropriate actions and behaviors supported by all parties involved (Noddings, 1984). Vygotsky and Bell remind us that we must consider the social and cultural contexts of all children's lives in order to develop a fully informed understanding of an individual. Moreover, critical race theory, as it applies to education, implores researchers and practitioners to consider race as a salient feature of our society and to acknowledge the power differential that embedded racism and wealth differentials in our nation create for children and schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Educational care, sociocultural theory, and critical race theory are not, themselves, means to an end in the context of parent engagement, but represent a proactive attempt to diminish cultural insensitivity, prevent parent and child isolation within the educational realm, and advocate for a more open and inclusive model of parent engagement in the educational process.

Historical Framework

Parent engagement fosters the notion that the cultural and social nuances of families are a source of strength as opposed to an oppositional force in the education of children. Central to the philosophy of parent engagement is the understanding of parents as a child's first and best teacher. Our work here builds on a wide range of scholars, notably, the work of Moll and his colleagues

on the understanding of funds of knowledge, especially cultural knowledge vis-à-vis families (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992). As far back as the Enlightenment, philosophers frequently stressed the family as central to the development and learning of children, and many modern educational philosophers have followed suit. Understanding the relationship of family and home to school, however, is a much younger and lesser developed concept. As school became a more formalized institution, parents became less personally involved in their children's education (Berger, 1991). Along with this, the general acceptance of teaching as a profession perpetuated the idea that teachers were professionals who expected parents to simply be supportive without question of teachers and schools (Anfara & Mertens, 2008; Lareau, 2002).

In the shadow of the great society debates of the 1960s, "educators and policy-makers renewed focused on parent involvement as a promising way to improve educational outcomes for poor and underachieving students" (McLaughlin & Shields, 1987, p. 157). Federal government programs such as Head Start, Follow Through, and Title I programs included mandates for parent participation and looked toward the development of the whole child. Research surrounding the relationships of family and home to school emerged as evaluations surrounding the effectiveness of governmental programs and other interventions began in earnest (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Martinez (2004) notes more recent movements toward the turn of the century related to community control of schools, especially in the education of low-income children, special education students, and English language learners, and a focus on implementing strategies to promote parent, family, and community involvement. Recent research also demonstrates that parent involvement is a cornerstone of increased school efficacy in promoting student learning, motivation, and school persistence (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

Demographic Framework

Finally, the rapidly changing demographics of the American public school system must be considered as the backdrop for this research. Over 84% of U.S. elementary school teachers are female, and over 82% are White (Aud et al., 2011). Of the almost 55.5 million children in American public schools, 43% percent are minorities, and more than 11 million children speak a language other than English at home, the majority of whom are Spanish speakers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). There is no question that the American teacher corps does not adequately reflect the composition of our schools based on gender, race, or ethnicity and that this impacts our need for a more expansive

understanding of parents and parent engagement. To be clear, teachers and students/families do not have to be from the same ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic background to work together successfully. Rather, regardless of the cultural perspective of the teacher or student, the deeper the understanding of the cultural, social, and economic backgrounds of all of the constituents within an educational setting, the more likely that setting is to be conducive to learning (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). It can be argued that teachers cannot successfully and consistently teach and fully develop children's potential without a flexible, culturally and socially sensitive framework for parent engagement.

Method

Study Description

This qualitative study was conducted as a pilot study for a larger project on parent voice in K–12 education. As researchers, we acknowledge the pedagogical and theoretical perspective we bring to this work, which maintains that parent involvement is often narrowly defined, leaving certain families, actions, and cultural traditions mostly moot in a child's educational process (Glesne, 2006; Hong, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Valdes, 1996). It is most certainly the case that this and other ideological biases informed the construction of the project at hand. Through the use of careful member checking, the employment of multiple triangulation techniques, and careful review by outside readers, we believe that our reporting of the data collected is both accurate and useful. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of a major, private research university in the Midwestern United States.

Using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory approach, we merged hypothetical ideas with qualitative data to create an inductive theory on parent voice and parent presence. After cursory exploration of the extant literature, we constructed a conceptual map of terms currently used in parent involvement literature. Glaser and Holton (2004) and Glaser and Strauss (1967) both support the use of concept mapping as a valuable part of the qualitative research process and posit that mapping allows for new theories and models to develop without being unduly influenced by existing theory. Through data collection and ongoing analysis, we hypothesized new models of parent voice and parent presence to synthesize our understanding of the parent involvement landscape.

Participants

Purposeful sampling and, specifically, theoretical sampling, was used to select participants for this study (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). By selecting a small, targeted sample, the researchers sought to both simplify

the recruitment process and to also access a group of parents who were already engaged in parent education programs and thus more likely to be articulate on the topic of parent engagement. The sampling frame, therefore, was parent participants in two local parent education programs. Selection criteria originally included only low-income parents (as determined by free and reduced lunch eligibility) who currently have children in the local public school district. During the recruitment process, these criteria expanded to include surrounding districts and parents of any income level, since participation in the parent education programs was not limited by district or income. The final sample consisted of eight mothers. Three-quarters of the women's children participated in the free and/or reduced lunch program. Participants were asked to self-identify race/ethnicity. Five women identified as African American, three as Caucasian. All of the mothers had multiple children in multiple public schools. Their children ranged in age from 1 to 25 years old. Finally, all but one participant was employed. However, two of the mothers had recently been laid off from jobs working within schools themselves. Notably, our sample consisted entirely of women, at least four of whom were single mothers.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study consisted of two data collection methods. First, two different focus groups were conducted with participants choosing to attend one of the two scheduled meetings. Focus groups were held for approximately two hours with childcare provided to encourage robust participation. One participant contributed her thoughts via an interview spanning approximately 50 minutes in length in lieu of participating in a focus group due to scheduling conflicts. (See Appendix for focus group/interview script.) Second, parent participants were asked to write hypothetical letters to a "teacher" of their choice about their family, themselves, and their children as they saw these groups related to education.[2] All participants were able to participate in the writing process unaided, but mechanisms were in place for non-English speakers and/or those who might have been functionally illiterate. Data remained anonymous and confidentiality was assured for the participants.

As with all qualitative research, data analysis was an ongoing process throughout transcription, coding, and writing processes. Data were transcribed by hand and coded using an open coding model, with attention to constant comparison between participants. Data were sorted into thematic units and subjected to axial coding, looking for additional categories and groupings (Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Holton, 2004). During open coding, data were then cross-referenced with coded letters to find additional subcategories and agreement amongst source material. Open coding allowed for themes based

on both frequency and depth of discussion (saturation) of a given idea. Lastly, axial coding was used to group ideas based on the constituent groups or arenas addressed by participants. As grounded theory suggests, these themes and arenas directly informed the creation of the model presented in the discussion section. As Patton (2001) advocates, two separate triangulation methods were employed with dual researcher coding (analyst triangulation) and letter versus focus group/interview comparisons (source triangulation) to substantiate both the data itself and the forthcoming model.

As part of the analytic process, the researchers examined their dimensions of objectivity, credibility, internal validity, external validity, and utilization (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We believe that the study meets the evaluative criteria of each of these standards but would be remiss if we failed to consistently acknowledge the potential impact of personal interpretations on our study results. The professor–student research team for this work allowed for some diversity of perspective regarding data interpretation due to differences in age, experience, life stage, and educational involvement. The varied perspectives allowed for a deep engagement within each phase of the study, including research design, coding, and data analysis, thereby adding to the reliability of the work.

Finally, and importantly, as we seek to complicate our understanding of parent engagement to include the ideas of parent voice and parent presence, we do so by using *all* the data our participants provided in their narratives and writing. This includes the participants' conversations about what they currently do related to involvement in their children's lives *and* those ideas which they articulated as things they *wish* to do but are not invited, allowed, or asked about in the current educational climate. Without an examination of the idealized actions presented by our participants alongside their actual reported actions we limit our analysis to a paradigm of parent engagement that does not include the possible and handicap our models from the outset. Here, too, we also seek to model how valuing voice can lead to deeper ideas and understanding about a given phenomenon.

