

School-Family Relations In Context: Parent and Teacher Perceptions of Parent Involvement

Michael A. Lawson
Urban Education 2003 38: 77
DOI: 10.1177/0042085902238687

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://uex.sagepub.com/content/38/1/77>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Urban Education* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://uex.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://uex.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://uex.sagepub.com/content/38/1/77.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jan 1, 2003

[What is This?](#)

SCHOOL-FAMILY RELATIONS IN CONTEXT

Parent and Teacher Perceptions of Parent Involvement

MICHAEL A. LAWSON

Communities in Schools of Sacramento, Inc.

This study addressed teachers' and parents' perceptions of the meanings and functions of parent involvement. Twelve teachers and 13 parents participated in semistructured ethnographic interviews. All actors were either employed by or involved in an ethnically concentrated elementary school in a low-income, culturally diverse, urban community. Analyses revealed that teachers and parents have different perceptions of parent involvement. These different perceptions implicate diverse epistemologies, differential power, and some competing purposes. On the other hand, teachers and parents both claim that firm, mutually beneficial partnerships (or collaboration) between them are essential to children's learning, healthy development, and success in school. Perceived barriers need to be addressed for these partnerships to eventuate.

School reform initiatives prioritize parent involvement, and for good reason. When parents are involved appropriately, children's

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The author is especially grateful for the comments, suggestions, and criticisms provided on earlier versions of this article by Hal A. Lawson and the reviewers of Urban Education. Tania Alameda-Lawson, Mary Link, Connie Collier, and Alfred Joseph, Jr., also provided instrumental guidance and criticism on earlier versions. This article is part of a master's thesis completed in the Department of Family Studies & Social Work in the College of Education and Allied Professions at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Dr. Mary S. Link served as chair. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Michael A. Lawson, Communities in Schools of Sacramento, Inc., 930 Alhambra Blvd., Suite 292, Sacramento, CA 95816; telephone: (916) 447-2477; fax: (916) 447-2507; e-mail: mlawson@cis-sacramento.org.*

URBAN EDUCATION, Vol. 38 No. 1, January 2003 77-133

DOI: 10.1177/0042085902238687

© 2003 Corwin Press, Inc.

academic achievement improves and other beneficial outcomes result, such as regular attendance, good behavior, and improved teacher efficacy (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Like other slogans, however, "parent involvement" may not be defined precisely. School reform efforts will be impeded if the meanings and functions of parent involvement are unclear, ambiguous, and competing (Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997).

Parents and teachers must perceive the meanings and functions of parent involvement at least similarly and compatibly, if not identically. Beneficial outcomes for children, teachers, and parents alike hinge on the relationships parents and teachers develop around shared commitments to parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Misunderstanding and conflict loom as alternative results when teachers and parents have different, perhaps competing, perceptions of the meanings and functions of parent involvement (Lightfoot, 1978).

In short, questions regarding the meanings and functions of parent involvement are essential to practice and research. However, the generic definitions and descriptions of parent involvement provided in the literature cannot be taken for granted. Local school contexts weigh heavily on people (Gore, 1993; Lipman, 1997). They construct meanings and functions in these contexts and in relation to one another (Swidler, 1986).

Teachers and parents in particular develop relationships and discourses in these unique settings. The practice of school reform thus entails research on the meanings and functions of parent involvement, in each context. Although an abundant literature on the generic aspects of parent involvement is available, differences in context, actors, and the theoretical points of departure mandate additional research (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Needs are especially evident for practice-embedded research in unique, diverse contexts that are selected because of their contributions to research (Lawson, 1999). This study on the meanings and functions of parent involvement in one low-income, urban community was designed with these needs in mind.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the literature, parent involvement enhances children's learning experiences and academic achievement (e.g., Chavkin, 1993; Eagle, 1989; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1987, 1992, 1996, 2001; Greenberg, 1989; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Thompson, 1993). Although Epstein (1996) asserted that the label *parent involvement* is no longer in good currency, the literature is replete with it, especially studies describing different parent involvement programs and activities and their presumed and actual effects (e.g., Adelman, 1996; Alameda, 1996; Becker & Epstein, 1982; Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992; Stearns & Peterson, 1973; Winters, 1993). Moreover, federal programs and provisions such as Title I continue to mandate and support parent involvement programs and school-family connections (Lodge, 1998; McClure, 1994).

In short, the language of parent involvement is used when schools are the unit of analysis and children's academic achievement is the primary focus. Here, the guiding question of parent involvement is simple: "How can parents help the school and its teachers" (Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997, p. 9)?

Framed in this way, much of the research on parent involvement examines a continuum of schoolcentric parent involvement activities that are structured and defined for parents by schools. At one end of this continuum, parents have little power or influence over school decision-making processes, and their involvement in creating structured educational environments at home for their children is often the primary focus (e.g., Eagle, 1989; Epstein, 1995; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Peressini, 1996; Rich, 1996; Walberg, Bole, & Waxman, 1980). At the next point, parents are involved in clerical, extracurricular, cultural, and child development activities at schools (Clark, 1983; Goldenberg, 1987; White, Taylor, & Moss, 1992). Moving toward the other end of the continuum, parents serve as teachers' assistants in classrooms and are involved in parent-teacher associations and like decision-making councils that support school-defined goals (e.g., Comer & Haynes, 1992; Eagle,

1989; Swap, 1993; Winters, 1993). At the other end of the continuum, parents serve as partners in school problem solving; parents help schools design, implement, and evaluate new reform and restructuring strategies (Comer & Haynes, 1992; Epstein, 1996; Hopfenburg, Levin, & Associates, 1993; Winters, 1993).

