

COMMENTARY

Family Involvement in Four Voices: Administrator, Teacher, Students, and Community Member

By Angela Wiseman, North Carolina State University

My parents come to the coffeehouses and it means a lot to me because he (her dad) works from like 2:30 to 4:30 and for him to come out and stay out real late just to come out and support me, it feels good. And my grandmother is on the other side of town; she also has to get up early. It feels good to have support. And they're always saying to do your best at everything. And when you do your best, you've got someone there to encourage you. —*Sherie, 8th grade*

Sherie's response came from a focus group session I had with five eighth graders, discussing a program that was implemented in her English class to encourage their families to participate in school events. Her class has a weekly guest teacher: An artist named Theo who works at a nearby community shelter that provides food, tutoring, and after school programs to low-income children and their families. Sherie is describing her positive feelings about her family's involvement, particularly related to this program, which has opened up many avenues of communication and facilitated connections that have been important in her life. The program was designed to create connections among families, community members, students, and teachers, yet the participation and perceptions of all the participants have been very different.

Collaborations and partnerships among schools and community members have been described as a way to provide better educational opportunities for students (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern & Duchane, 2007; Epstein, 1996). Such school–community partnerships have been described as relationships

that involve exchange and engagement with mutually defined goals benefiting all participants. However, the process of developing and articulating goals is complex and can be affected by the different participants' ideas about the program. The purpose of this paper is to consider how a parent involvement program in an eighth grade English classroom was affected by the collaboration and participation of a funding agency, a classroom teacher, a community poet, and students. Through conversations and observations with the participants, I have examined how they perceive involvement within a poetry program that was developed to encourage family participation. The following question guides my inquiry for this paper: How do community members, teachers, and students view family involvement in an eighth grade classroom?

RELATED RESEARCH

There are compelling reasons to look for connections between adolescent students' families, communities, and schooling experiences; adolescence is a time when children are straddling the world of being a child yet moving toward developing independence as a result of their own experiences and understandings of their life. Significant adults can have an important impact on children's development at any age, but it is particularly relevant during the adolescent years due to the significant life choices they experience as they become more autonomous. Unfortunately, there is a misperception that in developing their autonomy, adolescents need less adult guidance and involvement. Yet, research demonstrates that the opposite is true because adolescents benefit from con-

tinued support and mentorship that is developmentally appropriate and relevant to their needs (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007). Despite the fact that adolescents benefit from caring adults who participate in their education, involvement of families decreases incrementally as students progress to higher grades (Halsey, 2005).

There is still much to be understood about how to develop relationships that allow families to contribute and support students' literacy learning for children of this age. Adolescents often want their families to be involved, but only if the school practices and family events must support their developing autonomy (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002) and be accessible and relevant to students and their families (Schmidt, 2000). Furthermore, adolescents often do not encourage their families to participate because they have become increasingly peer-oriented, more independent, and their relationships with their families have changed in many ways (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). It is important to note that the developing independence and the desire for involvement do not have to be oppositional forces; however, understanding these different factors helps with considering different kinds of programs that support the needs of adolescents and their families.

Parent participation is defined in varying ways; for some families, involvement is centered on interactions within the home context and might include activities such as talking with their children about their educational experiences, goals, or achievement (De Gaetano, 2007; Foster & Peele, 2001;

Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993), described as “invisible strategies” (Auerbach, 2007; Lareau, 2000; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In Auerbach’s (2007) work, she looks at some of the ways minority and poor parents are involved in their children’s schooling and demonstrates that some of the most significant work may not be perceived by teachers and school administrators. For instance, some parents pursue supplemental learning opportunities for their children, such as tutoring or participating in extracurricular activities, without ever initiating contact with the school. Important forms of support are often employed at home and this support “from the sidelines” can be a significant factor in how students understand and view the world. Research has shown that this type of involvement can be a strong determinant of good grades and positive life choices (De Gaetano, 2007; Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001).