Findings

Parent Voice and Parent Presence

Recall our understanding of parent voice and presence. Parent voice, as we defined it, is the right and opportunity for parents and caregivers to express their understandings about their child(ren)'s and families' everyday lives and educational experiences in and out of school. These expressions may consist of parents' desires, dreams, goals, and hopes for their families and children as well as frustration, concern, or anger over isolation and exclusion. Parent presence

refers to a parent or caregiver's active involvement in their children's education, whether through formal school space (traditional activities) or "in more personal, informal spaces, including spaces created by parents themselves" (Carreón et al., 2005).

Ultimately, parents both wrote and spoke about five key arenas in which parents constructed narratives related to parent engagement: children, self (parent), family, teacher, and school. In their own words, we experience the broad ways in which these mothers conceive of their role in their children's educational process within each arena and see two distinct spaces of parent engagement emerge. First, parents describe ways in which they are present, involved, and engaged (or, in many cases, wish to be) specifically in the context of the schooling process. Second, parents describe their thoughts, understanding, and actions related to family and out of school life spaces. Together, these arenas and spaces work to reframe our understanding of parents' actions and thinking in relationship to school involvement. Thus, our first and perhaps most poignant observation is that many parents do have a great deal of motivation to support their children's education in a variety of ways and work hard to sort out the details of a given child's educational experience. Furthermore, we note that through opportunities to express themselves, parents have a great deal to offer educators, should they be open to listening. The intimate understandings of children, family, teachers, and school articulated by the participants in this study support the claim that parents are well equipped to participate in the educational process of their children and should have the opportunity to do so in meaningful and safe ways on a regular basis, just as Auerbach (2009, 2011, 2012) advocates.

Parent Voice and Presence Regarding the Child: Building Relationships and Parent Advocacy

Data supported parents' desire for teachers to not only "know" their children on a cognitive/academic level, but also on a personal level. Trina, a parent of five children ranging in age from 1 to 11 noted, "Because this is my thing—I know my child better than anybody else in this school, and this is how I do every one of my kids when I meet their teacher." Trina was describing her process of sharing information with new teachers and felt strongly that teachers should be asking parents about their children regularly. Trina is unique in that she has the desire and agency to provide this information to her child's teacher whether she is asked or not.

Some parents were not as comfortable sharing information about their children at the beginning of our work together, many out of fear of what educator assumptions might result from receiving additional information. Their

descriptions of their children came with caveats that they did not readily share information like this with teachers except when asked. Here we see compliance with the unwritten rule "speak only when spoken to" that children are often asked to adhere to by adults. Without opportunities such as this research project to share ideas, one might assume parents do not have anything of significance to share about their children, which is, at least for the women working on this project, entirely untrue. Three categories of information—related to children, parent advocacy, and building relationships between families and school—emerged in our findings. First, parents all eagerly described their children's potential to us. Second, parents provided what they thought to be useful descriptive information about their child's behaviors and needs. Lastly, parents were apt to share information related to concerns they have for their children in academic settings. In each instance, their examples are compelling and connected to related action on the part of the parents.

Within the data, there emerged an overwhelming desire from parents for teachers to have high expectations for their children. This was indicative of omnipresent and often implicit parental belief in their children's potential. One parent noted, "As a parent I have only three expectations for my kids: to be kind, responsible, and follow the rules." Another parent, Serena, took a different approach, writing about how "bright" her children are and that they "know that there is nothing they can't achieve." Amy wrote that her son has a "good, strong mind." Parent praise from Trina was a story, "I mean, her teacher was very hard on her….My daughter got straight A's on this last report card. She, the teacher, called me after school and said, 'You need to be very proud. She worked her tail off.'" Consistent among all the parent comments was the expectation for teachers to hold children in high regard. Parents supported these high expectations vis-à-vis phone calls with the teacher and clear explication of expectations at home.

The second aspect of parent voice related to the child focused on building relationships through the sharing of information. Parents wanted to provide information about their child that might be helpful for a teacher to know. Parents described health issues, academic needs, and again, expectations for their children and how they wanted opportunities to tell teachers these things. Amy described one of her children in her writing to his teacher, "Xavier can be sensitive at times, talkative also. At times he can be hot headed...." In her letter, Serena shared her belief that "keeping kids [including hers] busy keeps them out of trouble." Amy also noted the difficulties her child had with eating during school. Jen, mother of two high school students, made a point about older children needing parent involvement "even though they are 13, 14, and 15." In each case, we see evidence of parents as advocates who, if they were asked,

would provide information they believed would help their child and further solidify the parent–teacher–student relationship.

Finally, parents also took a great deal of care in the letters they wrote to alert teachers to unique characteristics of their children, especially concerns about their child's development or academic progress. Latisha pointed out that her son's IEP recognized the importance of a teacher understanding her child's special needs. She appreciated this and wished for more interaction with the special education professionals. Amy noted that one of her children had asthma. Lisa wanted to be sure that the teacher knew her children have medical conditions including ADHD, depression, and arthritis that impact their abilities. For Amy and Lisa, having a space to discuss and make sure the basic health needs of their children are taken care of in the school setting was an important undertaking. Donna made the comment,

> I would like to meet the teachers. One time, the younger one escaped [me meeting her teachers]. They didn't let me go conference with one, and I say, "Hey? You have a teacher yet? I must meet the teacher"…so then last semester I met him...and I know she's [her daughter] fine, but I mean, it's one way or the other [meeting the teacher].

Donna's recognition of the importance of "checking in" with teachers is additional evidence of the natural inclination of parents to build relationships with educators and to communicate concerns related to their children. Conversely, the participants in this work were more than happy to hear concerns or comments the teacher might have about their children. Echoing Donna's comment, Lisa expressed a host of concerns that she would inform a teacher about if given the opportunity. She said,

> It [absence of his father] has caused some emotional turmoil for Beau. He still is looking for him to step up and be a "dad." He has also suffered from depression due to these issues as well. He has some bad days still where he gets real sad and emotional. Mostly, when that happens, he's looking for someone other than me to talk to and be understanding.

In each instance, parents wanted the hypothetical teachers to really "know" their children—the unique and wonderful things about their children as well as their strengths and weaknesses. As they discussed their letters, it was clear that they thought the teachers might know about some of these concerns but that parents were rarely asked to provide information above and beyond the "basics," as one mother put it. As Latisha, a mother who described herself as a "hard-working, Black female" eloquently noted,

> Don't put my child in a box. He is not like anyone else you've ever taught. He is capable. He has music in his head. He may not sit perfectly still. He does not need Ritalin. Do not label him….

The depth of detail that these mothers shared about their children in their letters to the teachers and through their discourse was evidence of deep engagement and meaningful activity with their children in everyday life. This is a major facet of parent presence in the truest sense of the word—attending to the day in and day out needs of a child without pause and making clear connections between this sacred work of the everyday and the larger picture of parent engagement.

Parent Voice and Presence Regarding the Self: Behavioral and Cultural Modeling

Again, participants did not immediately share much information about their individual lives at the outset of the focus groups. Yet, in the process of our discussions, many personal stories and anecdotes emerged capturing the idea of parents' perceptions of themselves. These examples illuminate the fact that the mothers saw themselves as individuals who needed to model and, in some cases, explicitly defend what being a good, hard working parent in their particular cultural context meant.

Many descriptions of self came from the hypothetical letters to teachers that the women wrote. As a reminder, in these letters, participants were free to write whatever they desired regarding their family, lives, and children to a child's teacher.[3] Two categories have emerged from our data sources. First, the participants framed their identities in terms of their parenting practices. Next, they provided descriptions of themselves and narratives of their willingness to be involved with their child's school in ways which were feasible given their work and space circumstances but often less traditional.

Interestingly, parents all took the time to frame themselves first as parents in their letters; they did not introduce themselves to teachers in terms of their employment or with individual characteristics in mind immediately, but as mothers/parents. For example, Serena, mother of three, began her letter by saying, "I'm a loving and devoted mother." Amy introduced herself as "Xavier's mom;" Lisa started off with "My name is Lisa, mother of Jack and Matthew…I am a single parent." The fact that these parents construct their identity focused on their role as a parent is a clue regarding their level of involvement in their children's lives.