Despite differences in how parent involvement is defined and operationalized in research and practice, schoolcentric parent involvement programs and activities appear to encourage learning at home; garner high expectations for academic achievement; and result in higher grades, higher test scores, better attendance, and higher graduation rates (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Nevertheless, in spite of such indications, these encouraging findings also call into question the assumptions, selectivities, contingencies, and silences that may undergird schoolcentric parent involvement practices and activities.

For example, to what extent are all parents provided equal access to participation? Are low-income, culturally diverse parents with low educational attainment afforded full inclusion in educational decision-making processes? Are parent involvement activities a priority for low-income families? And to what extent are cultural differences between constituents accommodated, if at all?

Some research suggests unequal involvement between parents on all levels, even at the same school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Harry, 1992; Lareau, 1996; Winters, 1993). Parent involvement and inclusion in practice and research also vary by race, ethnicity, and social class affiliations (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 1999; Henry, 1996; Lareau, 1989, 1996; Wells & Serna, 1996). Moreover, when schools serving low-income neighborhoods and communities represent the unit of analysis, researchers have found parent involvement in schoolcentric programs and activities to be often minimal, sporadic, or altogether nonexistent (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 1999; Chavkin, 1993; Lareau, 1996).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) attributed such low levels of schoolcentric parent involvement to challenges associated with living in poverty. They suggested that particularly challenged low-income parents are more likely to need consistent satisfaction of

their basic needs before their involvement choices would mirror less challenged populations (see also Reglin, 1993).

However, in a later review of the parent involvement literature, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) also suggested that the ways in which parents construct their parental roles in relation to their children's education may further determine and reflect their levels of involvement in schools. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler claimed that the associations and groups to which parents belong hold expectations about appropriate parental behaviors. Over time, the "expectations" that groups and associations hold for their members may become recursive: They influence the scope, level, and nature of parent involvement in children's schooling. The more the groups to which parents belong value and expect parent involvement in schooling, the more likely parents are to be actively involved in their children's schools. Conversely, the lower a group's expectations for parent involvement in schooling, the less likely parents are to be(come) involved.

When the focus of role construction expands to include both teachers and parents, studies suggest that parents and teachers in low-income school communities often have competing roles that in turn affect the level of parent involvement in schools (Katz, 1980; Lightfoot, 1978). Katz (1980) claimed that educators' specific and limited roles afford a more objective and dispassionate evaluation of children's behavior, development, and readiness. This orientation is posited to differ radically from the diffuse and limitless frame of reference of parents, who tend to view each child as a reflection of his or her own experience and/or circumstance. In short, these sharp contrasts are hypothesized to frame discontinuities, disconnects, and blaming cycles between families and schools that are hurtful and harmful to children, families, and teachers alike (Lightfoot, 1978).

The literature on parent involvement in low-income school communities also implicates complex sociocultural and political factors that may contribute to low levels of parent involvement and engagement in school-designed and/or schoolcentric activities. For example, Lareau (1996) attributed differential levels of involve-

ment between class groups to the often conflict-laden interactions and relationships between low-income parents and teachers. Lightfoot (1978) explained these conflicts as reflections of differences in power and status in society, citing the often ethnocentric and schoolcentric messaging and metamessaging processes that define and underscore teacher interactions with parents. Ogbu (1995a, 1995b) also questioned the extent to which some ethnic, low-income minorities will engage in institutional processes defined by dominant cultural norms and frames of reference. When schools do not recognize racial and cultural issues, especially when people are not treated equally, racial and cultural boundaries and divisions between families and schools are reinforced (Lipman, 1997; McDermott & Gospodinoff, 1979).

MISSING LINKS

Despite the benefits and barriers included in the parent involvement literature, needs remain to further analyze and clarify the often unarticulated assumptions and (implicit) theories of action that undergird what parent involvement means and represents to its primary actors: parents and teachers. This need is particularly salient for elementary schools that are both challenged by poverty and struggling to involve and engage parents in schoolcentric activities. By attending to the assumptions, worldviews, and theories of action of parents and teachers in school communities challenged by poverty, the strengths, selectivity, and silences, embedded in the ways parents and teachers think, talk, and interact may become more readily apparent. Once identified, such subjugated understandings of what parent involvement means and represents—to whom, under what conditions, when, and why—may further contribute to practice strategies and research agendas that support the unique and overlapping strengths and needs of parents and teachers alike.¹

Although several studies have given voice to teachers' perceptions of parent involvement (e.g., Epstein & Becker, 1982; Lipman, 1997; Shunow & Harris, 2000), understandings of the meanings, functions, and attributions that low-income parents make in

unique, diverse settings have not been adequately understood. As Lareau (1996) suggested,

I have no doubt that parents check off these answers in survey research. The meaning; however, differs radically. The same phrase “contacting the school, checking homework, helping with homework, and talking to teachers,” appears to have different meaning to the parents. (p. 59)

Meanings in context are especially important. Ethnographic interviews are needed of both parents and teachers in the same low-income school (Lawson, 1999). This study responded to this need, as well as the need to further include the perceptions and worldviews of ostensibly “uninvolved” parents in the current research conversation on parent involvement and school-family relations. The research questions for this study were the following: What are the meanings and functions of parent involvement for teachers and parents in the same low-income, culturally diverse school community? How are these meanings culturally constructed? How do teachers and parents perceive their individual and collective roles in facilitating parent involvement?