The various ways that involvement is defined reflects the inequities of society, cultural variances, and economic opportunities along with differing values and expectations of families (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Halsey, 2005). Culture and power relationships also have a profound influence on the relationships between families and school and many minority families feel alienated from schools as a result of their own negative experiences while they were students. For instance, families of bicultural students may not participate in school events because they feel that they are treated differently or because there are language and cultural barriers that inhibit their participation (De Gaetano, 2007, Cassity & Harris, 2000; Nieto, 2008). In Valdes’ (1996) three-year ethnographic study with ten Mexican and Mexican-American families on the Mexican-American border, she found that teachers often did not understand the families and thus viewed them from a deficit lens. Her work with teachers and families shows that both sides are operating with assumptions that prevent effective interactions:

Both the schools and the families made assumptions about each other. Schools expected a “standard” family, a family whose members

were educated, who were familiar with how schools worked, and who saw their role as complementing the teacher’s in developing children’s academic abilities. It did not occur to school personnel that parents might not know the appropriate ways to communicate with the teachers, that they might feel embarrassed about writing notes filled with errors, and that they might not even understand how to interpret their children’s report cards. (p. 167)

Often, these mismatched expectations occur with families that do not share the same socioeconomic or cultural background as the teacher. While many teachers in Valdes’ study believed that parent involvement would solve many of the students’ educational experiences, she found that advocating parental involvement in a traditional sense is a “small solution to what are extremely complex problems” (p. 31).

Regarding school and classroom participation, the most common forms of parent involvement include parent-initiated contact with the teachers regarding academic matters (Lareau, 1989/2000; Lareau & Horvat, 1999), parent volunteer opportunities, and participation in parent-teacher organizations (Swap, 1993). Families are usually in positions of less power and authority that the teacher and administrators of the school when it comes to decisions about education, and, therefore, they are often excluded from educational decisions and reform (De Gaetano, 2007; Fine, 1993; Lareau, 1989/2000; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). One way to encourage family involvement is to change relationships between schools and home so that power and resources are reconfigured. An important aspect of restructuring the relationships between families and schools is for schools to feel support and encouragement (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). For example, Fine (1993) describes examples where school curriculum and reform began with considerations of parents; however, this approach is not commonly used as a basis for creating partnerships between schools and families.

THE PROGRAM AND THE CONTEXT

My research took place in an eighth-grade English classroom in an urban public middle school in a major metropolitan area called Douglas Johnson Junior High School. Ninety-seven percent of the school population qualified for free or reduced lunch. Of the 22 students in the classroom, 17 were African American, 1 was Asian, and 4 were Hispanic; 9 were male and 13 were female. All of the people and places in this article have been given pseudonyms. The poetry program was designed to provide families with a variety of opportunities to become involved in their children’s school experience; students were encouraged to invite their families to coffeehouses, share poetry with them at home, and solicit poetry from caring adults for their anthology, which would be published at the end of the year.

The poetry program began because Pamela, the teacher in this classroom, was looking for a way to connect students’ learning in the classroom to the community. By working with a local nonprofit educational organization called Urban Voices in Education (UVE), she was introduced to Theo. Theo, who was also a poet and artist, agreed to teach a weekly poetry workshop and then emcee bimonthly evening poetry coffeehouses for families, students, community members, and teachers to perform poetry. UVE secured grant money from the Ford Foundation to improve parent involvement, and they used the funds to pay him a stipend for two years. Pamela arranged to “loop” with her students and teach them English for both their seventh and eighth grade years so both she and Theo could continue her involvement with the same students.

English instruction in Pamela’s classroom was a balance of skills instruction and service-based projects; Pamela’s collaboration with Theo was one of several projects that linked the students’ classroom learning to experiences within the community, including classroom projects that incorporated community member interviews and volunteer work that focused on learning through experiences outside of the classroom. Theo’s poetry workshop

became one vehicle to encourage risk-taking and create a space where students could share and learn with each other. The poetry writing workshops lasted approximately 45 minutes and were designed by Theo based on either topics he believed were relevant to the students or music that conveyed an important message. After a 15-minute introduction that included students listening to a song and reading lyrics related to the topic, students were encouraged to move to a comfortable place, work together if they wanted to and write down their ideas in poetic form. Pamela, Theo, and I would circulate and confer with students through the classroom as students wrote and read, and the workshop concluded with an opportunity for students to read their work to the class.