Parents also shared descriptions of their parenting. These descriptions included strong statements about the compassionate relationships these parents have with their children. Ebony asserted, "I am a parent who cares, and I am here for my child." Amy, declared "I'm very direct and to the point and very involved in my child's life." Serena shared, "I started off raising my kids as a single mother. I will say it was very challenging for me, but as a parent/mother,

I was there for every important event." These parents felt as if it was necessary to explain to teachers that they care for and support their child, as opposed to thinking the teachers will automatically assume this. As Latisha affirmed, "I would say on my behalf, I'm a parent first and foremost. Anything. A job. Whatever. My child comes first." In these descriptions we see parent presence emerge in the form of playing the role of provider: "doing whatever it takes," being "very involved." and "being at every important event."

Parents' self-description also seemed designed to counter negative assumptions or stereotypes that they experienced or that they believed teachers may harbor. Donna, an African American woman, described herself and warned against judging solely on outside appearances:

> …I'm a unique person, everybody is unique, doesn't mean that if I'm this way, or I look this way, my children don't have a way of surviving, and so perceiving individuals from the physical appearance doesn't always count for, there's more to it. You have an open mind and share.

Latisha cautioned teachers against making quick assumptions about her life based solely upon demographic characteristics:

> Don't assume that low income means low intelligence or low caring. I raise my children to the best of my ability…I am a hard-working, Black female. I don't sell drugs or walk the streets. Please don't put me in a box. I am well educated.

Again, the fact that Latisha felt the need to counter assumptions was powerful evidence of the view parents believe teachers have of them. In part, it is this process of clearing up assumptions, both coming and going, that allows teachers and parents to connect in new, robust, positive, and productive ways. Setting aside assumptions and engaging in listening matters to the educative process. Here, too, we note the active component of leading by example that these parents are espousing in their letters.

In another way, Amy models a powerful means of having her voice heard when she says, "I found that, when I would call [teachers], it wasn't near as effective [as writing]. It [the writing] made me feel better because they had to listen to me." Amy is not only noting her need to be heard but the fact that she has found and uses a particular communication strategy (writing) to insist that her presence is not ignored.

Lastly, parents expressed their willingness to be actively involved with their children's lives. At the end of the day, these parents wanted to be even more active in their children's lives at school than was formally allowed by the schools their children attended. Serena says, "I'm willing to listen and want to have a good relationship with my children's teachers." In this quote we see Lisa model

the behavior she expects from her children's teachers: "I will keep you informed as well with what's going on, or if you have any questions, call me." Lisa had important information to share about her son's life but seemed to need a teacher to be willing to ask for it. Note the behavioral modeling that Lisa tries to exhibit for her children with her proposed communication strategy.

Parent Voice and Presence Regarding the Family: Providing Basic Needs and Cultural Modeling

The participants discussed a variety of facets about parenting roles and challenges. Parents mentioned being single parents, working, having a limited income, race, spirituality, and having implied and explicit expectations as a family for their children's educational endeavors. Three notable findings related to parent voice and presence emerged. First, parents were able and willing to share specific information and details related to their family life, but not necessarily directly related to schooling. In these instances, parents recognized that sharing some types of information could be considered tangential or inconsequential to academic performance to some educators. Sharing information was a risky proposition for these parents, one that perhaps might make them seem less in tune with what information was, in fact, important to school in the teacher's eyes. In reality, the hesitation was far more about their perceptions of the lack of safe spaces for expressing ideas than about anything else. The participants' thoughtfulness about the potential risks involved in sharing too much information demonstrates their desire as parents to do not only what is best for their child but also what is safest. This was evidenced by the powerful action some of the women took as they crossed out writing about their personal circumstances even in their hypothetical letters.

Our data reflect a general consensus on the part of the parents that being "involved" in school does not stop with homework or volunteering in the classroom but demands a constant attentiveness to the basic needs of their children. In the focus groups, the mothers discussed at length working hard to give their children "everything" they need and the implied judgment on families from schools and teachers at times. Amy brought up how offended she was when her child brought home a "contract" related to home practices:

> I was rubbed very wrong by this. It was telling me, you know, you make sure your kids get to sleep, you make sure your kids do their homework, you make sure they go to school dressed clean, and I'm thinking—don't, what, how dare you? Of course this is gonna happen. You're gonna make me sign something that says I'm doing this? Kiss my ass. Excuse me, but I was like, you're crazy. I didn't sign it.

Amy was offended by the suggestion that she would not, without a reminder via this contract, meet the basic needs of her child. Her statement (quoted above) garnered a robust discussion amongst the mothers about implications of this request; namely, if a child comes to school unkempt, hungry, tired, or without homework done that somehow this was desirable or the fault of the parent without reason. The group agreed there is no "benefit of the doubt" for parents in educational spaces. Here we see the notion of deficit thinking creep into the experiences our participants recounted so carefully.

From our limited time with the mothers it is very clear that these types of assumptions and actions on the part of the schools are part of what make family circumstances and details of family life difficult for parents to share with educators. This was especially evident in the letter written by Latisha who wrote poignant ideas only to cross them out, including the following comments: "my income is limited but..." and "I have to be both parents at times." She was clearly filtering what she wanted a teacher to know, even in a hypothetical situation. Ebony made sure to drive the point home that "he [her child] does come from a single parent home, but he does have a parent…and siblings who…are there for him to give him the support that he needs." In each of these cases we hear the implied, fierce defense of these mothers who assert that they not only provide the basic needs of their children but far, far more in the way of love, protection, stimulation, and time. The implication of these ideas on the notion of parent presence is important since it is, in most cases, the school that implies with a parent contract that everyday caregiving is activity directly and necessarily related to schooling.

Another mother, Donna, asked the teacher to "start her day with a prayer" providing insight into the value she places on praying as a part of daily life. She went on to say, "Do not overlook the spiritual tests of students and their families." Here again we see the protection of the right to a spiritual life as part of fulfilling basic needs. Donna was also quick to make the point that, "failure [of a child academically] comin' back to you [the parent] doesn't mean the teachers or schools aren't doing their jobs, it might be whatever is happening at home." Amy made note of a related idea,

> I would say, if there was a divorce happening or a recent death in the family or anything, you know, like that, you'd want them to know. And what your expectations are. You know, that this is what you expect.

In each of the examples above, parents communicated sensitive information (or sometimes decided to cross out sensitive information) to teachers in ways that indicated a great deal of thoughtfulness and an understanding of the connection between home circumstances and school life. In addition, these data

display yet again a fierce commitment these parents have to understanding their child's unique circumstances.

Parents also expressed their desire for more involvement at the school level. Multiple mothers pointed out that they would like to see more men involved in schools with their children, not only as teachers but in terms of families and the community. Latisha pointed out the idea that schools "need more community involvement, as a whole. I mean, there are so many churches in the area, you know if you got churches to volunteer you might have more men." Serena seconded this idea, noting,

> I think there should be more mentors, men mentors, for the lil' children who don't have men in their lives…for all races that need a male figure just to be there. There just needs to be more of that…yeah, we need some more men.

Embedded in this thoughtful exchange about children needing more men to look up to and have as mentors was an overt attempt on the part of the research participants to bring to the forefront of our conversation the absence of fathers in their lived experiences. The group recognized this as an issue related to both race and class that they were working to think through. The suggestion that the schools partner with local churches to recruit male mentors is steeped in a rich history of Black churches being the seat of community participation and cultural wealth. Here we see an idea for action relating to cultural practices and historical context as well as parent's advocating for a holistic sense of well being for their children. Finally, there were notable instances where race as it related to the family was part of our conversations. Latisha shared a story about her daughter experiencing racism in her middle school classroom and the lack of opportunity she was given to follow up on what her daughter communicated:

> I remember when my older daughter was in middle school and had a Black teacher and she said, "Mom, this lady don't like Black kids." I'm like, "What do you mean, she's a Black teacher, how could she not like Black kids?"…so I followed protocol…and that was the one teacher that would not let me in her classroom, even after 24 hours notice.

She continued by saying,

> I think that they could probably go out and try, and try and bring in more Black parents, because it kind of seems that, um [long pause] I don't think that they [the school] don't quite understand, like, the Black family, and I don't think they are trying to understand.

