**Parent Involvement in Minority Families**

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December 13, 2024

**Abstract**

High parent involvement is linked to direct communication with children's teachers. The purpose of this study was to reveal differences in Head Start parents' comfort level communicating with teachers. The original focus of this study was Hispanic, Spanish speaking families however, lack of this population in the sample shifted focus to racial differences between White and Black families. This was a mixed methods study that collected quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data included parents' comfort level communicating with teachers and race distribution in the sample. The qualitative data included three open-ended questions addressing parent involvement and stress management. The hypothesis that minority families would feel less comfort in communicating with teachers was not supported. Results indicated that Black families felt more comfortable communicating with teachers than White families. Understanding what groups experience low comfort communicating with teachers can help implement strategies to increase comfort and parent involvement in schools.

***Keywords***: parent involvement, minority families, survey research, Head Start

**Introduction**

This study explores the challenges to parent involvement that minority families face. The primary barrier to parent involvement in general is insufficient communication between parents and their children's teachers. Direct communication between parents and teachers has shown to increase parent involvement in the form of home literacy and home numeracy environments as well as increasing general perceptions of parent involvement (Lin et al., 2019). Minority children are disproportionately impacted by barriers to education leading to higher rates of illiteracy and innumeracy in school. In 2022, 84% of Black and 80% of Hispanic students tested below typical literacy levels for their age range. Additionally, 91% of Black and 80% of Hispanic students tested below typical numeracy levels for their age range (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). These statistics represent socioeconomic disparities of minority families and factors such as access to childcare, quality and adequate schools, diverse settings and staff as well as, overrepresentation in school punishment, discrimination, and segregation in school systems (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024).

Certain parents may be more susceptible to discomfort with teachers than others due to intersectional factors such as race. While this study focuses on White and Black families, it is important to acknowledge this barrier to minority groups as a whole. Several studies have addressed reasons for minority parents' discomfort with their children's teachers. The primary themes that emerged were language barriers and discrimination. Language barriers are more prevalent with Spanish speaking parents. However, discrimination is a barrier to comfort across races. Parents expressed two types of discrimination: discrimination against their children and discrimination against them as parents. Firstly, many Hispanic parents felt as though teachers held lower expectations for their children (Ramirez, 2003). This theme was consistent with Black families. Both Hispanic and Black children were placed in lower-level classes without a valid reason (Ramirez, 2003; Bhopal, 2014). In regard to parents themselves, Black, Hispanic, Indian, and mixed-race parents all felt as though their complaints were not taken seriously by teachers. Black parents especially felt as though teachers stereotyped them based on their hair and dress (Bhopal, 2014). Overall, these experiences made parents very uncomfortable communicating with their children’s teachers. It is important to identify which groups experience discomfort so practices can be implemented to remedy the issue and thus, increase parent involvement.

**Literature Review**

**Parent Involvement**

Parent involvement is typically defined in two ways. The first definition emphasizes the direct relationship and communication between parents and their children's teachers or school staff. This type of involvement is referred to as school-based or formal involvement (Lin et al., 2019; Ramirez, 2003). The second definition emphasizes efforts to enhance education at home. This type of involvement is known as home-based or informal involvement (Coba-Rodriguez, Cambray-Engstrom, & Jarrett, 2020). Home-based involvement typically involves parental support in learning shapes, numbers, colors, and reading skills (Tovar, 2016).

Researchers have conducted many studies on the effects of parent involvement in education however, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the nature of parent involvement of Hispanic and Latino families. Researchers disagree on the frequency and types of involvement Hispanic parents engage in. For instance, Lin et al. (2019) found a negative relationship between Hispanic parents and home-learning involvement. In contrast, the majority of researchers found no correlation between Hispanic parents and lower levels of parent involvement. The reason for the discrepancies in research may be due to schools and teachers’ inability to recognize the type of parent involvement practiced by Hispanic families (Ramirez, 2003). For that reason, further research is necessary on how cultural differences may affect the definition of parent involvement.

**Barriers to Involvement**

Ramirez (2003) conducted interviews with 43 Hispanic or Latino parents (29 women, 14 men). Through this study parents described three primary barriers to parent involvement: communication, expectations, and accountability. Firstly, parents expressed language barriers to be a significant factor limiting communication with teachers. As seen in a study by Lynn Zagzeboki Tovar (2016), parents stated language barriers lead to misunderstandings of events and their importance to their child's education. This lack of clarification led to poor attendance among this population. Secondly, parents expressed concerns that faculty held lower expectations for their children than they did for other children. For example, parents revealed instances of discrimination towards their children, such as them being placed in lower courses without consent and one teacher even labeling a student as “retarded” (Ramirez, 2003). The final barrier observed was accountability. Parents felt that teachers were not held responsible for their actions or behavior. More concerningly to parents, teachers failed to include them in their child's education. Parents found this behavior particularly concerning as this exclusion was not the norm in schools in their home country.