METHOD

At the beginning of the study, the initial goal was to understand school-family relations in context. In the course of 2 years of fieldwork, however, the investigator learned that to understand school-family relations, the cultural and subcultural meanings of parent involvement from the perspectives of each constituency of the school community needed close examination. On the basis of a 2-year tenure at the school and in the community, an ethnographic study seemed to be the most pragmatic approach to generate the contextualized richness of the actors' personal and collective experiences (Fetterman, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Semistructured ethnographic interviews, including focus groups, were conducted for the purpose of this study. Although this

method inhibits the generalizability of the findings, it is the most appropriate for determining meanings and perceived functions in unique, culturally diverse contexts (Fetterman, 1989).

Pursuant to the time requirements for ethnography, the investigator participated in school and school-community activities for 2 years. The semistructured focus group interviews of teachers and parents lasted from 1 to 2 hours. In addition, the investigator interviewed the school's principal twice. The investigator also reviewed district records, school records, and a school-administered survey gauging reform indices to facilitate a greater contextual understanding of the school and its community (Fetterman, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

The recruitment of teachers for this study began in April 1997 at the school's staff meeting. At that time, the investigator informed the school staff of the purpose and objectives of the study and asked permission to attend designated "team meetings" (according to grade level) of teachers who might be interested in obtaining additional information. In the proceeding 2 weeks, the investigator attended meetings of third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers, who were informed further of the study's objectives.

The teachers who agreed to be interviewed taught sixth grade (2), fifth grade (2), fourth grade (4), and third grade (4). Two teachers were African American men, 3 were African American women, and 5 were European American women. There was 1 European American male teacher and 1 multiethnic woman. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 22 years. Four of the interviewed teachers had obtained advanced degrees, and 3 of the teachers were involved in the school's parent involvement committee. None of the teachers lived in the local neighborhood or community.

There were two groups of parents represented in the study's sample: "involved" and "uninvolved." The recruitment of involved third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade parents was facilitated by their presence at school every day. Because the investigator had been involved in the school for 2 years, a relationship had already been established with 4 of the 6 involved parents in the study, and they readily agreed to participate. Building from the enthusiasm of 1

parent, snowball sampling was used to recruit 2 others. Interviews of involved parents were conducted in "twos," or dyads.

Because of the perceived omission of uninvolved parents in the parent involvement literature, the inclusion of what Ragin (1994) referred to as the "voices of the silent" was a central effort. However, the recruitment of the 7 uninvolved parents was a formidable task.

Fetterman (1989) argued that a community guide, or a community insider, is a necessary vehicle for community entry and acceptance for any ethnographer (see also McKnight, 1995). Although the investigator had been involved in the community for 2 years, 3 days of door-to-door outreach failed to recruit a single parent. However, with the aid of the school's well-respected parent advocate (who had been born and raised in the community), 4 parents were recruited. After the community had become increasingly familiar with the investigator over the period of a weeklong door-knocking sojourn, the investigator spoke with nearly 20 parents about parent involvement, yet only 3 additional parents agreed to have their words and thoughts audiotaped. In the end, although 3 uninvolved parents agreed to be interviewed at the local community center, the other 4 parents were interviewed individually in their own homes because, as they told the investigator, they were afraid of the repercussions that might ensue if anyone else were to hear them talk negatively about the school. Nevertheless, after a week of knocking on doors and interrupting street "hangouts" within a 10-block radius of the school proper, the investigator was able to recruit 7 parents who described themselves as uninvolved.²

The recruitment of uninvolved parents who lived in close proximity to the school resulted in a parent sample composed exclusively of African Americans. This delimitation came at the expense of the inclusion of Caucasian parents of Appalachian descent, who largely lived on the outer edges of the community described in the following section.

In total, 13 African American parents of low socioeconomic standing were interviewed (6 involved and 7 uninvolved). There were 10 women and 3 men. Two of the 3 men participating in the

study were collecting disability pensions, and the other was employed. Of the 10 women in the study, 7 were single mothers, 6 were employed, 2 were collecting Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and 2 were unemployed, having recently had their AFDC benefits terminated by welfare reform. Eleven of the 13 parents had graduated from high school, and 1 had received a general equivalency diploma (GED). Another had dropped out of school in the 10th grade. One of the high school graduates had also received a bachelor's degree.

Thirteen questions were used in each interview. These questions were derived from field notes; informal conversations with teachers, administrators, and parents; as well as the literature. Interviews of both teachers and parents were piloted. Modifications between questions for teachers and parents were substituted as needed. Follow-up questions were levied frequently to lend clarification and/or probe a respondent's idea. Each question was open ended. Open-ended questions invited the free sharing of experiences and beliefs, which in turn helped alleviate any a priori categorizations already embedded in the interview questions. Each session lasted an average of 1 hour and 15 minutes. Respondents were told that any questions deemed "uncomfortable" were allowed to remain unanswered. Anonymity was promised, and respondents were told that pseudonyms would be used throughout the text of the findings.