Latisha's thoughts on race and Black culture were supported by others. Donna said, "I should be accepted like they would like to be accepted in any social gathering…everybody is unique…and so perceiving individuals from their physical appearance doesn't always count for, there's more to it." Comments about involving Black families and finding additional opportunities for minority mentors were spread throughout the focus group transcripts in smaller instances, as well. In each example, the mothers recognized how important it was for their children to be proud of who they were and the cultural and ethnic backgrounds that they were associated with, especially in cases where the other children, teachers, or school officials acted in ways that are contrary to these positive beliefs. The participants also recognized that part of their job as engaged parents would have to be to counterbalance some of the negative ways different cultural groups, individuals, or ideas are portrayed in school settings, as was the case with Latisha's daughter's experience.

Overall, parent voice about family, meeting basic needs, and modeling cultural identity has particularly unique dimensions to it, especially given how risky sharing these aspects of themselves seemed to the parents. It includes sharing information about family circumstances, a plea for additional opportunities for engagement, and in some cases, charges to be more racially and culturally sensitive.

Parent Voice and Presence Regarding the Teacher: Relationship Building and Traditional Involvement

Parents' expectations regarding their children's teachers dominated focus group conversations at times. Upon examination, this heavy focus can be partially attributed to the way in which the focus group questions were framed, that is, with an emphasis on school climate and culture (see Appendix). Two salient ideas emerge from these data points. First, each parent in our study considered teachers the primary contact and conduit for information, teaching, and learning with respect to individual children and educational settings. Second, parents had distinct and specific ideas regarding how teachers should behave in order for their children to succeed. The participants felt strongly about teachers being the primary point of contact in schools and classrooms being the primary space to develop a greater understanding of the actions and ideas associated with family–teacher relationships and traditional parent involvement. Parent understanding of education and teachers is a critical aspect of parent voice, as it opens the pathway for a two-way line of communication between parents and teachers, specifically as it relates to a child's learning. Likewise, opening lines of communication thoughtfully also allows parents to examine and better understand any preconceived notions they might have

about teachers, leading to more effective parent presence within the traditional confines of the teacher–parent relationship and to a clearer picture of parent engagement.

Participants focused their discussion regarding teachers around the need for high expectations and appropriate levels of challenge for children, successful communication, and the importance of personal relationships between teachers and their students. Trina, mother of five, wanted teachers to "give my child the best education that's out there." Another parent added, "As an educator, it's your job to make sure that they learn." Latisha, also a mother of five, said this about one of her children:

> My son has an IEP. I expect him to be included in whatever is going on in the classroom. Please don't put him on the computer to keep him "busy" until you are finished teaching the others. I expect you to teach my children.

The desire on the part of the parents for a teacher to maintain high expectations went beyond simply noting that there had to be high standards. Interestingly, parents also briefly discussed the need for teachers to have a mastery of classroom management techniques and content expertise. High expectations without the ability to deliver high quality content and support a child's motivation is not sufficient, according to the parent participants. Parents recognized that high expectations, expertise in content, and classroom management knowledge are all three necessary components of successful classroom teaching. What's more, parents were able to articulate those ideas. This articulation indicated a more sophisticated level of engagement and understanding of educational pedagogy than what is typically ascribed to parents. As Serena noted, "If my child needs to be challenged—challenge him." Likewise, another seconded, "I expect you to challenge him and not let him slide by." Parents did not want their children's abilities and strengths overlooked or written off by teachers, particularly not as a result of assumptions based on gender, race, or disability. Latisha was adamant in her plea for her son's teacher not to overlook his abilities, "Don't put my child in a box...He is capable!...Do not label him."

The parent participants in our work set very high expectations for teacher behavior, particularly as it pertained to communication between teacher and home. However, the parent comments privileged traditional models of parent–teacher interaction. For these mothers, the teacher was expected to instigate most, if not all, conversations/communication about their children; phone calls home, teacher-suggested conferences, and notes home from school were seen as desirable. Interestingly, by defining the communicative process as primarily beginning with the teacher, these parents inadvertently demonstrate

the lack of agency many parents feel when it comes to communicating with teachers and schools. They seem to be responding to an already embedded belief in a "teacher as expert" model that can unintentionally lead educators and caregivers to believe parents are somehow less capable of knowing and sharing important information about their children related to the educational process. Thus, it is important to expand models of parent voice and presence to privilege conversations about children in a holistic manner. This expansion in understanding not only creates a sense of shared values but, most importantly, supports fluid bidirectional dialogue among teachers and parents.

Successful, authentic communication was an important factor in how parents viewed their overall relationship with teachers and schools and their ability to interact within the school environment. All but one parent specifically cited experiences and situations where communication was positive and allowed the parents to feel welcome within the school. For example, being kept abreast of what is happening in school was important to parents. Ebony noted, "As soon as something is goin' on, they're on the phone, they call me. His teacher emails me regularly." Trina appreciated having several communication options:

> We have a choice, as parents, to either get it in the newsletter or email, AND she also calls if we like it. You know, she tells us at the beginning of the school year to give numbers, pagers, whatever, and she will—and she does—she takes the time out every day.

Despite these descriptions of positive experiences, negative school encounters and communications were by far more the norm than not. "I can't get them to call me" and other similar phrases were common throughout the interview/focus groups. Serena remarked, "Good luck on teachers callin' you back," while Latisha mentioned, "They don't really call for good things. You get a phone call if your child's misbehaved." At times, parents wanted to be involved with their child's education and tried to communicate with teachers through conventional methods such as telephoning but were unsuccessful. This history of missed communication opportunities affected these mothers, and many ended their writing with phrases such as "Don't hesitate to call." Latisha added, "My number will always be available." Lisa said, "I will work with you in any way necessary and support you 100% as long as you communicate with me. If there should be a problem, please call or email." These quotes show active engagement and attempts to communicate with teachers despite past negative experiences. Here again, we see the traditional notion of the teacher having control of the lines of communication even when the parents were trying or willing to communicate with teachers.

Thankfully, when parents were speaking about teachers, they were also apt to describe the rapport and the connection that they had made with the

handful of particularly great teachers responsible for educating their children. Trina noted "One year, me and my daughter's teacher, we sat down for a half an hour and talked. Like, literally…." Lisa was inspired after forming a relationship with her son's guidance counselor: "I want to be a school counselor, I decided…I saw the difference that Jack's school counselor made, and…that's what I want to do." Here we see not only the importance of the relationship of Lisa's son to the counselor but the impact it had on Lisa as well. Serena, a mother of three, explained her relationship with her son's first grade teacher,

> She was nice; she was welcoming. "Come anytime," you know. She always called and invited me or vice-versa…she used to come to his basketball games. She was a really nice lady, really, really nice. So, it made me, you know, feel a lot welcome.

Serena's example, along with Lisa and Trina's short anecdotes, support a model of engagement that includes both voice and presence even in a traditional format. Parent engagement must consider an asset-based model of presence seen not only in parents' volunteering but in how parents seek out communication and relationship opportunities outside of those traditional spaces.

Parent Voice and Presence Regarding the School: Parent Advocacy and Traditional Involvement

Focus group questions regarding parent voice also addressed ideas and perceptions of the larger institution of education. Parent concerns and understanding regarding institutional issues receive relatively little consideration in existing models of parent involvement. Our data suggest that this is an important oversight, as several significant themes for parents emerged from our data: negative parent perceptions of school to home communication, the subordination of parent roles in educational decision making, a lack of opportunities for parent participation in school activities, and the need for additional resources for public schools to fully engage children and parents.

As suggested above, one of the aspects of education that parent participants focused on was past negative experiences within schools. This is doubly important given that no interview questions were framed in such a way as to suggest experiences of a negative nature. Parents relayed stories of miscommunication and misunderstanding between home and school. Some parents spoke of children being disciplined at school and school administrators being unsure why. Lisa said,

> I got a message, and so I called back, and the lady who called me to tell me that my son got in trouble couldn't even tell me what he got in trouble for. You know, I would ask questions, "Well, what happened?"…

> Well, "I don't know, I'm gonna have to ask someone."…It's really frustrating.

Latisha explained a similar situation involving her high school son,

> …so I actually went to the school board on a principal. Last year, my high schooler, well, he got jumped at high school, and whoever the guy was that jumped him, he beat the guy…and I wanted to see the videotape; the principal wouldn't let me. So…I mean that was a side [of me] that wouldn't normally come out, but my child got injured in your [the principal's] building, and you don't seem to care.