Although I observed the program and spoke with Pamela and Theo during the first year of its implementation, my role as a researcher documenting this program began during its second year, while the students were in eighth grade. During that time, the grant administrator at UVE was pleased with some aspects of the program, particularly since many parents who had previously not been involved in their children's schooling were attending the evening coffeehouses and submitting poetry for the anthology. Some of the coffeehouses did not have the level of attendance the administrator was hoping to see, and she began to question her support of the program. During the first year of the poetry program, the poetry coffeehouses had good parent turnout, often with 40 family members attending. However, during the second year of the poetry program, fewer parents were attending the coffeehouses, usually with approximately 15 parents attending. As parent involvement decreased, UVE and Theo recruited other adults to attend; hence at any given coffeehouse there were other community members in attendance to read poetry and interact with the students. It was in this context that I organized and collected information from the four participants – the funding agency, teacher, students, and community members – regarding family involvement.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This research is part of a larger ethnographic study that documented many aspects of the middle school poetry program, including the literacy learning that occurred as a result of the partnership between the community poet, the teacher, and the students (Wiseman, 2007). My research utilizes a broadly qualitative and descriptive approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As a researcher and former teacher, I was both a participant and an observer with this classroom, using ethnographic techniques of participant observation and descriptive analysis to document the poetry program and the classroom interactions (Creswell, 2008). I attended poetry workshops, regular English class sessions, field trips during the school day and after school, and poetry events, and I also met participants for interviews and member checks in the community.

I became involved in this poetry program because of my interest in classroom learning opportunities that connected students' in- and out-of-school literacies. I spent a full school year in this classroom, observing and interacting with Theo, Pamela, and their students. My role evolved from observing and taking notes to working with small groups, assisting students, and discussing their writing and experiences. In addition, I held focus groups with five students to discuss topics related to their experiences within the poetry workshops and their attitudes regarding family involvement (Creswell, 2008). I also conducted interviews and regularly communicated with all the participants regarding the success and progress of the poetry program. The focus groups, interviews, lessons, and evening coffeehouses were audiotaped and transcribed to be analyzed. Themes were established inductively (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and data were used to generate theory (Coffee & Atkinson, 1996). My goal was to create a story of this classroom that represented the participants' experiences in a way that was sensitive to their knowledge and understanding; therefore, member checks and peer debriefings were a significant

aspect of my research and conducted with students throughout my data collection and analysis. The students in this focus group provided me with member checks regarding findings and throughout data collection and analysis and also read through significant parts of my data analysis to provide verification (Creswell, 2008). It is important to note that I was granted access to students, teachers and community members in this study; however, the school district restricted my data collection with parents and other family members. I interacted with students' families in many instances but did not record any of the conversations for my research because of the restrictions from the school district's review board.

FINDINGS

In the next section, I present the different perspectives of those involved in the program. First, I present Emily, the administrator from a community agency responsible for funding the coffeehouse program. Then, I describe the classroom teacher's perspective, particularly related to the various efforts she made to increase family involvement in her school and classroom. The third perspective is that of the students, whose relationships and attitudes about literacy played a strong factor in whether or not they encouraged their families to participate in the program. Finally, I present the voice of the community poet to show his perspective and vantage point from working with the students outside of school and in the community. These differing voices illustrate the complexities of designing and implementing a program to increase the involvement of families in a junior high school.

The Funding Agency/Administrator: Looking for an "Open Door" to Encourage Involvement with Families

Emily was an administrator at Urban Voices in Education (UVE), an agency that advocated for students and families in the city public schools. This poetry program was funded from her initiatives; she was awarded a grant from the Ford Foundation and the

funding provided Theo with a stipend to teach poetry workshops to Pamela's classroom for two years. She explained that her impetus was, "to get parents involved with their kids in an intergenerational project". Emily realized that fostering parent involvement at this middle school required actions from the school and the parents and felt that developing a positive relationship was the most important component of working with a program. In an interview, she explained, "If the relationship is built you'd have parents glad to come in. They could find some time". Emily thought that it was important to encourage some "nurturing and trust-building" among the schools and families so parents would feel comfortable participating and supporting their children's education. Establishing relationships with parents and then building a program based on their interests and concerns were two of Emily's objectives. In our conversations about family involvement, Emily reflected on how the perspectives of families are often lost in educational decision-making, which alienates both students and their caregivers from school experiences.

Emily's experiences with Douglas-Johnson Middle School and her initiatives to create programs that bridged the gap between schools and families were affected by school policies. Emily, along with her organization UVE, approached the administration of the school with many different ways that UVE could support their efforts to increase parent involvement. She worked with a teacher to reactivate a parent resource at the school, but it was later taken away as necessary classroom space. As the poetry workshops continued through the spring semester, Emily started attending more of the sessions and speaking with Pamela, the classroom teacher, regarding ways to encourage parents to come to the poetry coffeehouses. Her increased attention to parent involvement coincided with her assessment that the poetry workshop was not improving the base of involvement with parents.