Poststructuralist theoretical underpinnings were used to help guide data analysis procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Although the ethnographic principle that people are able to create and make meaning of their lives was honored (Fetterman, 1989), the impacts of race, culture, structure, socioeconomic standing, and community context on the lives of the participating teachers and parents were weighed by the investigator throughout data analysis. In poststructuralist inquiry, the status and power of the informants are honored by acknowledging the power differences between the informants and researcher throughout the research process (Ladson-Billings, 1995). To help protect the voices of the participants in the study, transcripts were returned to the participants during the early stages of analysis for verification, clarification, and expansion. In addition, another researcher, who specialized in

ethnographic research, helped provide an audit trail of the key decisions made during the process of data analysis. Two other researchers provided “debriefing” sessions with the investigator during the process of writing and interpreting the research findings. Additional field notes, district records, school records, and a school-administered survey were used to help triangulate whenever possible.

Each transcription, a verbatim account of the audio interview, was read, analyzed, and scrutinized for predominant themes and patterns. The data were coded, and trends were defined, catalogued, and grouped (Fetterman, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once the initial codes were defined, the investigator found it pragmatic to group together all codes and patterns that dealt with a wider theme. The investigator mixed and matched patterns and began to build theory from the ground up (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process continued until codes, patterns, and themes were decontextualized and recontextualized until saturation occurred.

SETTING

Garfield Elementary is a Title I neighborhood school located in Grace Point, a largely poor urban community in a Midwestern city.³ It houses 851 students, 42 teachers, 19 paraprofessionals, 1 nurse, 1 part-time counselor, and 1 visiting teacher. Sixty percent of Garfield’s students are African American. Nearly 40% are Caucasian of Appalachian heritage, and many of these do not live within walking distance of the school. Garfield serves low-income children.

Eleven thousand people live in Garfield’s neighborhood community. Eighty-four percent of the 5,000 households are composed of single women and children. Twenty percent of these households are without telephones, and over three quarters are without automobiles. More than 100 of the housing units lack complete and/or adequate plumbing systems, and over 800 apartment units are vacant, even though 20% of the community’s households are estimated to contain multiple generations of families. Grace Point’s population is 94% African American, and 70% of its inhabitants live below the poverty line.

Although the community has some of the highest rates of child abuse and neglect in the region, only 375 children are enrolled in the community's three Head Start programs (Lawson & Hooper-Briar, 1995). In addition, Grace Point is challenged by a severe substance abuse problem, and more than 600 cases of juvenile delinquency involving Grace Point's youth were filed during the investigator's 2-year tenure in the school community.

Garfield's principal estimates that more than 70% of the school's students enter school without the physical, mental, or social health to achieve at grade level. Furthermore, Garfield Elementary's teachers, administrators, and staff believe that they, as a school staff, lack the sufficient resources to make up for the social and health challenges experienced by many of the school's families. Although there are an estimated 100 social service agencies serving Grace Point, many of these service agencies are unaware of one another, and their often derogatory attitudes toward the community members of Grace Point contribute to poor resident access and use of such agencies (Lawson & Hooper-Briar, 1995).

Two years prior to this study, a community schools initiative began in an effort to address many of the challenges that confronted the members of Grace Point's community, including but not limited to a Grace Point community consortium; a school-based interprofessional collaborative (Lodge, 1998) of social, health, and juvenile justice services at the middle school two blocks up the street into which Garfield feeds; and the revitalized Grace Point Community Council, which helped oversee many of the community development agendas already under way. At the time of the study, Garfield Elementary was in the process of attempting to be a "family-friendly" school. Toward this end, the school received a grant from a national foundation to be part of a nationwide group of 19 other "Points of Promise Schools." As part of the grant, Garfield's teachers and staff members were asked by the foundation to begin to form partnerships between teachers and families under the assumption that parent involvement would improve students' academic outcomes, which rate considerably below the district average.

A year later, this foundation provided a self-administered survey for Garfield Elementary to assess the preliminary progress of the

reform initiative. This survey defined and operationalized parent involvement in schoolcentric ways. The schoolcentric activities described in the questionnaire included parent participation in parent-teacher conferences, parent involvement in school decision-making activities, parent involvement in the classroom as teachers' aides, parent involvement on field trips, parent involvement in bake sales and book drives, and so forth.

Of the teachers polled, 62% reported that less than 5% of all parents attended parent-teacher conferences. Sixty-six percent of the responding teachers indicated that parents' lack of concern toward their children's education was a "major problem," and 45% of Garfield's teachers cited a lack of clear expectations and/or a well-developed vision about what was involved in the school's reform strategy as a major problem.

By the time the formal interviews for this study commenced, Garfield's teachers and staff members were challenged by parent involvement. Although Garfield had a parent involvement steering committee, a parent coordinator, and a parent club headed by the school's parent advocate that was meeting regularly, the school's attitude and demeanor toward parent involvement could be characterized as a "hopeful paralysis."