Another story of serious miscommunication between a mother and her son's school emerged in this conversation,

> I worked in [another town], and I got a call from Jack one day, you know, "Mom, are you coming to get me?" and I'm like, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Well you called the school and said that I had an appointment and that I was to wait outside after school, 'cuz you were coming to pick me up." No, I didn't…I was furrrious, you know, of course, I was scared to death, because I work in [other town]. So she [a friend's mom] took him home for me, and I went into the school, and the people in the office were so rude, sooo rude. And their response to me was, "What do you expect us to do?" You know, "We have all these kids to keep track of." I said, "Why was my child told to wait outside?"… they were just so rude, and just took no responsibility for that, and "It's not our fault, you know we have too many kids to keep track of." We wrote six letters, to the superintendent, to the principal, and I don't even remember who else they all went to, and I never got one response from anyone in the school corporation. Not an apology, not a nothing.

While the examples of poor school to home communications here are powerful in their own right, in each instance, what is perhaps most noteworthy is that parents did feel upset enough to voice their frustrations within the confines of this study. In all of the three cases noted here, the parents also felt strongly enough that they expressed their concerns to school administrators but to no avail. Their attempts to be present by becoming an advocate for safer, clearer, and transparent rules were not successful. From their vantage point, their lack of success in communicating concerns was *in spite* of the fact that they were trying to act in ways that followed the appropriate channels for voicing concerns to school officials.

Another theme to emerge from the data is parent subordination within the educational decision making process. These unfortunate instances can highlight the advocacy work of many parents when responded to appropriately.

By way of example, Amy tells a story of her twins being separated into two difference classrooms against her wishes. She notes that she was told it was a "district policy" to separate twins. Eventually, she found out this was not the case and fixed the circumstances for her children. Similarly, Lisa noted, "I've had a better relationship with security people at this school than with the actual educators." Ebony discussed the fact that she was given a hard time as she tried to do an intradistrict transfer, saying,

> when I transferred my son from one school to another school, because we moved and I wanted him to be in the right school for the district, um, they gave us a hard time…he was told that, you know, he didn't do well at his other high school, what makes you think he'll do better here?

In each of the previous examples, Ebony, Lisa, and Amy describe situations in which they were not afforded the respect or deference that one might expect as a concerned parent. In fact, in Ebony's case, it was implied by her child's educators that that they believed that she did not know what would be best for her child in the given circumstance—a traditional model of educational power.

Despite this, the parents in our study were clearly invested in their children's education and ready to act. Parents wanted not only to be informed about changes and respected as decision makers, but they also wanted to be involved in a capacity congruous with their daily lives. This is why the notion of advocacy enters into a model of parent presence so solidly. As Latisha asserted, "I am not always able to volunteer in the building, but if you need me to do something, please call me." Despite the challenges that these mothers face in raising children, they care deeply about teachers and schools and are keen to be included.

Another significant theme to emerge during data analysis was the opportunity (or lack thereof) as students get older for parents to participate in traditional school activities such as receiving and responding to newsletters, lunchtime visits, homework help, and conferences. The majority of parents related positive experiences of parent inclusion within different elementary schools but not as readily with upper level schools. As Jen noted,

> They [the elementary and middle schools] welcome the parents. I go in and have lunch with my sixth grader…and it, well, keeps me abreast of what's going on, too, because I can place a name and a face now with the kids who my kids are referring to.

Latisha adds, "[This elementary school] welcomes with open arms…just even coming in and working in your child's classroom or in the library…coming to 'em at lunch time." Similarly, Serena said of her son's school, "[It's] pretty good on getting families together. Keeping you involved, so, I like that." These

positive experiences of inclusion made parents feel welcome and a part of their children's lives. However, involvement in these ways did not change the overall perception of parents being on the "outside" of their children's educational experiences. With more respect for family lives and actions outside of the school walls, the chance to expand the notion of what families and, by extension, children can do is a powerful possibility.

Trina made it clear that middle and high school settings were not nearly as family friendly, saying, "And with middle school…I don't think that they have so much of a good open door policy as elementary." Amy agreed, saying, "But they didn't try to get you very involved, now that I think about it, when he was in high school." Others described involvement as a choice that families and parents have to make, sometimes under difficult circumstances. Amy continued, "and the open house was…was like, uh, speed dating, is what it seemed like." Still, on a different note, Donna observed, "I mean…we all busy, but you have to choose to, to also be there [at the school] knowing that your children…knowing that you are interested in them, in visiting, or have concerns." Yet again, we see examples here of trying to engage traditional school processes.

Parents voiced their understanding that the idea of parent engagement seemed to change when children reached a certain age and discussed traditional means of parental involvement. In addition to the lack of opportunities, some parents also expressed a similar sense of disillusionment with their ability to support and advocate for their children once they get older. As Serena, a mother of three children aged 5–15, declared, "Not much you can really do for high school, for your child in high school." Parents' beliefs that they have little impact on their children's success in high school is sobering and, again, warrants careful attention to the role of parent voice, especially as children get older.

Finally, the mothers in the study were quite cognizant of disparities in resources from district to district. In fact, some participants discussed using their knowledge of local school systems and of the social, economic, and cultural capital they possessed specifically to move to certain areas so that their children could attend particular public schools. Here we see parent presence via advocacy taken to a new level; no longer is the advocacy simply about the teacher–student or teacher–parent relationship. Advocacy now becomes about understanding all facets of the larger picture of a school and community space. The participants recognized that some parents lack the financial means to move to better school districts and not all parents are capable of providing their children with extra resources, such as personal tutoring, as evidenced by the remarks of Ebony, mother of three, "But a lot of times, some parents can't, you know, some families can't do that [get outside academic help]." Data also indicate that parents grasped the challenges faced by schools with limited resources

and that they understood how the absence of additional resources hindered the learning experiences and opportunities of their children. Trina talked extensively about the lack of resources in her elementary-aged cousin's school and how it affected her emotional well being,

> [She] would cry, you know, because she's havin' a meltdown, and she wants to talk to someone. They told her that they didn't have nobody to talk to her like that because there was so many kids up in that school with more problems than what she was having.

The shortage of guidance counselors in her elementary school negatively impacted Trina's cousin, suggesting that in some schools, the social and emotional well being of students is delegated to only a few counselors or social workers who cannot realistically support and care for such large numbers of children. Although Trina wished she could do something about the circumstances, she felt powerless to do so given her own circumstances.

Parents also voiced their understanding of school resources in a manner that acknowledged an understanding of the larger social and political structures related to education. Donna stated, "Unfortunately education is the number one [place to cut resources]. Wherever the state has to cut anything, it has to start from the education sector, which is hurting our future leaders." Donna's voice here recognizes the importance of education in creating the next generation of leaders and also the fact that often school funding is viewed as a luxury expenditure during times of economic hardship by the local, state, and federal governments. Here we see Donna exhibit the beginning of a social protest over the lack or inequitable funding in education with little success. Overall, through their firsthand experiences with their children and their schools, the parents expressed a clear understanding of the need for additional resources in public schools. Parents also noted their desire to advocate for stronger home–school–community relationships and parent involvement at the various levels of schooling.

Discussion

Together, Parent Voice and Parent Presence Equal Parent Engagement

Our analysis of how parents conceive of their involvement in their children's lives not only elucidates the phenomena of parent thinking/parent voice, but also highlights the associated actions to undergird a robust vision of parent presence. In each instance, when parents voiced their concerns, understandings, hopes, and frustrations surrounding schools, there was also evidence of

the ways parents acted or wished to act as engaged participants in their children's lives beyond the typical homework/conferences/parent contract mode of engagement we sometimes see teachers enact. As such, this evidence supports an expanded notion of parent voice and presence. Parents were able to describe, in careful detail, facets of their educational experience with children, their families, and schools and teachers—indicating active, consistent, and attentive engagement with their children and related educational issues. In addition, the descriptions of family life and ideal family engagement scenarios provide further evidence of parent presence in school settings and/or the desire of many parents for the opportunity to be in school settings more. As we learned from our participants, parents are often caregiver/provider, double parent, cheerleader, cultural liaison, protector, and facilitator all at the same time. Importantly, parents' feedback also evidenced ample support for the notion that teaching cultural mores and norms are also part of their roles.