While she placed some of the responsibility for the lack of trust-building on the school administration, Emily also recognized the difficulties of

developing parent involvement from the administrators' standpoint. While Emily expressed that parents could be "difficult to work with", she did not feel that this was an adequate explanation for not encouraging families to have responsibility in their child's school. She explained to me, "If parents support what you are doing, they can really be a factor in raising student achievement". While Emily understood that working with parents took extra time and energy, she also acknowledged the role of the administration in keeping families out of the school. As she reflected on her efforts, her evaluation was both positive and negative:

I think it's been real mixed. It's been real mixed. I don't know--we've worked at from several directions simultaneously by working with the workshop. The thing is, I think, when a school does not have an ongoing kind of openness about family involvement, it's real tough.

Even though she was attempting to support a variety of programs, she believed that these initiatives were hindered by various factors coming from the school.

Emily's approach to parent involvement was to look for opportunities to gain momentum through long-term programs rather than short-term in-services or projects. The poetry workshop was one of many initiatives she supported in order to increase parent involvement, and she explained that she showed the administration a "menu" of options and also worked on "getting a trust building relationship. You have to have that open door". Despite her varied attempts to find ways to create partnerships, she felt disappointment that there was not an improvement in the relationships between families and schools and wished the initiatives of Urban Voices in Education could have encouraged more parents to be involved in the school. Urban Voices in Education's work with the parent resource room and poetry coffeehouses did not increase the participation of families in their children's education from a quantitative standpoint.

Successful parent involvement initiatives change their modes of approaching relationships, increase resources

for parents, and gather information from parents as to how to develop relationships (Swap, 1993). These components were echoed in Emily's approach to working with the school in supporting and designing programs. Emily's experiences at this middle school were aimed at broadening the base of parent involvement. However, the varied and extensive approaches she attempted did not meet their goals of increasing the broad base of involvement in the school. At the beginning of the following school year, Emily and Urban Voices in Education decided not to fund Theo's poetry program. They decided to shift their emphasis from families to initiatives that would increase teacher training and professionalism and the program was discontinued.

The Classroom Teacher's Perspective: Exploring Ways to Improve School Involvement

From my first conversation with Pamela, I was struck by her energy and enthusiasm for teaching and working with the students and their families. At the beginning of the school year, she listed her ideas for connecting with families in the community through research projects, writing assignments, and text selection. One of her main initiatives was to improve parent involvement because "That's a negative thing about our school. We don't have enough partners and we don't have enough people". Pamela attempted to be in touch with parents on different subjects, particularly when their students were having a hard time with attendance or grades. However, with as many students as middle school teachers are responsible for, this was not an easy task (Sanders, 2001). Pamela participated in a committee that discussed ways to encourage families to become involved in their children's education. She considered different ideas with her colleagues in the school and some days, spent much of her planning time trying to stay in touch with parents with varying levels of success. The evening coffeehouses were planned because Pamela thought they might be a way to motivate students' writing and speaking

while promoting parent involvement.

Pamela worked to further her understanding about parent involvement by attending conferences, speaking with other educators, and discussing topics at school. The idea for the coffeehouse was sparked from a presentation at a conference she attended where a teacher described some initiatives that had been successful in her school. Pamela's initial goals were quite similar to Emily's objectives in that she wanted to encourage parents to attend the coffeehouses as a method for increasing parent involvement. When Pamela proposed the program to Emily, Pamela was interested in increasing parent involvement for the benefit of her students.

Taking on most of the responsibility for organizing the coffeehouses, she put extra effort into contacting parents and creating a welcoming atmosphere for all. Pamela distributed flyers in Spanish and English, bought food and solicited donations for pizza, and organized the room with students. Pamela explained, "We were so happy with the parent turnout the first year. In a weird way, it did achieve, but it never increased. I think that is why Emily was unhappy". Pamela had a good rapport with many of her students and, knowing their backgrounds, she realized that parents experienced barriers to participation such as their work schedules, family responsibilities, and comfort level at school functions, which made it difficult to participate in school events. Transportation, time, and financial resources have been cited as major factors that affect parent's ability to participate (Cassity & Harris, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995), and Pamela was well aware that these factors affected her students and their families.