FINDINGS

The findings are divided by the study's two constituents: parents and teachers. The narrative is structured around the stories and experiences of these primary actors. Both parents' and teachers' narratives reflect a constant tension between structure and agency. This tension is manifest in parents' and teachers' struggles to assert their worldviews and experiences as legitimate within community and institutional contexts that make them feel marginalized, devalued, alienated, and isolated.

Parents' narratives are structured around five predominant themes: blocked (communitycentric) pathways, changing times, teacher-parent communication, parents' trust in children's schooling, and parents' aspirations for the school to become a community-serving institution.

Teachers' narratives are structured around three central themes: parents' involvement defined by teachers; teachers' beliefs and attributions; and teachers' lack of ownership, loneliness, skepticism, and withdrawal in the school reform process.

PARENTS

Garfield's parents talked about their lives with equal doses of pride and remorse about their community, its history, as well as their individual and collective experiences. Although the people, places, and rituals of Grace Point are the overwhelmingly positive benchmarks to their individual and collective identities, they are nonetheless simultaneously conflicted and constricted by their own environment. As one uninvolved parent, Cecilia, noted, "You know, we feel the love, baby. But we also feel like we's trapped."

Blocked Pathways: Parents' Voices and Communitycentric Frames of Reference

Currently, many of Garfield's parents are struggling to make a difference in the lives of their families and community. However, this process is as paradoxical as it is dynamic. For these parents, every ounce of fervor in their lives is mixed with trepidation. The hope that they bring to each passing day seems sprung from seeds of doubt planted the day before. Cecilia suggested, "We just deal, honey. We just deal."

In fact, they do more than that. Much more. But when it comes to schools and schooling, Garfield's parents are at a loss for ways and means to access the people who will convey and convert their messages and experiences into better lives for their children and the community in which they live. They are not at a loss for ideas. As Cecilia passionately explained,

You know, if you think that I'm gonna sit back and wait for them to hear me while my baby's future is on the line, then you got another thing coming, honey. Cause in this day, you've got one, maybe two chances if you're lucky, and that's it. Cause the moment your kid gets in trouble with the system, then you can wave goodbye to your

baby. Cause the street will swallow them, and, honey, it will take God and an army to bring him back.

Garfield's parents were eager to share their stories. Yet they did so only when they were asked to tell them. Because these parents often saw themselves and their realities as different from people from other walks of life, many of their responses vacillated between what they felt were the predetermined "correct answers" and what their own individual experiences told them. This dissonance is perhaps best illustrated in how they perceived the construct of parent involvement.

Parent involvement: Schoolcentric versus communitycentric foci. When Garfield's parents were explicitly asked what parent involvement meant to them, they readily answered in ways that conformed to the meanings and functions defined by the school. As one single, uninvolved parent, Sheri, said, "Parent involvement mean going on trips and stuff like that. Just being around talking to the teachers and helping out in the classroom and stuff like that. Just, basically, doing whatever the school ask you to do." But as their stories progressed, it became apparent that although the term *parent involvement* gets operationalized within a schoolcentric context (how can parents help the school and its teachers?), Garfield's parents viewed parent involvement as a desperate fight for their children's lives and futures. This fight transcended the needs of the school and its teachers.

For these parents, orientations for involvement start in the community and move into the school. Conventional schoolcentric conceptions of parent involvement start at the school and then branch out to children's home environments. As one working uninvolved parent, Vanessa, stated,

You know, most of us, we're concerned with what's gonna happen to these kids after they leave school each day. I mean, some of us are scraping to put food on the table, clothes on their backs. You know, keeping the kids off of the street corner. That's our job, you know, taking care of business and making sure that they have the opportunity to go to school each day. Cause with no clothes, or if they wind

up in trouble with the system, then school ain't a possibility for them. So, I'm not gonna worry about the school when I got these other things, you know?

Parents' community-driven orientations of involvement are rooted in two sources. First, with the exception of the home, 8 of the 13 parents in the study identified the school as the primary safe haven in their children's lives. Second, because of that belief, these parents viewed the 6 hours a day that children are in school as one of the few times that children's physical safety is relatively assured.

Changing Times

The community. Garfield's parents are perpetually concerned with the changing climate of Grace Point. Parents believe that Grace Point has been coming apart "at the seams" over the past 20 years. Whereas Grace Point was once perceived as a community defined by togetherness and a shared sense of collective peoplehood, it is now considered a place of social isolation and individualism (Winters, 1993). As one involved parent, Fred, explained,

When I grew up down here, it was like just one big family. And everybody knew everybody outside of the home. And now, I see that people are afraid to get to know each other. You know, it doesn't seem like there is that community. It's like everybody is out for themselves and it didn't used to be like that.

Garfield's parents perceive the breakdown in their community as a direct consequence of community drug use and violence. When streets are filled with drugs and violence, parents will not let their children outside. And when children stay inside, neighbors and parents fail to build community social ties. As Cecilia pointed out,

You know, when I was a little girl, you know, like in the summers we'd be outside playing all the time. You know, jumping rope, playing baseball, stuff like that. And, you know, my mother and my aunt, they'd be sitting outside with the neighbors, havin' barbecues and havin' a good time. And, to me, that's what this neighborhood is still

all about. But, you know, with the stuff that kids are into these days, and with the stuff going down on the streets like drugs, kids getting into fights, and stuff like that. You know, we don't want our kids playing like we used to no more, cause who knows what will happen to them when they go around the corner? And, you know, except for holidays, we don't have those community cook outs no more. And, I'm not sure I know my neighbors like my momma did. And, it's a shame, you know? A real shame.