Most parents had concerns for their middle and high school age children in regard to barriers to involvement (Ramirez, 2003). Parents of elementary school children experienced less problems however, any concerns they did have were not addressed. Tovar (2016) remedied this problem by elaborating on complaints from parents with elementary-aged children. Parents in this study expressed feelings of isolation and discomfort during school-sanctioned events due to language and cultural differences. Additionally, Spanish-speaking Hispanic parents demonstrated less shared responsibility with teachers compared to Black and White parents and English-speaking Hispanic parents (Wong & Hughes, 2006). This difference may stem from language barriers that make communication with teachers uncomfortable or even impossible for Spanish-speaking parents.

**Hispanic Parent Involvement**

Hispanic families typically engage in home-based or informal parent involvement. Hispanic parents identified their home learning strategies that include direct teaching, promoting reading, quizzing on material, and using real-life objects to access knowledge (Coba-Rodriguez, Cambray-Engstrom, & Jarrett, 2020). Coba-Rodriguez et al. describes these home-based educational efforts as protective factors against previously discussed barriers. Home-based involvement gets overlooked in studies on parent involvement due to the challenges teachers face observing it (Tovar, 2016). Purtel et al. (2021) found that perceived parent involvement was significantly higher in the KTP+ group. In this group, teaching assistants visited students' homes up to five times throughout the program. Through this method, teacher assistants were able to witness home-based involvement thus, increasing perceived parent involvement. These findings reinforce the notion that schools often overlook home-based parent involvement efforts by Hispanic families (Tovar, 2016)

**Solutions to Barrier of Involvement**

Several remedies have been identified to address the barriers to involvement by Hispanic families. For instance, parents expressed disappointment over the lack of interpreters at school-sanctioned events (Ramirez, 2003). Many parents stated that if they struggled to understand during an event, they were less likely to return for subsequent ones (Tovar, 2016). Providing translators at school events could encourage Spanish speaking Hispanic parents to engage in more school-based involvement.

Additionally, direct communication between parents and teachers has been linked to higher levels of parent involvement (Lin et al., 2019). This finding aligns with Epstein's (2010) study, which found that parents often derive their ideas for home-based involvement from their involvement with teachers. Direct communication also encourages parent involvement in supplemental education (McWayne & Melzi, 2014). Support from family and friends has also shown to positively influence supplemental education (McWayne & Melzi, 2014). With this said, it is vital to recognize a limitation of this research: cultural factors and differences were not considered in the correlation between family and friend support and supplemental education. Nevertheless, many parents in Ramirez’ study (2003) did emphasize the critical role that family support played in enhancing their children’s education. While this may not be a direct remedy, it is important to acknowledge the cultural values that provide resilience despite barriers.

To summarize key points, parent involvement can be either home-based or school based. Through interview studies, researchers have found that Hispanic parents tend to engage more in home-based involvement. The majority of researchers agree that this type of involvement is present but overlooked in studies on parent involvement. Further research is needed on cultural differences of Hispanic and Latino families. Understanding the specific barriers to this population could be beneficial in developing programs and methods to increase parent involvement in school and at home.

**Data and Methods**

**Instrument**

A research collaborative at Longwood university created an online survey questionnaire. The survey was created in Qualtrics and included an informed consent question, open ended items, and closed ended items. There are 23 close-ended items that cover parent needs including resources, comfort, time, finances, mental health needs, and demographics. Additionally, the questionnaire included three open-ended items that cover what parents enjoy doing with their children and how they manage stress. The questionnaire was expected to take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

**Sample**

 The convenience sample for this project is parents and guardians of Head Start children between the ages of three and five who reside in seven counties in Central Virginia. There are approximately 119 families in this sample population. Head Start headquarters emailed the online survey to county Head Start teachers. Teachers then emailed the survey to all families in their classroom. Surveys were emailed home at least three times during data collection resulting in four surveys being submitted. To increase response rate, researchers visited six Head Start facilities to hand out surveys. Surveys were given out on a paper with a QR code as well as some participants filled out the survey in person on a tablet. This resulted in 25 surveys submitted in total. The response rate was approximately 21%. No incentive was offered for completing the survey.

**Quantitative Analysis**

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The dependent variable of interest is parent involvement in Head Start families. The question used to analyze this variable was “How comfortable do you feel interacting with your child’s teachers on a scale from 0 – 10? (0 = Not at all, 10 = Extremely comfortable).” This question addresses the comfort attribute of the survey. The independent variable of interest is language barriers. The question used to analyze this variable was “Is English the primary language spoken in your household?” The attributes are “yes, no, prefer not to answer.” This question addresses the demographic attributes of the survey.