During one coffeehouse, Pamela wondered aloud if the students were showing the flyers advertising the coffeehouse to their parents. She made an announcement to the people in attendance questioning whether parents were receiving information about the events:

I was just going to add, because we have fewer parents here, there are people, like I know Desiree's mother, some of you I hope even if it is the first time here to come.

We never know how much information you have. We don't know who gets flyers and information that we want you to have.

Speculating that parents were not coming to the coffeehouses because the students were not giving their parents the flyers or invitations to the events, Pamela identified the problem of communication between students and their families as being a barrier to coffeehouse attendance (McGrew-Zoubi, 1998). Although Pamela distributed the flyers and called parents at home to invite them to the coffeehouses, she was unsure how much information the families were receiving.

Pamela explained to me, "Studies show that parent involvement helps," and she put forth time and energy to encourage participation in her classroom. However, Pamela realized that the barriers from the school were larger than her own individual initiatives. She took on the role of juggling various goals and objectives of UVE, Theo, and students within her classroom. Even though the attendance of the coffeehouses declined during the second year, she believed that the program was successful and was a benefit to her students. As a result, she worked hard to continue everyone's involvement for the sake of her students. Her focus shifted from an initial goal of increasing family participation to recognizing the benefits of the poetry program for her students. Furthermore, despite the fact that the poetry program was discontinued, Pamela continued with her own efforts to encourage families to help their children at school.

The Community Poet: "We're not in Mayberry..."

Theo knew the families of several children from either his involvement in church or from the children's involvement in after school programs at his community non-profit center, Janet's Kitchen. While he encouraged parent involvement, he also believed that counting the numbers of parents at the coffeehouse did not represent their involvement in their children's lives. Also, he emphasized the complexities

involved in encouraging families to participate; he told me, "Many factors had to be in place in order for the families to attend the coffeehouse. The parents have to be able to come in the evenings, have the energy to attend another function, and be willing to write and participate in a school event, and this goal might not be achieved for all students". Furthermore, he realized from his work in the community that having parents involved could present some difficulties for students. He explained to me, "So, it's not as if we are in Mayberry and we're trying to get all of the positive moms and dads to come out and do it".

Theo related to the students' perspectives because of his vantage point as an adult working directly with young people in the classroom, explaining, "If we're in the classroom and we're on the front line, then we have a totally different vantage point than the administrators of it. So, that's where things could potentially get a little murky." Characterizing himself as "on the front line," he used this metaphor to convey that he knows the students from his connections and regular interactions with them. As Theo further questioned the initial goals of the program, his perceptions of Urban Voices in Education's involvement reflect their distance and lack of understanding as a result of differing backgrounds and culture. Since Theo is African American and Emily is white, he questioned how her race and class, which are different than the students', might affect her understanding of the students' circumstances:

You might have a sense where there are administrators from different ethnicities and from different situations where the perception is that the parent is not involved, but to the young person, their perception, which truly is the perception that counts, their perception is, "Know what? As long as I can walk into that house, flip that switch, and the light comes on... And there's food in the refrigerator and there's clothes on my back, then that's the support. That's participation. That's what my mom is doing. She puts a little bit of allowance in my pocket, I can actually get a snack, I can come to school and forget about myself. You know,

to a degree, based on my esteem and somewhat being attached to what I have. That's parent involvement. So, I understand both sides.

In this statement, Theo reflects an understanding of the students that was not addressed in conversations among school staff or Urban Voices in Education administrators. Realizing that some of the students were not encouraging their parents to participate because they had other responsibilities or that they were not able to have this type of support, Theo's understanding of students reflects the mismatched assumptions of schools and families (Valdes, 1996). It also reflects the complex intersections of race and identity and how participants can have different interpretations of a situation based on their own experiences (Nieto, 2008).

As he considered the outcomes of the program, he believed that continuing the focus on parent involvement could be detrimental to students. Theo explained that maybe the initial approach and ideas behind the program needed to change:

And truthfully, I would be the first one to go on record to say that in some ways, the objectives that we went at, in some places we could have been wrong. Because, the goal of the parental involvement and what that could produce, I'm not saying that that is wrong... So if the two years, we created a space where they were able to positively influence each other, then maybe the objective was wrong. So, maybe in the analysis, in the prognosis, and if we do have an opportunity to go at it again, then maybe the objectives need to be reprioritized.