For many of Garfield's families, the potential for drug use and violence is compounded when parents have to work and are unable to guard their children's safety. Although Garfield's working parents believe that they are doing the best that they can to provide for their families, they nonetheless fear that their employment is contributing to the plight of many of their youth. Because many of Garfield's parents lack sufficient money or are not aware of affordable or subsidized opportunities for daycare, many children are left at home after school with nothing to do. And when kids get involved with drugs when parents are working, parents feel responsible. As Sheri explained,

I know our kids are at a loss. I can tell you that. Because the more that we have to work to provide for them, the less time that they have with they families. I don't know what to tell you. They don't have nothing to do but do the drugs. My daughter was telling me that this morning, about one of her friends that's starting, and her momma is a working momma, just like me. And that's scary, you know? And it wasn't like she was making any type of threat or nothing. You know, she ain't like that. It was like she was telling me about what is going on in the children's lives. And when you've got a community with a lot of working mothers and parents just trying to get by and provide for they families, then something has got to give. And, as hard as I'm trying, I think that's why kids are at a loss.

Consequently, many of Garfield's parents are challenged by their dual responsibilities of having to safeguard their children by themselves, while struggling to provide for them. This process is especially frustrating for these parents given the fact that they perceive this struggle as endemic to only their generation. As one single, involved parent, Shirley, explained,

Like they say, there are two paths that you can take, the wrong one, and the right one. And, they may chose the wrong one, and then you need to put them on the right and get them back on track. But that can be really rough, and there can be a lot of obstacles that stand in your way and beat you down. But it's hard now, and especially frustrating, because it used to be that you had people there for you. But now, a lot of parents are lucky to have one helping hand.

Parents identify social isolation as a characteristic of the changing conditions of Grace Point, and it upsets them (Winters, 1993). Garfield's parents also believe that the community's institutions have also changed. Parents expressed sadness over the closures of the local movie theater, grocery stores, and churches. They have also noticed a change in the community's schools.

School, teachers, and children. Garfield's parents once saw the school as an institution charged solely with teaching academic subjects. However, because of the changes in Grace Point, they now believe that the school is faced with additional educative responsibilities. Although they perceive that the school has had difficulties in accommodating to the changes in Grace Point's community, parents generally believe that Garfield's teachers are trying to create better futures for children. As Shirley noted,

And it used to, as I was growing up, that it was just the job to teach us how to read, write, and do math. Now it's up to them to make kids aware of their safety, make them aware of drugs, and make them aware of all the things that are out there waiting for them. So, it's not just science and history anymore, and they are trying to do their best.

The change in community conditions has not only resulted in a change in educational focus. Indeed, parents believe that drugs, violence, and other environmental hazards have created a school environment that is centered on suspicion and fear. In fact, many of Garfield's parents believe that the school is not only weary of the potentially harmful environmental conditions in Grace Point but scared of the children as well. When teachers and school staff members are afraid of children and their community, safeguards are put

in place that are both harmful and stigmatizing to children. As Vanessa, an uninvolved parent, explained,

And, some of them act as if they scared of the students. And now they have cameras in a lot of the schools. And they didn't have all that when I was growing up. Cameras in the schools, security, things being locked up, can't get into the school, can't go to the bathroom without a pass. It's just so different. It's like they believe those babies are all criminals or something. And, I think that kids see that. At least, I do.

In addition to the implementation of new devices and policies designed to promote school safety, many of Garfield's parents believe that the school has responded to changing community conditions by treating children differently. Parents say that as children, they were viewed by teachers as students ready to be taught, but they now believe that Garfield's staff regards children as objects needing to be controlled. As one involved parent, Jacqueline, said,

Like how some of the teachers, and the staff, how they talk to the children. And I know, cause I have a lot of friends that are parents, that if they were around the school to hear a lot of the things that are being said, they would not be very happy, cause that ain't the way that we were treated at school. And the way that they are talking to the children, you know, may stunt their learning. All this yelling and carrying on like, you know, every time I walk into the building, all I hear is teachers screaming at the kids. And so, you have to be really careful what you say. Because, children are meant to be taught at school, not treated like a bad dog like they are today.

Many of Garfield's parents, like Jacqueline, are familiar with the disciplinary challenges associated with many of their children. As Vanessa lamented, "Sometimes with these kids, you don't know what to do, 'cause they just so hard headed." However, many of them are continually concerned by the lack of affection that they perceive is shown to their children by Garfield's teachers and staff members. Moreover, this concern reaches the point of parental frustration and outrage when teachers translate and attribute negative actions and behaviors by children to parental irresponsibility and neglect. As Jacqueline explained,

Cause there's not enough love in the school, and a lot of times I think that the school think that there's not enough love in the children's lives. And, I think mostly that that is not really true. And, it makes me angry. I think that some kids may need attention, especially when their parents are working or whatever else. But I also think that there is not much, or enough, love in the school. You know, with all the yelling and all. But, that's why the kids are so needy there, because they aren't getting much love there. And, like my child say, the other day, he needed to get a hug from his teacher. He said with all the yelling that was going on, he needed that and wanted to show it to the other kids, you know, that the teacher cared. But, then it's like it gets turned around to the parents, you know? Like the parents don't love the kids so they act up. And sure, you may know that the kids aren't being fed or clothed right, but it may not be because they aren't loved, it's because they have nothing, you know, it's their circumstance.