**Qualitative Analysis**

Qualitative analysis was based on the open-ended items. Thematic coding was used to analyze parent responses.

**Findings**

**Quantitative Findings**

The dependent variable is how comfortable parents feel interacting with their child’s teachers. The independent variable was previously language; however, all participants answered English as the primary language spoken at home. As a result, the independent variable has been changed to race. Respondents selected one or more of the following: “White or Caucasian,” “Black or African American,” “American Indian/native American or Alaskan native,” “Asian,” “Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander,” or “other.” The hypothesis is that minority parents feel less comfortable interacting with teachers than White parents.

The mean score for comfort communicating with teachers is 9.29. The standard deviation is 1.49. This shows that the variation did not vary greatly. Most parents rated high comfort communicating with their children's teachers.

**Table 1**

*Racial Demographics of Families at Head Start Programs*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Race | Percent |
| BlackWhite | 76%24% |

 *Note.* N = 25, four participants did not report race.

Table 1 shows the percentage of racial categories of the respondents. This shows that the majority of respondents were Black families. In this sample, 16 families were Black, and five families were White.

 **Table 2**

*Mean Comfort level Interacting with Children’s Teachers by Race*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Comfortability by Race | Means | Standard Deviation |
| BlackWhite | 9.538.40 | 1.361.82 |

*Note.* N = 25, four participants did not report comfortability or race.

 Table 2 shows the comparison between parents' self-rated comfort level interacting with their child’s teachers as a function of race. This shows a difference in comfort scores between the two racial categories represented in the sample.

The original hypothesis stated that minority families would feel less comfortable interacting with their children’s teachers. The mean for White family’s self-rated comfort level was 8.40 and the standard deviation was 1.82. Conversely, the mean for Black families was 9.53 and the standard deviation was 1.36. These results indicate that contrary to the hypothesis, Black families, representing the minority group, actually felt slightly more comfortable interacting with teachers than White families.

**Qualitative Findings**

We asked parents three open-ended questions regarding parent involvement, coping with stress, and any other concerns they wished to add. From their responses, two main themes emerged: time together and time alone. Parents provided various examples for each theme.

***Family Involvement: Time Together***

Time together was the most prominent theme in regard to family involvement. Parents provided numerous examples of activities that promote their family involvement including playing with their children, contributing to learning activities, and engaging in outdoor activities. Participant five gave an example of their family’s involvement with “Singing and dancing, watching shows and movies.” Dancing was an activity frequently reported by parents. Participant two reported their emphasis on engaging in educational matters, they particularly enjoyed “help[ing] them [their children] learn and go over what they learn every day.” Many parents also expressed enjoying outdoor activities with their children such as visiting the park.

***Coping with Stress: Time Alone***

When coping with stress, parents emphasized the importance of time alone. Many parents expressed dealing with stress by engaging in self-regulating exercises and activities. A few examples of this are “walk away when [you] can and just breath[e], take deep breaths and pray, and being alone and thinking.” Additionally, parents highlighted engaging in breathing techniques as a way to self-regulate. Other parents took a more active approach to dealing with stress such as participating in yoga, reading, journaling, and spending time outdoors.

***Coping with Stress: Time Together***

The majority of parents preferred alone time when coping with stress however, some parents preferred managing stress in a group setting. For instance, participant 24 reported dealing with stress by attending therapy. Additionally, participants 1 and 10 emphasized dealing with stress by “communica[ting] and talk[ing] with family and friends.” A small number of parents expressed not dealing with stress at all or not having the time to address it.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the differences between White and Black families' comfort levels communicating with their children's teachers. The participants were all parents or guardians of Head Start children. Contrary to the hypothesis, Black families felt slightly more comfortable communicating with teachers than White families. This finding challenged the notion that Black families will experience less comfort due to discrimination. It is vital to acknowledge that this finding could be due to the demographics of the teachers themselves. Future researchers could study the race of teachers as a moderator for comfort level. Hispanic families felt more comfortable engaging with their children's teacher if the teacher spoke Spanish or if a translator was present. This is likely the same for Black parents in regard to Black teachers. Additionally, this finding could be due to the small sample size of the group representing the majority population.

Despite these findings, it is important to acknowledge differences in comfort levels communicating with teachers between racial groups as well as the reasons behind discomfort. Parent involvement is vital for children’s educational richness. Increased parent-teacher communication has been shown to increase parent involvement. Schools should take steps to address communication barriers and potential direct and indirect forms of discrimination to minority groups leading to low comfort in communication. Whilst Black families did experience more comfort, White families were only slightly less comfortable and both groups rated high levels of comfort. This shows that over all parents are comfortable with their children's teachers at Head Start facilities.

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