As he evaluated the program and considered the families of the students, he wondered about further expanding program goals by encouraging other community members to write with their parents citing that it was important to "open other avenues" and focus on mentorship rather than family involvement. Theo believed that other community members could be recruited to write and perform poetry with students so that the idea of family would be ex-

tended to include significant adults. In light of the positive impact the poetry program had for students and the situation that many of the families were in, Theo thought that evaluating the program solely on the attendance at the coffeehouses was misdirected. Believing that there were other important successes within the program, namely the positive influence it had for students, Theo did not want students to feel alienated or disappointed that their families were not able to attend.

Eighth Grade Students: " Why would I want my parents there? What if I mess up?"

Students' relationships with their families had a strong impact on whether or not they invited them to participate in school events. Explanations about their families' lack of attendance revealed the students' relationships with their parents, their parents' job responsibilities, and their parents' levels of stress at home. In this study, students were most comfortable encouraging involvement, including engaging with their parents at home, if their relationship supported this type of literacy event. Since the poetry was usually quite personal in nature, the students were affected by whether or not they shared these types of personal feelings with their parents.

For some students, the poetry workshops were the only places where they could safely express their feelings, consider some of the experiences they were facing in life, and receive support from peers and adults. Involving families in a program where students were encouraged to do important identity work provided some students with an opportunity for guidance and mentorship that expanded their modes of communication. For those students who were comfortable, their experiences with poetry and performance as well as their emotional development were often enhanced by bringing poetry performance into the relationship they had with family members. For instance, Shakira felt comfortable sharing her poetry and invited her family to participate in the poetry program. Her family

attended two of the three coffeehouses, and she additionally shared her poetry with her family on a regular basis to convey her feelings. She explained,

My father left and I was angry, but my mom didn't want me to talk about it. I could write poems, though. I wrote two poems about my dad, about hating my dad. When I showed my mom, she broke down and hugged me.

Poetry opened up avenues of communication between Shakira and her mother that may not have otherwise existed. While Shakira had positive feelings about sharing her poetry with her family, in a focus group she also characterized her mother's attendance as a "bad thing." Poetry was a conduit for telling her mother about her experiences; however, Shakira had mixed feelings about her attendance at poetry events because emotional topics sparked similar emotions within her mother and made it difficult for her mother to listen when Shakira was reading.

Some students did not feel comfortable sharing their poetry with their parents, and they prevented their parents from attending the coffeehouses because they were worried about the dynamics. Taniqua was such a student; she was reluctant to share her poetry with her family, never shared the coffeehouse invitations with them, and did not have any parental participation in the program. During the first year of the project, Taniqua was shy and reserved and did not volunteer to read any of her poetry out loud; therefore, she did not attend the coffeehouses. During the second year of the program, she began to open up and share her poetry in class as a result of her increasing confidence and the encouragement of her peers. In a conversation where some of the students were discussing their feelings and attitudes about performing poetry, Taniqua talked about the concerns that prevented her from inviting her mother: "What would happen to me when I got home? Would she say something good about me? What if I mess up?" Taniqua was uncomfortable involving her family in this type of venue because the nature of her relationships with them made it difficult to share

such personal poetry. Taniqua was like several students in this class who tended to rely on support from peers rather than working with her parents to improve and communicate through poetry. She chose to separate the personal nature of the poetry topics from her relationships with family members.

Desiree was another student who did not tell her mother about the coffeehouses during the second year of the poetry program even though her mother had been involved in the coffeehouses during the first year of its implementation. Desiree described how she decided not to inform her mother of the coffeehouses because she thought that her mother was too busy and stressed:

I told her last year [about the coffeehouses] but not this year. It's not the fact that she's lazy. She's stressed out. I know that's the best time to write... And then she's busy and when she's home, I'm not home. When she does get home, my mother sleeps. There's not time to explain it to her.

Desiree reflects the concern that students have when they see their parents working hard and holding down several jobs. Desiree further reflects on the role of communication for other students in the class when she considers the difference between last year's and this year's attendance at the coffeehouse events:

Desiree: Last year, it seems like there were more people. And now, they tell us ahead of time and people be forgetting and they have all these other activities. They finally tell their parents at the last minute and their parents can't come.

Me: Is that something you do? Or is that something that other people in the class do?

Desiree: Me. And it seems like other people do that, too. Because we would tell them that there's a coffeehouse tonight, can you stay?