When children's misbehavior results in the labeling of parents, the roots of an oppositional relationship between parents and teachers begin to form. Parents perceive that when teachers assume that they do not love and care for their children, teachers stop listening to parents' voices and concerns.

Barrier: Teacher-Parent Communication

Garfield's parents believe that poor communication between parents and teachers is the chief barrier to the future health and well-being of their children (Epstein, 1996; Mannan & Blackwell, 1992; Thompson, 1996). As Fred said,

You know, if we could get parents and teachers together, on the same page, working together, that would help. Cause, if they can learn to talk to each other, then our babies are gonna get an education. And, we know that an education is what it's about. That's what our community needs: our children to all be educated.

Because parents believe that the origin of poor teacher-parent communication lies within the school, they believe that the school should initiate collaboration by becoming more responsive to parental voices and concerns. Although Fred worries that the school's unresponsiveness is due to his suspicion that "the school

sometimes doesn't want parents involved," many of Garfield's parents feel that they cannot wait for the school to become more responsive to their voices. As Shirley remarked,

Schools need to be there. And to listen. And, I know that sometimes there may be too much information to swallow, but parents here have got stories to tell, and experiences to share. And, they may not be pleasant stories. But they need to be heard, and schools need to listen. They need to listen to us. No matter what we say.

In keeping with the above theme of poor parent-teacher communication, some of Garfield's parents perceive this process as a consequence of school staff members viewing themselves as "experts," thereby ignoring and/or excluding the opinions of parents. As one involved parent, Rick, noted,

You know, sometimes the teachers be acting like they know about everything on earth, you know, more than you, 'cause they all educated 'n stuff. So, you just got to let them think that way until they get to know you. Then they'll listen [laughs]. Well, at least sometimes.

For some parents, however, Rick's remark is no laughing matter. Some of Garfield's parents believe that in addition to ignoring parents because of differential levels of educational experience, school teachers and staff members couple such notions of expertise with deficit assumptions about how children's academic aptitude relates to parental caring. Two uninvolved parents, Demetrie and Whitney, described this severe and tragic process as it related to their children's learning disabilities. Demetrie said,

I'm stressed out, because one of my kids got in trouble with the law. And the school couldn't figure it out because he couldn't read and I could. And it was like, the school said that I wasn't paying him enough attention. Like my kid, he couldn't read. He didn't know what he was reading. And everything for us was bad until I had to go down to the board of education to have him tested for dyslexia. And then they found out what was wrong with him, but by then it was too late. He already had a court record, and he had already taken to the streets.

And the school said that he was bad. And, I'm not against that part, but it's a communication problem, because they need to listen to us. Cause I'd been trying to tell them about his problems for a long time, but then they don't listen. And, ya, you can teach them a lot, cause that's your job, but we live with that child.

And you know, they say that it's because parents fly off the handle that nothing gets done. And I have. You can't help but fly off the handle when they try to tell you what your child like, when you know what your child do everyday. You can tell me what my child does at school, and I can tell you what my child does at home, but they be trying to tell me what my child be like at home and what I be doing with him, and that ain't right! But, if they don't communicate with us and listen to our side of the story about our kids, and if we don't work together, then this school is going to continue to deteriorate. And then, they try to tell me that I am not involved. Shoot, what am I doing up at school talking to them?

This diffuse sense of powerlessness and outrage becomes even more frustrating for parents when they experience conflict with the roles expected of them by others (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). When parents' work interferes with their ability to be involved at the school at the time and in the manner that the school specifies, school-family relations intensify. Whitney said,

Same thing I say. My son has the same problem. My son passed everything with high marks. The only thing he didn't pass was reading. I kept telling the teachers at the school that he can't read. So, if he can't read like the other kids, he is going to act out 'cause he don't want the other kids to think he can't do what they do. So, I am trying to tell them this but they don't hear me. And now, the end of the year come, and he ain't gonna move on. Why? Because he can't read. So, I come into the office to come talk with the teacher and the administrators and they make me wait for an hour cause they've got other emergencies. And I'm like, my lunch hour's over. And then, they bring me in the office to tell me that my son has a behavior problem and that I need to start giving him more affection. And I start asking them, "which one of you has got a Ph.D. to tell me what I do with my kids?" And then they tell me that I'm being unreasonable. And I'm like, "I just got a job, I'm off welfare, I'm risking getting fired by standing here, and you are trying to tell me that I need to calm down when you tell me what me and my baby are like?" And, I think that's why parents get so upset at the school all the time because of the fact that the school always act like they know everything. But what

makes me really mad, is that they won't even allow us to know what they know, cause they always telling us what we don't do. You know what I'm saying?

When parents have negative experiences with the school that affect the lives of their children, word spreads throughout the community. As Cecilia said, "The people in this community have ears as big as Dumbo [laughs]. So, you know, you can bet that if one thing happens up there that's a story, you can bet that everyone gonna know about it." Indeed, because parents believe that negative stories infiltrate the community frequently, school-family relations are often put "on the block."