On a broader level, parents conveyed in various ways their willingness and desire to be engaged with the schools more than they are at the present time—one-on-one with teachers, in school activities, and even with a political voice, noting some of the fiscal strains schools have at the present time. According to our data, parents did not shy away from being involved in their children's lives, but did not always see appropriate and constant entry points for that involvement. Here again is an indication of parent presence and a desire for action that is unaccounted for in many currently used models of parent engagement. Moreover, these parent voices lead the researchers to conclude that there is, in fact, a great deal more to parenting practices and circumstances that educators can overlook when they don't see parents at conferences or on the volunteer sign-up lists for school functions. In their focus groups and letters, parents continued to parse the ways in which they wanted to be involved in regular communication with teachers and the schools and noted the ways in which they already observed, communicated, and supported their children's overall growth. Additionally, it was clear that parents want educators to know the specific ways they love and care for their children. This desire of the parents seems to have little to do with ego, but rather seems to emanate from the desire to be respected by educators as capable, loving, and supportive parents.

As mentioned at the outset of this section, coding data led to the creation of five categories or spheres about which parents were sharing information: child, self, family, teacher, and school. At first, these spheres seemed to only form the basis for the model of parent voice. Upon closer examination of the data, along with secondary coding and reflection, however, it became clear that the mothers were not simply sharing the ideas they had about a given topic. They were also providing rich data about the related actions that fit into similarly codified

categories. Therefore, with a step back into the coding process of the five parent voice categories, our understanding of parent presence also emerged, thus giving us the models presented in Figures 1 and 2.

The parent voice and parent presence models each contain two spheres of influence—home and school. Moreover, and importantly, these models capture *what parents are already doing or wish to do* as it was reported to the researchers. As such, the models presented herein diverge from traditional models in that they are not based on deficit models of parenting or remedial notions of engagement. Instead, these models stem from a desire to recognize and highlight the daily work and love of parents with children and, thereby, reflect tolerance for a broader, deeper, and more varied understanding of parent presence in the lives of children. Most significantly, these models provide multiple directions for educators to identify spaces for relationships to grow. By examining a family context through parent voice and parent presence, educators might become open to more possibilities for positive relationships to flourish.

In terms of parent voice, the categories of concern and relevance to the parents all centered on facets of the home and school life integral to the child's well being and daily existence. The data reflect that many parents reported having daily, regular conversations with their children. In addition, data demonstrated parents who were engaged in the physical, social, emotional, and educational lives of their children. Data also suggested that parents were full of future plans and hopes for their children and held educational, behavioral, and social expectations that mirrored these hopes. Specific details regarding what each family did or did not do together with children were of less consequence in generating the model of parent voice than the demonstration by parents that they were invested in their children's lives and well being from a variety of vantage points.

Parent presence is the model wherein more specific spheres of action are identifiable both within the school and the home. Within the home sphere, the components of parent presence included action via the following three portals: providing for basic needs, behavioral modeling, and cultural teaching. With regard to the school sphere, parent presence was understood as parents acting in a triad of ways: traditional school involvement, parent advocacy, and relationship building.

Ultimately, the parent voice and parent presence models were generated side-by-side, even though the parent voice data analysis was, in large part, the catalyst for uncovering the requisite understanding of data to support the parent presence model. Coding thoroughly confirmed the constituent pieces of both models. The cultural modeling aspect of parent presence derived from the observations of the parents involved in the study and evidence documenting that parents were both implicitly and explicitly influencing and honing the

cultural norms for their children through their approaches to parenting and their casual interactions with their children.

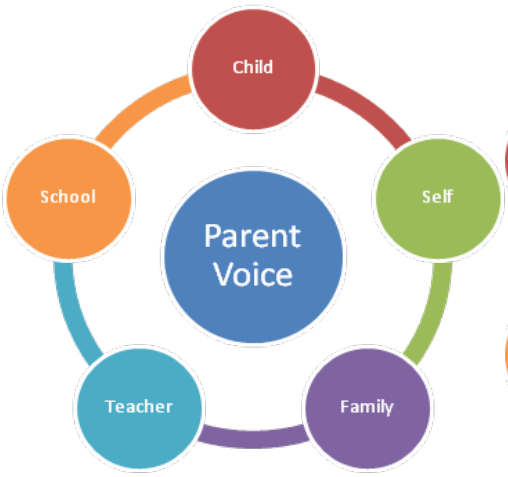

Figure 1: Parent Voice Model

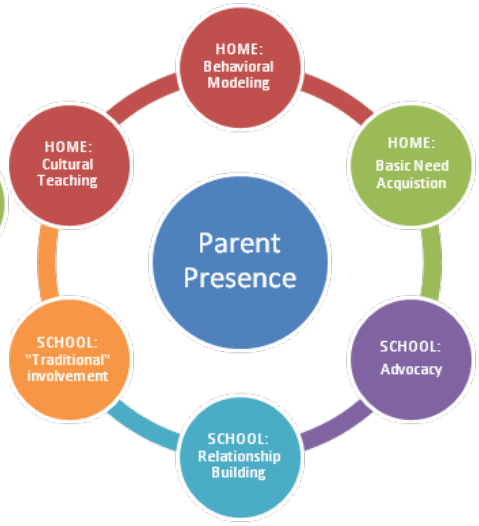

Figure 2: Parent Presence Model

Upon deep examination, the development of a side-by-side model of parent voice and parent presence not only seemed to be a logical outgrowth of the data, but also led to a larger, more complete picture of parent engagement and, by extension, a more broadly construed understanding of family engagement. We most certainly do not claim to have invented the notion of parent engagement nor do we claim that the idea of funds of knowledge as socially, culturally, and economically bound is unique to this model. Rather, we posit that we have reframed and broadened the scope of earlier models of parent engagement in order to rectify implicit deficit model thinking. This new conception of parent engagement is inclusive and respectful of more diverse parenting styles, actions, timing, and communication between the home and school. It also, most importantly, places the *child* at the center of the model, as opposed to school, parent, or teacher.

Parent Engagement

Parent voice and parent presence, together, form parent engagement. To clarify further, parent presence does not simply reference involvement or overt participation in schools, but also includes a broad variety of subtle ways in which parents are active in a child's life, which are more difficult to quantify and measure. Likewise, parent voice does not reference inert or heretofore unheard ideas, but encompasses an authentic, two-way communicative process

between educators and family members. Such a process is necessarily predicated on the understanding of family members being more than recipients of information but also important providers of information. The parent voice and parent presence models above respect family members as experts on their child(ren) and partners in children's learning and growth. Examples of the nuances and behaviors described above are supported by numerous researchers (Auerbach, 2007, 2011; Carreón et al., 2005; Jeynes, 2011a; Mapp, 2003). As such, we conclude by tying together our findings on parent voice and presence to hypothesize a more inclusive, forward thinking, child-centered, parent friendly model of parent engagement.

Our model presented in Figure 3 below, supported by this study and extant literature and derived from a grounded theory research methodology, is the final piece of the puzzle in our exploration of parent engagement. Clearly, this model, as well as the parent presence and parent voice models, must withstand additional comparative analysis and subsequent research. Therefore, we propose that, in the meantime, these models can be of immediate use by providing (1) a starting point for examining what Jeynes (2011a) astutely refers to as the salient features of parent involvement, and/or (2) an accessible, modern, useful visual construct for engaging and instructing educators and preservice teachers about the subtle features of parent engagement, particularly those related to culture or family context.