Desiree's description of how adolescents informed their parents at the last minute is consistent with other students who documented that adolescents discourage families from becoming in-

involved by not providing information on school functions. Taking responsibility for the lack of communication with her mother, Desiree acknowledged that the coffeehouse dates were organized with plenty of time for her parents to make plans if told earlier. While her response was most likely autobiographical, it also reflected why some of the other parents were not attending; the avenues of communication between families and students were often not open and parents did not receive information about the coffeehouses.

For students, the nature of the literacy event can encourage or hinder participation; therefore, looking at the goals of the program and making sure that they are in alignment with the ways that families interact is important. Students' feelings and responses about parental involvement reflected varying life situations and backgrounds. I found that some students encouraged their families to attend and found it to be an important aspect of their relationships, while other students whose families participated described some drawbacks regarding that involvement. Also, some of the students were making the decision that their families should not be involved because of their parents' schedules or stress levels.

DIFFERING PERCEPTIONS AND IDEAS ABOUT FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

The topic of family involvement, seen from different vantage points, illustrates how perceptions can vary based on experiences and background for participants in a program designed to promote parent involvement. There was much to be learned by simply asking, "What constitutes family involvement?" or "What were your own experiences with family involvement?" Because the intent of the program was to increase parent involvement, this topic became a focal point and an evaluative measure in the spring semester of this study. In many ways, the participants' views of how parents should be involved represented a touchstone that reflected the multiple ways of thinking about the children and families in this study.

All of the participants in this study

expressed differing definitions and perceptions about family involvement that were connected to their identities and roles within the program and in their lives. Emily's experiences at this middle school reflected a history of taking different approaches, yet being discouraged by abandoned initiatives and discouraging administrators. Pamela is a teacher who knew and understood her students' backgrounds and put forth much time and resources to create opportunities for parents to become involved in the students' lives beyond the school day. Theo understood many of the reasons these students would act as gatekeepers and promoted a broad definition of family and involvement, suggesting that that students encourage relationships with community members. The students reported different comfort levels with having their families involved and, in some cases, actually took the responsibility of controlling the communication between school and home.

Much of the evaluative pressure from Urban Voices in Education's perspective was influenced by a specific grant that funded this program and was designed to improve family involvement. Regardless of the efforts of a community organization that attempts to be attuned to the needs of a school community, the relationships established by school administrators can override the initiatives of teachers or community agencies (Fine, 1993; Swap, 1993). When a school has discouraged parent involvement, it is quite difficult to make changes and affect the school and family relationships through initiatives in one classroom. Emily found herself in a difficult position; while she clearly had respect for Theo and his work, her responsibility to meet the objectives of the grant caused her to focus almost solely on the numbers of parents attending the coffeehouse. Since she was responsible for the funding, her dissatisfaction was cause for concern from Theo and Pamela and represented a point of dissonance for both of them.

The teacher in this study believed that having families involved would improve students' educational experiences. As she considered activities that would encourage family participa-

tion, Pamela clearly understood that encouraging families to attend the coffeehouse was unrealistic in some situations due to work schedules, transportation, and family responsibilities. Regarding her collaboration with Theo and Urban Voices in Education, Pamela found herself juggling their different goals and objectives. While she initially thought that the program had the potential to improve parent involvement, her focus shifted when it became obvious that the educational outcomes had more of an impact on the students than did their families' involvement. At the same time, she wanted to continue the collaboration with Urban Voices in Education because they were funding the program and had provided many of the resources to support Theo's work in the classroom. Placed in the position of mediating the goals of the grant and understanding what was most effective for her students, Pamela worked hard to maintain the goals of parent involvement from a realistic perspective.

Theo believed that when it came to family involvement, different adults can be involved, that significant adults can be extended family or close friends, and that parent involvement was not necessarily positive for all students. He also felt a strong connection to the students because of their shared cultural backgrounds. This understanding affected his approach and also resulted in his attitude that parental involvement cannot be forced or mandated—that many of the children excluded their parents for significant reasons that may be beyond their control. Theo's motivations and incentives were quite different because he was not directly responsible for carrying out the objectives of a grant or meeting certain goals or objectives. Theo's knowledge about families and his role as a mentor in this class resulted in notions of involvement that were different than counting the parents that showed up for events.

