The Importance of Parent Engagement and

Their Impact on Children's Academic Success

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Extensive research has been conducted to evaluate the connection between children succeeding in school and the implication of their parents' involvement. A 2018 study of a program to promote the involvement of parents in education defined parent engagement as something that, "Begins early in life and encompoasses educational activities that have been positively associated with children's readiness, achievement, and acclimation to primary school. Engagement by parents in children's education is conceptualized as an active process encompassing a variety of attitudes and behaviors that families may exhibit that contribute to a child's school success" (Mendez and Swick, p. 250). Those with the capacity to touch and influence the life of a child have an opportunity to assist families with setting them up for success. The success being referenced is academic or educational, which starts after birth and continues on for the rest of their life. There are many programs and services in place to help children and families but unfortunately in terms of academic achievement there are few to none. Research shows that children do better when their parents are engaged. Research also shows that student and teacher relationship is important for positive outcomes and the relationship between school personnel and parents is also just as important. To take a step further there is research that discusses the difficulty of urban and low-income schools to engage parents in their child's education. Behavior of a parent is categorized as either home-based where learning activities take place outside of school or school-based in which activities are done at school (Fishman, 2015).

Statement of The Problem

A review study of early childhood parent programs conducted by Katherine Magnuson and Holly S. Schindler made a pointed statement that opens the question for further exploration

as to what degree a parent impacts educational success. "Because young children spend so much of their time in their parents' care, parents are often described as children's first teachers. Parents' verbal interactions, responsiveness, and stimulation all help to develop their children's early skills and to prepare them to learn in formal settings. However, parents differ in the quantity and quality of their interactions with their children and the degree to which they provide enriching experiences, both of which are important in understanding socioeconomic gaps in children's academic achievement" (2016, p.208).

Education statistics measure parental involvement in school by "attendance at a general meeting, a parent-teacher conference, or a school or class event; or by volunteering or serving on committee at the school." A 2016 trend analysis indicates that there was a four percent gap between Hispanic and black parents (87%) that attended meetings compared to Non-Hispanic white parents (91%). There was a fifteen percent gap between Hispanic and black parents (72%) that attended school or class events compared to Non-Hispanic White parents (86%). "This lower participation by nonwhite parents may reflect an inability to attend school functions rather than any desire (or lack thereof) to participate in their children's education. Nonwhite parents are less likely to have flexible work schedules. However, students belonging to marginalized racial and ethnic groups experience similar levels of parental involvement in learning at home" (Child Trend, 2013). This fact shows that there are justifiable and fixable reasons why the number of parents of SES background is lower compared to their counterpart.

When ensuring students thrive academically parental engagement should be considered because research shows that when families are engaged children do better developmentally, emotionally, and socially. In Mendez's study of barriers to engagement she reports, ". . . studies suggests that parents may define learning differently, and therefore parent engagement in early

learning will look different depending on their views about child development and early learning (2018, p. 252). Several programs to improve engagement have had positive outcomes and response but further research is needed to address the gap of long-term turn-around in academic success, cultural competence of school personnel and community partners to effectively work with parents, and prevention strategies to assist urban and low-income parents. In 2005 the Miami-Dade Parent University was a program for parents to learn skills and receive certification to increase employment opportunity. In 2008 the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' (CMS) program was to educate and provide parents with information on how to cultivate a healthy family and prepare children for school. The Guilford Parent Academy intervention program was created in 2011 which provided information and training on topics that parents and grandparents stated were areas of need as well as connecting them with community resources (Mendez and Swick, 2018, p. 253-256). These programs were successful in increasing willing engagement of parents, fewer absences, and increased hope of academic achievement.

Problem Exploration

Research indicates the following as common reasons why parents are not as engaged in their child's education: lack of or "inadequate" communication with teachers and higher level school personnel (Perez, 2017, p.18), dealing with community issues of crime, safety, and social isolation (Alameda-Lawson, 2014), and limited access to academic and social supports (Williams, 2017). Racial segregation of public schools has been found to be a part of this problem with student achievement. A fact that needs to be recognized and acknowledged is the existence of inequality in school support, systemic community barriers, and lack of protective factor cultivation in students. Maddox and et. al. studied the positive and negative impact of white middle-class families on urban communities.These researchers found that even though

these parents, ". . . middle class "choosers" of urban public schools tend to consider themselves "urban people" who value city living and all that it entails, identify as politically liberal or progressive, and profess a desire to have their children attend racially and socioeconomically diverse school, . . . these parents nevertheless opted for the 'whitest' public schools available to them. Despite their moral sentiments and political orientations, parents remained "trapped" in white privilege, as the diversity they sought in schools actually provided their children with cultural competencies that would benefit their education and future careers" (2013, p.448-449). In essence the presence of middle-class families brings a source of monetary flow, school and city improvement, and requests from parents for better facility, equipment, or additional activities, but this applies to only the schools they invest in. The other schools of primarily low-income families in the same city lack the resources and funds to improve so they are overlooked during open enrollment and therefore suffer as a result. Not only are students at a disadvantage as they are not provided the same opportunity, schools are not given the funds to facilitate optimal learning, neighborhood and community segregation continues to exist and be influenced.

