Activating African American Parental Engagement

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Goal of the Session

School leaders and board members will consider developing policies that take into account the social, historical, cultural and economic factors that influence African American parental engagement (AAPE) in low-SES school settings.
Objectives

Participants will be able to identify factors that contribute to African American parental engagement in urban, low-SES settings.

Participants will have the tools to develop strategies to effectively engage African American parents in urban, low-SES school settings.

Participants will examine their own biases, as they relate to African American parental engagement in urban, low-SES settings.
This session takes a social justice perspective as it relates to African American parental engagement (AAPE) in an urban low-SES school setting.

This session will be interactive.

This session will require some personal and professional reflection.

This session may challenge your beliefs about AAPE.
There must be a profound recognition that parents are the first teachers and that education begins before formal schooling and is deeply rooted in the values, traditions, and norms of family and culture.

— Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot —
Engagement vs. Involvement

- **Involvement**—Often characterized by the time parents spend at the school site. Parents who attend school sanctioned events, visit the classroom and participate in structures like the Parent Teacher Association (PTA).

- **Engagement**—implies a greater degree of interaction. “…A desire, an expression, and an attempt by parents to have an impact on what actually transpires around their children in schools and on the kinds of human, social, and material resources that are valued in schools” (Barton et al, p. 11).
Social Justice

- **Social justice** is about equity, fairness, and inclusion of groups that have been historically silenced or disenfranchised, with the understanding that hearing their voices will ultimately result in an equitable society.
“School leaders must act as advocates in their schools and communities and specifically as advocates for the needs of marginalized students.”

–Theoharis and O’Toole
Think, Pair, Share (3 minutes)

- When you think about the “standout parents” at your school site, what characteristics do they possess? What makes them standout?
- What (personal/professional) factors influence your perspective on parental involvement/engagement?
Why I studied this topic

- To understand how I could better connect with African American parents of my students
- To learn how African American parents defined parental engagement
- To improve academic outcomes for African American children
- My own story
What research says about the topic

“Currently, parents’ roles and involvement in schools have been understood in terms of “what they do” and how that fits or does not fit with the goals of the school. Frequently this approach to understanding parent involvement has relied upon the deficit model, especially in discussions of parent involvement in high-poverty communities” (Howard & Reynolds, 2008, p. 6)

African American parents are often described as not as involved in their child's education when compared with other ethnic groups (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001).

Studies have shown that parental involvement is a factor in increasing academic and behavioral performance of students (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006).
What **factors** should we consider when we define parental engagement?

- Historical
- Socioeconomic
- Cultural
- Racial
For AAPE context matters…

- What is the history of my experience with schools?
- What does society say about me/my child?
- How does my socioeconomic situation play a role in my participating in the ways the school requests I do?
- How does/has my race impacted decisions made (implicitly) about me/my child/my community?
Considering the 4 factors presented, when you think about your current parental engagement with African American families, what is working and what might be improved to build better school-to-parent relationships?
What types of parent engagement does your school value?
Whose social capital matters at your school?

- What form of social capital matters to your school?
- What might the African American parent perceive about the form of social capital that matters at your school?
- What form of social capital do African American parents bring to your school?
- Can a bridge be built between the two?
Traditional School View of Involvement

Parents ———> Mediating Artifact: Volunteer Hours ———> Object Outcome: Parent Involvement

Traditional Explanation of Parental Involvement (Adapted from Barton et. al, 2004)
AA Parent View of Parental Engagement

Parents → Mediating Artifact: Staying up late to help w/ Homework → Object Outcome: Show of moral support

Traditional Explanation of Parental Involvement (Adapted from Barton et. al, 2004)
The Case Study

- Qualitative Study

- Middle school in LA County

- Interviewed 10% of African American parents (21 total), 100% of teachers meeting criteria, site principal and 1 support staff

- 89% of the student population was African American

- 98% Free and Reduced Priced lunch

- Conducted focus groups with teachers, support staff and parents

- Reviewed parental participation policies and handbooks
The Problem

- Based on the extant literature, it appears that African American parents are only considered “involved” based on what they do at the school site and not necessarily how or why they are involved.

- **Lack of trust**—between African Americans and the school system (Fields-Smith, 2005).

- **Lack of depth**—Traditional ideas of involvement are transactional, do not address deeper levels of engagement and lack consideration of African American and high-poverty households.

- **Lack of clarity**—There is no commonly held definition among researchers for parental engagement (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, and George, 2004).
The Research Questions

- How do parents within a predominantly socio-economically disadvantaged school setting, come to understand practices and beliefs at their child’s school?
- How do African American parents build relationships with other parents and school staff?
- What factors do African American parents identify as contributing to their parental engagement or lack thereof?
The Lens

What roles do power, race, history and culture play when it comes to African American parental engagement, in low-SES schools?
Findings: What AA Parents said...

- Parent Engagement in middle school is important.

- Parent engagement is important factor in child’s success—it does not only/always consist of being present at school.

- Very few parents had relationships with other parents at the school; few had relationships with teachers.

- Most had challenges (multiple jobs, single parents w/ more than one child) that prevented them from volunteering/being present at school, but most considered themselves engaged.
Findings: What school personnel said...

- Building trust and relationships with parents is critical.

- School consistently communicates with parents (calls, texts, emails, paper communications), but it is not necessarily acted upon (low parent AA turn-out at meetings, etc).

- Parental engagement was largely defined by parents being present, being proactive about building relationships with the school (i.e. teachers, school staff).
What does trust have to do with it?

Given…

- What we’ve learned about AAPE,

- What we know about the current data as it relates to African American student achievement, disproportionate suspensions and expulsions,

- how history, culture, race and SES play a role in the perspective African American parents have about schools,

might there be some hesitancy from African American parents to trust the educational system?
What do we know now?

As previous research has shown, the position of educators and policy makers as it relates to African American parental engagement has not necessarily been one of advocacy, but rather one that frames the ideal for parental engagement and imposes this ideology onto the African American parents they serve (Auerbach, 2007; Barton et al., 2004; Epstein, 2001).
What can school leaders do?

- School leaders must take responsibility for ensuring the vision for parental engagement is communicated clearly and consistently to school personnel.

- Call out and denounce deficit thinking and set up an environment that values and welcomes African American parents.

- Leadership should provide training ensuring personnel understand the unique challenges African American parents from low-SES face, while appreciating the rich culture and value they bring to the educational setting.

- After the foundation is set among school personnel, the school leader must create spaces for parents to engage with each other and with school personnel.
What steps can stakeholders take?

- To change the approach to parental engagement, the first step is to review the school policy to ensure parents are not just present, but actively engaged with the school.

- An emphasis should be placed on educating parents on how to support their children in an educational context and how to engage with school policy (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008).

- Teachers and staff should take the initiative to build relationships with African American parents and be consistent about strengthening the relationship over time.
Conclusion

- The voices of African American parents have not been included in the political and educational interventions made on behalf of their children.

- School administrators and policy makers should consider activating a type of engagement that shows African American parents in low SES settings how to navigate power structures and puts them in positions to advocate on behalf of their children and collaborate with the school.

- School administrators should see parents as powerful collaborators and supporters of the school.
Questions...
Thank you

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"At the end of the day, the most overwhelming key to a child's success is the positive involvement of parents."

- Jane D. Hull
References