The students were in powerful positions to broker the relationships between their families and the school. Some students had ideas about family involvement that clashed with the objectives of the evening coffeehouses and their relationships with their parents that were not conducive to shar-

ing their feelings, and they were more comfortable sharing their poetry with classmates. The poetry workshops for some students were the only places where they could safely express their feelings, communicate some of the major experiences they were facing in life, and get support from peers and adults (for more details on this aspect of the program, see Wiseman, 2007 and Wissman & Wiseman, in press). For some students who were testing out important issues and not comfortable doing so in front of family, this was a factor in whether or not they invited their parents, which illustrates how important it is to respect students' developing autonomy when creating programs (Deplanty, Coulter Kern, & Duchane, 2007). As a result, students relied on other people for support, such as peers or other adults, and discouraged their parents from participating.

In order to understand the learning environment in the classroom, it is important to consider the larger context of the students' lives and to conceptualize ways this knowledge can be incorporated within the classroom. Involving family members has been described as one way to do this, but there are many complexities in the intentions and goals of a program designed to incorporate important adults from students' lives into the school environment. Each individual brought her/his own intentions and perspectives, and, in the end, all of these individual voices shed light on the complexities of implementing a family involvement program for adolescents.

IMPLICATIONS

There are several implications from listening to the different views of the participants in this family involvement program. First of all, from some of the adults and students in this project, it seemed that opening up mentorship and guidance beyond the family might be a positive approach, especially when the levels of participation for immediate family are lower than anticipated. In this program, there were several other community members and other caring adults who participated in the poetry coffeehouses. What if there had

been a mentoring system provided for any child who wanted to collaborate with an adult? Would more students have come to the evening events to work with other types of people? Caring adults would certainly be in the position to support students in various ways, especially in the context of poetic expression and academic involvement. Expanding the notion of involvement seems to be an important idea that could have encouraged more students as well as more adults to participate in this school program.

The second implication is to recognize how significant the content and organization of the program can be for encouraging or deterring family involvement, with the idea that addressing adolescents' concerns is an important way to encourage their participation. With many of the students concerned about future employment and thinking about which high school to apply to and with the teachers concerned about the students' future academic goals, would the participation have been different if students received educational and occupational information at the coffeehouses? As DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane (2007) explain, support and mentorship needs to be developmentally appropriate and relevant to adolescents' needs. While the students were very receptive to writing poetry in the classroom (see Wiseman, 2007 for more details), it may not have fit with all of the students' needs or interests to continue writing with family. Carefully considering the goals of the program as well as the needs of the students and their families would be an important point for planning sessions or activities. While there were surveys and questionnaires administered in the first year of the program, it could be that as students got closer to entering high school and as they may have been becoming more independent, their interests changed. Regular assessment and feedback should be an important component of any type of program that encourages involvement beyond one school year.

Third, it is important to recognize the different kinds of involvement and the importance of "invisible strategies" (Auerbach, 2007) and possibly

look to build of some of different ways students receive support. In some settings, technology might facilitate participation – students and parents could write and respond to each other about various topics and create a virtual school presence. While I do not think that technology can replace important face-to-face guidance, it might make some of the ways that families are involved more visible. This would relate to the notion that it is important to create more supportive interactions between schools and families by both recognizing and encouraging different ways of becoming involved (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). This would also confirm the assertion that one way of creating more supportive school-family interactions is to recognize and encourage different ways of becoming involved.

Finally, the ways that parents view involvement can be affected by many factors, and certainly racial and cultural identity was an underlying factor

that seemed to influence perceptions and understandings in this program. Theo provided one perspective that illuminated a mistrust of administrators and questioned whether the goals of the program were synchronous with what was best for children. Understanding the different needs or interests, particularly of those who are closely involved in the community and of different backgrounds or perspectives, would provide important insight on how programs are structured and how to sustain involvement (De Gaetano, 2007; Nieto, 2008). It might be that understanding more and hearing from different voices, particularly with knowledge of and an investment in the community, would enhance our understanding of involvement. Further studies that incorporate different perspectives and models of successful community partnerships are crucial to knowing about why and how they become involved.

This poetry program was funded to improve family involvement; however,

this goal and its outcomes were complex and reflected differing viewpoints. The various perspectives and approaches to families demonstrate some of the complexities of collaboration as well as the difficulties of increasing parent involvement for adolescent children. Above all, it is important to note that understanding the roles and systems of family support for adolescents is a complex and important consideration.

Angela Wiseman graduated with a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania's department of Reading/Writing/Literacy in 2004. She currently is a literacy professor at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC and has published work on poetry, parent involvement, and the social nature of writing in journals such as *Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy* and *Language Arts*.

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