Similarly several research studies conducted assessing the perceptions of students indicates that more African-Americans and those of low socioeconomic status do better and benefit far greater when they have a good relationship with teachers and feel like they belong at the school compared to their white peers (Bottiani, 2016). This goes to show that while parent engagement is critical to foster academic success, how a student perceives care and assistance from teachers or other school personnel also has some influence. How is a positive relationship between student and teacher created when teachers are of a different ethnicity than the students? There is commonality and sense of belonging when majority of peers are of the the same ethnic

group or are of the same background. Attention to culture and diversity as well as skills to effectively relate are a starting point.

Another perspective to consider is that of the parents, more specifically black fathers. Unfortunately there is not sufficient research to analyze this, but there is one that studied their role in educational engagement and how they are received by the school. Linn Posey-Maddox had this to say about engagement, "black fathers have high academic expectations for their children and their schools, and engage to support their children's education. Black fathers' engagement is often in the form of homework help, words of advice and encouragement, interest in their children's extracurricular activities, and setting high expectations. Black fathers have also been found to engage in race socialization, teaching their children lessons about race and racial bias as well as working to foster positive racial identities in their children. Research also shows that when black fathers do engage with school personnel, they often encounter race-gendered microaggressions. Studies of the experiences and involvement practices of black middle-class fathers, for example show that these fathers are often met with discomfort and stereotypes of white educators, often related to their physical stature as black men" (2016, p.579). This goes to show that when parents do make an effort to engage they are not met with kindness or help. Most research studies consists of reference to participants being mothers or white-dominant, and little consideration is taken into account the role of fathers. School personnel play a role in facilitating a respectful and unbiased relationship with black fathers or further hindering their school-based engagement.

Another identified aspect of this problem is lack of knowledge or resources that offer family support and parent programs. There is little supportive evidence to show concrete lasting effectiveness of parent support programs even though they have positive outcomes and impact

on the children. For preschool to third grade programs two approaches are utilized, ". . . offer a clearly defined parenting program that focuses on specific skills to support children's early academic or behavior. Yet another is to give parents information about the preschools and elementary schools among which they can choose" (Magnuson, 2016, p.209). School readiness is important and parent interaction plays a part in developing necessary skills and behavior in children, which could assist with better academic achievement. This study concluded by stating, "Effective programs train their staff in how to work with parents; they also target specific skills or behaviors and focus on parenting practices that are clearly linked to the targeted skills" (2016, p.216).

Theoretical Perspectives

Theories researchers utilized to conduct their studies or as strategies to address this problem vary in names but collectively they all suggested a multi level and collaborative approach. An emerging theme that was named differently but had the same underlying message encouraged a deeper understanding of contextual factors that implicates parent involvement, an ecological approach, ". . . is best understood through an examination of how parental beliefs, actions, and circumstances are shaped by broader social systems (Posey-Maddox, 2017, p. 579). In congruence, "When the research problem is to understand the common experiences of several individuals about a phenomenon, a phenomenological study is appropriate"' (Williams, 2017, p. 185). In order to better fill a need or offer assistance a challenged perspective and solutions derive from the parties directly involved. This problem requires holistic effort from individual families, groups of parents in the community, teachers and administrators, partners, and even local policymakers, which is the basis for the Collective Parent Engagement (CPE) Model used by Alameda-Lawson, "Focus is on parent(s) working together to improve educational and

community outcomes because individually they can only do so much. CPE programs can be viewed as an intervention design that helps parent groups develop an engine for improving school outcomes from the outside in and from the inside out" (2014).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall research repeatedly shows that school, parent, and community each and cohesively influences the success of students academically. In White and Lever's study of parent-teacher engagement from both viewpoints they concur, "Experts agree that the ability of schools to promote the perception that students are safe and wanted, and that they can be successful, is intricately linked to the concept of relationship . . . If parents are not involved, or if they play a disruptive role in this triadic system (parent, child, teacher), the learning process crumbles or breaks down" (2017, p. 21). "The empirical literature also suggests the importance for schools to increase opportunities for parents to build their relationships with teachers, especially for Latino and African American families (Mendez and Swick, 2018, p. 264).

Social Work Practitioners, Counselors, School Personnel, and other professionals working with children and families should be mindful of protective factors and common desires or concerns of parents in regards to their child's academic success and preparedness. Moving forward there is a need to encourage fathers to be engaged, establish a relationship with them, and learn how academic success is promoted in the home for collaboration of efforts. When creating programs or implementing intervention methods they should be incorporated on all levels to strengthen protective factors. Two common run-ins to consider when implementing a service or creating a program are acquiring and retaining parent participation. "One important consideration is the trade-off between sustaining parents' participation and the programs' convenience and time demands. Some evidence suggests that shorter, less intensive programs

may not be as effective as longer, more intensive programs. Prevention services may have an especially hard time enrolling and retaining parents, given that their children haven't yet demonstrated low skills or problem behaviors. A related, persistent concern is whether there's a cultural match among program leaders, content, and the families they seek to support. Program design would benefit from greater attention to why parents don't participate" (Magnuson, 2016, p.217).

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