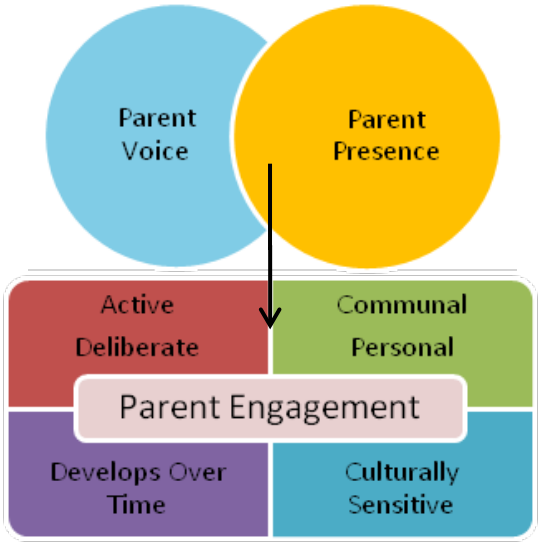

Figure 3: Contemporary Parent Engagement Model

By way of explication, the model in Figure 3 begins with the comingled components of parent voice and parent presence. Together, parent presence and parent voice lead to a holistic vision of parent engagement. Surrounding

parent engagement are the conditions that the study participants highlighted as important to the engagement process. Thus, the holistic model of parent engagement encompasses four salient conditions; engagement must develop over time and be active and deliberate, culturally sensitive, and both communally and personally based. The conditions for parent engagement to flourish include a two-way understanding for both families and educators to note and are supported by data from our participants as evidenced in the larger explanation below. We use the participant's own words to highlight the supportive conditions of parent engagement. For example, Donna's response to a query about school expectations for parents included this comment illustrating how important active parent presence is. Here we see a rather mundane description of parenting that reminds us that what parents do to be engaged always includes attending to the most basic of tasks:

> I make sure the children attend school daily, and (that) they get enough rest at home before each day and homework done—make sure they have also enough food or if eating for the day, even if they don't eat at home, then they have the choices to eat at school also.

Likewise, Lisa mentions being a "hands on parent," while Amy noted:

> And they [the teachers] want you highly involved. They're…they'll have a program going and usually, the bulletin, and it'll be for the whole month. They'll have it there so you know when it is, and then they even send you a nice big, bright blue paper, "Remember!" or "Reminder," there's so and so program or fun fair or whatever it is tonight. And stuff like that…they seem to want you very involved.

In our model we name engagement as active and deliberate as a result of comments like these.

Similarly, the mothers in our study present evidence for both a communal and personal aspect to parent engagement as well as culturally sensitive practices. These ideas are two sides of the same coin for parent engagement. Practice that is truly engaging must be both about the needs of the self and the community and must remain consistently sensitive to the cultural environment of children and families. These conditions hone in on the reciprocal and respectful nature of all engagement that Noddings (1984) so eloquently notes is critical to educational care. As Donna shared with the researchers:

> …the home has 80% to contribute to the success of their children in school. Oh yeah. I was a teacher. (*Researcher) So you understand the teacher's position, too*? Mmhmm…so I know all the code of conducts that they supposed to follow through, and every year I say repeat and read back to me, and I make sure you are going to abide by everything and anything

> that comes with the dress codes and all that. I hold them responsible…I really…I think it's good.

Here we see the notion of engagement that considers the good of the school by following school guidelines as a larger perspective while also having roots in the individual children. Trina tells the story of personally engaging with teachers for the sake of her daughter:

> And like I told my middle school daughter's teacher, she talks a lot. I'm just letting you know. She talks a lot, she has an attitude, she smacks her lips, so I just want you to be aware of that. And she doesn't like to wear her glasses, so you have to keep on her, and…I left her my number the first day, and I said if you have any problems and she keep on persisting on doin' this or that, please feel free to give me a call. And I said please—I don't give a care if it's 7:30 in the morning. I know they start school at 7:45. I'm up. So just give me a call.

Trina needs teachers to hear her request and understand her interest in her daughter's education. Trina also notices how school communities and families must engage together to figure out issues of importance, especially as they might pertain to certain family groups. Here she discussed the value of workshops helping underresourced families navigate finding funding for college:

> Three or four different speakers on subjects that pertain specifically to us. Like you know, where is the free money for college? I got four kids. I got one in college; you know, which we qualify for grant money for him, but you know, what about these, I have three more to go through. And I'm planning to go back to school next year so, you know. Where does that stuff come from? And then the other stuff on disabilities. The information…it was unreal what kind of help you can get.

From a different angle, Serena noted the value of family engagement rooted in community building and fun:

> They have the after school stuff…movie night, at our school. They have like a movie you can pay like five dollars for movie and popcorn so you come with your family and watch the movie. They had dance night. One time they had the fun fair. That's the only school I know that's done all this. I don't know 'bout other schools, but our school is pretty good on getting families together.

Thus, we notice in each example ways that parent engagement is both communally and personally minded. Likewise, parent engagement must be consistently culturally sensitive. Latisha, an African American mother, mentioned quite seriously one afternoon, "It should be more of the 'it takes a village to

raise a child' kinda thing…and it's not that around here." To which Serena wholeheartedly agreed. When asked about resources she would like to see for her children in schools, Serena also said:

> I think that they [the school] could probably go out and try and bring in more Black parents because it kinda seems that, um [long pause], I don't think that they quite understand, like, the Black family. And I don't think they're trying to understand. So…in that aspect, I think some more could be done.

As the participants note, parent engagement must be communally, culturally, and personally tailored.

Finally, it seems parent engagement must develop over time. It is not a "one and done" workshop or parent meeting, nor is it simply a series of teacher-led workshops. Meaningful parent engagement that honors parent presence and voice must be cultivated and sustained via students, parent and educator interactions and the environment. As Latisha described with simultaneous satisfaction and irritation:

> Our school welcomes with open arms…just even coming in and working in your child's classroom or in the library. Comin' with 'em…even my daughter will take my granddaughter and go see my son at lunchtime, and that's fine. They didn't have any problem with that…middle school and high school it's a little bit different. They're not quite as welcoming when they get older.

Here we see the struggle to hold onto relationships across school levels with only marginal success. Similarly, Lisa highlighted the importance of relationships with her thoughts on how the office staff should respond to parents:

> I'm a greeter. I'm a "hi, how are you doin'" to everybody in person. That's my thing. Um, 'cause my thing is, when you deal with the public, that's something that you have to do. Every time I've ever gone there [the school office], there's one lady in the one office who is just the nicest lady. The other office where you go for the counselors and all that…I don't know what goes on in that office, but they're not people oriented.

As it was, the participants shared with the researchers over and over the importance of educators and parents getting to know one another, consistently making contact with them, and sharing both the good and the bad sides of student life and behavior. From this came our assertion that the conditions for meaningful parent engagement are found in the four elements highlighted in the model; namely, engagement must be active and deliberate, developed over time, culturally sensitive, and involve both communally and personally oriented actions on the part of both educators and parents in a relational

nature. Together, these conditions, along with the recognition that engagement is about voice and presence, led us to the creation of a respect-laden, reality driven model of parent engagement to ponder and, hopefully, develop more fully going forward.

Reflection on Methodological Process and Outcomes

We readily acknowledge that the data collection process for this project was a single instance with a relatively small group of participants in the context of a study rooted in the grounded theory tradition. Additional limitations included a relatively short time of engagement with participants and an acknowledgement that these women may not be "typical" parents given their previous involvement in a parent education program. While the authors understand the need to point out the selectivity of our sample, we assert that this does not make the models any less valid. In fact, it is because of the thoughtfulness and investment of our participants that we were able to garner such a robust model of ideal parent engagement. The rich descriptions gathered proved fruitful for both narrative inquiry and model building related to parent voice, presence, and engagement. Additionally, multiple methods of triangulation and a clear explication of possible researcher bias allowed for fidelity in both the data collection and data analysis stages. The parents who chose to participate were clearly engaged and had a vested interest in thinking through the topic of parent engagement which we ultimately see as a positive limitation of this work.

The focus group questions allowed for additional contextual understanding with questions on teachers, administrators, classroom climate, school resources, and relationships. This approach to the script allowed for the researchers to gather data about context that might otherwise have been lost in translation. As the researchers suspected, the parents were more than eager to discuss the topics of the study. In fact, listening to them talk was analogous to watching a pressure cooker release steam. The conversation was steady, measured, and powerful. It often bubbled over into other related topics. This led to the most difficult aspect of the focus groups—attending to the time while also allowing room for each person's thoughts to be heard as openly and freely as possible, as grounded theory work dictates. Ideas about parent involvement, rules, communication, and relationships within schools all intermingled in the conversation. At times, one participant would finish the thought of another. Often, one parent would bring up an idea that the others immediately related to and would continue discussing. Many times, the mothers used specific examples to support a theoretical point they were making. Parents appeared very eager for their ideas regarding schools and their own lived experiences—

as mothers, heads of homes, and educational partners—to be heard. Some of the most hurtful examples of "noncaring" in schools provided by the women centered around teachers and administrators refusing to listen when parents needed assistance, clarification, or additional help with a given situation. The level of animation and intensity surrounding the anecdotes shared was palpable and confirmed the need for a forum or avenue for parents' voices to be heard in educational settings.

These conversations led to our emerging models of parent voice and parent presence and a breadth of support to undergird them. First, the participants confirmed many parents have perspectives and understandings of schools and school culture that they want to share. Second, the data suggested parents are far more attentive to the nuances of interactions, policies, curriculum, content, and school programs than educators often given them credit for in existing parent involvement literature and practice. Third, the parents involved in the study confirmed that the relationships and the communication paths, opportunities, and efforts between school and home are seen as essential components of schooling from their vantage point. Finally, the data overwhelmingly supported the idea that allowing parents to have a voice not only "feels" important but is important and must be seen as an essential component of engagement and as a critical indicator of the care schools have for children and families.

Data collected from the letters proved equally powerful in terms of parent voice and presence. By asking the women to participate both verbally and in writing, a different focus of parent voice emerged. In addition, the open-ended nature of the letters allowed for unfiltered writing on the part of the participants. Parents talked extensively about schools and their personal experiences within those schools in the focus groups and interview, most likely because we asked about those topics. However, when given the chance to write without any restraints or strict guidelines, the parents wrote most consistently about their children and their interactions with schools. The researchers remain surprised that the participants, in large part, neglected to specifically address the contexts of family and community.

During the research process, parents recognized that details about their lives and the lives of their children are important topics to address as part of the communicative process between home and school. Additionally, their writing indicated an understanding of why the information they were writing about could be valuable to share. Moreover, parents, while less inhibited (given the hypothetical nature of the letters), chose to write explicitly about their personal lives, sharing private, sensitive information about their family and children. Parents wrote about family circumstance, parent challenges, parenting styles, and their understanding of parental responsibility. They also clearly outlined their expectations for teachers. More often than not, these expectations

stemmed from their own experiences of educator misconceptions about their children and, at times, a lack of understanding on the part of the parents about what might go on in a classroom. The depth of the letters and the seriousness with which the parents approached the task was another powerful indicator of their desire for educators to truly know and understand the children they are serving with the hope of better educational experiences as a result.

Conclusions and Implications

A great deal of contemporary educational research has focused on the importance of parental involvement in education. It is a commonly held belief in education at this point in time that parental involvement is a key factor in children's school achievement. Significant associations have been found between parental engagement during the early years of education and overall long-term school success (Barnard, 2004; Epstein, 2011; Jeynes, 2011a, 2011b). Beyond traditional expectations including being involved through attending parent–teacher conferences, volunteering in the classroom, helping with projects and homework, and reading at home, this study situates itself in the newer generation of parent engagement and home–school–community partnership literature by theorizing about a more inclusive understanding of parent engagement, specifically the constituent pieces of parent voice and parent presence. This is, in large part, to respect, share, and acknowledge the parenting practices of lower income and minority parents that are, at times, misunderstood and undervalued by school staff and administrators. We believe that the models of parent voice, parent presence, and parent engagement presented here can withstand additional comparative analysis and deserve attention as a modern understanding of parents' role in the educational process. The models presented warrant further investigation, especially within different minority groups, different regions of the country, and with different age groups of parents of both genders. As Glaser and Holton (2004) note:

> Only as the researcher discovers codes and tries to saturate them by theoretical sampling in comparison groups, do the successive requirements for data collection emerge—both (1) what categories and their properties to be sampled further, and (2) where to collect the data. By identifying emerging gaps in the theory, the analyst will be guided as to next sources of data collection and interview style. (para. 51)

All models, regardless of the manner in which they are developed, ought to be tested, and, if necessary, reconfigured to more accurately reflect what reality indicates in particular circumstances, especially when the goal is a culturally sensitive model of a specific area or idea. Additional areas for future

exploration should include additional studies in the parent voice arena, teacher education with respect to parent/caregiver engagement, and parent engagement specific to the various levels of preK–12 education. A meta-analysis of the extant ethnically and racially specific parent voice literature would be helpful toward creating a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of parent voice. Likewise, work with specific populations, such as male parents or parents based on age, may prove useful.

As our research suggests, this parent engagement model can be useful for all educational stakeholders, but should prove especially helpful to classroom teachers. Using this model within teacher learning and educational leadership training paradigms could help foster new understandings of parent engagement for teachers, the educators who interact with parents most frequently. Expanding the understandings and information that teachers have of parents could be the first step toward establishing this new ethic of parent engagement in schools. Research regarding the application of the model in teacher education and educational leadership programs or professional development would be ideal. Finally, future investigations could include additional attention to the voice of fathers and different parent engagement models with specific attention to middle and high school level students and their families. Our research indicates that parents perceive changing opportunities to participate in schools as their children age, and exploring new models of engagement in these arenas could prove useful. Such studies could assess the current nature of parent engagement at the middle and high school levels and consider new ways of creating home–school partnerships using the parent engagement model.

Parent/caregiver engagement impacts schools, families, and, most poignantly, children in indisputable and important ways. Honoring that which is real, useful, and culturally sensitive regarding parent engagement in education is a test of our commitment to public education at large. Engaging parents in respectful, meaningful, reciprocal avenues of communication is a commitment to the civic-minded, democratic, community-centered principles our schools were, ideally, founded upon. Schools and educators who are willing to put aside assumptions and preconceptions about parenting and the abilities of children and their families based on race and class will go a long way toward moving education forward. New concepts of family and parent engagement must be attentively and rigorously examined. Incomplete perspectives about parents and families prevent the "out of the box" thinking which Latisha mentioned and which can be seen as a primary need for school systems as they continue to become more diverse, if they are to teach and serve students completely. The development of cooperative, sensitive cadres of adults whose central goal is to work in conjunction with one another for the benefit of the child is a feasible framework for tapping into the resources offered by parent voice and parent

presence. Creating these partnerships is not simple, nor is it something that can be readily created in the absence of the context of working models. Parent engagement is a relational endeavor that requires ongoing motivation and mutual respect. Inclusive, culturally relevant models that accurately represent the perspective of parents will help in further expanding educator and policymaker perspectives about parents, children, and the educational process in useful ways which will allow everyone involved to more closely approximate an ideal partnership on behalf of children.

Endnotes

[1]All names are pseudonyms to protect research participant anonymity.

[2]The prompt for this writing exercise was as follows: "If you could write anything about your family, children, life, or experience with your child(ren)'s school(s) to a teacher you know with no ramifications, what would you write? These letters are confidential and will not be shared with your children's teachers.

[3]In the explanation of the project, it was made completely clear to participants that the letters they were writing were only for our research purposes and that we could not, even if we wanted to, share them with anyone outside of our research context. However, participants were encouraged to decide on their own, outside of the context of our study, if they wanted to think about giving a copy of the letter they wrote to their child's teachers. Notably, none of the participants asked for a copy of their letter and many remained worried about who would "read" their letters.

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Appendix: Focus Group/Interview Script

Section #1—Parent/School Relationship

• In your experience, what role does your child's school expect you, and other parents, to play in their child(ren)'s education?

• How does your school communicate information with parents? Can you give me some examples? Do you think their methods are satisfactory?

• How do you communicate with the school? Do you wish there were other ways to communicate?

Section #2—School Participation

• Do you believe your child's school makes it easy for parents to participate in their child's education? Why or why not?

• Can you describe ways your child's school provides opportunities for parent participation? What about opportunities for family participation?

Section #3—Climate and Culture of Public School System

• How would you describe the climate of your child's school? By climate, I mean the feeling parents get when they enter the school building, the way the school is set up, the attitudes of the students in the school, how parents and students are treated by the school staff, etc.

• On a scale of 1–5, 5 being excellent and 1 being terrible, how well do you think your child's school is doing educating your child academically? socially/emotionally?

• Can you describe the behavioral expectations the school has for your child during school hours? How do you know what these expectations are?

Section #4—Parent Voice

• What resources, above and beyond what your child(ren) have now, do you think your child(ren) would benefit from most? By resources I mean opportunities, physical things, support systems, information, etc. Why are the things you mentioned important to you?

• Finally, what do you want teachers to know about you, your child(ren), your family, and your life? Just think about it for a little bit. Tell me about it. In just a moment, this is what we would like you to express in the letters you will write to a fictional teacher. Think of this as a short brainstorm about that.