Barrier: Parents' Trust in Children's Schooling

When negative stories are told by parents who visit the school, the trust of other parents toward the school and schooling becomes eroded (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Ogbu, 1995a, 1995b). This process occurs even with those parents who believe that the school is working for them. As two involved parents, Leasa and Shirley, noted,

Leasa: I trust this school. But sometimes, you know, things happen. I had one child here and he went through kindergarten and first grade and he was student of the month, but when he got to third grade he was falling by the wayside. And, I couldn't understand that. And so, it turned out that after he changed a few rooms, then he started to do well. Cause some teachers are good for some kids, and some aren't. And, it seemed like the teacher had a grudge against him, and the teacher would send him out in the hallway all of the time. And, the only reason why is because he was real bright and he wanted to ask different questions, and the teacher didn't want him interrupting all the time, and so he couldn't have a word to speak. And so, he would say, "if I couldn't learn, then nobody else is going to learn either." And, it became a problem, because they classified him as a slow learner. But, after in a special education class, they found that he needed to learn more quicker, and he's in the right grade now. But they didn't find anything wrong with him. But you should have seen all the papers that I have saying what was wrong with him. And now, he's doing great.

Shirley: For me, it's all about looking for the positives and not looking for the negatives. But sometimes, the community focuses so much on negatives that, that we can't even think about the positives. You know, we just sink our teeth into the negatives and just drag on it—especially when stories like that are passed around.

For some of Garfield's parents, the erosion of trust in the school is perceived to cause parents to approach teacher-parent interactions with hostility, even when the school is trying to accentuate positive accomplishments by the students. As one involved parent, Ron, explained

Its all comes down to a parent-teacher thing. Cause, most parents that I know can't get along with their child's teacher. "He picks on my kid," and this and that, you know? And sometimes it's like that. But, I saw one parent come up here screaming at a teacher when the teacher was trying to tell her that her boy was "Student of the Month." So, you know, it works both ways.

Moreover, when parents distrust the school and when parent-teacher interactions are perpetually laden with conflict, teachers and parents are not the only persons affected. In fact, Garfield's parents believe that children are the primary victims of teacher-parent conflicts (Lightfoot, 1978). Yet in spite of their compassion and concern, parents believe that children contribute to many school-family entanglements (Epstein, 1996).

Barrier: Children's Attributions of Parent Involvement

When negative teacher-parent interactions occur regularly, children associate parent involvement as an indication of negative student behavior. As Leasa explained,

And I wouldn't get to school until there was some sort of problem. And, when I came into the building, it would get passed down the line, cause somebody in the building knew me, and by the time that I hit the door they would pass it all the way down the line and they would say, "Your mother's in the building! What did you do?" And that's the way that it is, you know, because, maybe because it

doesn't happen very often—that parents being involved at school always seem like a bad thing to the kids.

Garfield's parents believe that an increase in positive parent-teacher communications and interactions would change the negative attributions made by children when their parents enter the school. Parents also believe that if children viewed parent involvement in a more positive light, parent-teacher interactions would improve. They do lament, however, that they have yet to arrive at that point.

Because Garfield announces parent involvement activities largely through take-home flyers, teachers' ability to involve parents often depends on the extent to which children successfully deliver the materials distributed to them each Friday afternoon. When school flyers and announcements fail to reach the hands of parents, parents are often left unaware of the current and upcoming activities and events at the school. As a result, they seldom attend. Although many of Garfield's parents believe that their unawareness of school activities is by their children's design, they also believe that consistent breakdowns in the school's hand delivery system ultimately lead Garfield's teachers and staff members to associate low parent turnout to a lack of family caring. As Vanessa noted,

You know, they've got to do something besides sending home things with the kids that I never get. Cause, I don't know if it's that they're embarrassed or something, but I always get the feeling that kids are scared to have they parents in the building. So, I just don't get those things when they're sent home. Or, when I do get them, it's like they say, "Oh, I brought something for you today momma," but the activity, you know, took place last week. And then, sometimes I've gone into the school after that and the teacher asks me—all sly—"Why weren't you there last week?" And I say that I didn't know about it, but then it's like they giving me a look like I'm too lazy, or how you say, disinterest to be involved.

Although Garfield's parents believe that "home visitations" by a school administrator, teacher, or parent would be an important means of informing parents of school activities, they believe that such measures would serve only to scratch the surface of a larger

problem. Indeed, because they perceive that Grace Point's inhabitants tend to have greater needs than persons in other locales, many of Garfield's parents believe that the school should become a hub for community programs and supports.

School as a Community-Serving Institution

Many of Garfield's parents believe that the best means to erode Grace Point's negative cycles of hardship involve the creation of an environment in which parents and children can learn together. Parents hypothesize that if challenged parents can learn and gain new skills alongside their children, then positive community norms and values will be made explicit. Although Fred stated, "Our kids need to see the value of education through the work of their parents," and although Cecilia noted, "If teachers could see parents learning and growing with they kids, then it would change those attitudes about negative progress in the community," Garfield's parents largely believe that the school should provide programs and resources to create such an environment. Under this framework, positive community norms and values are reinforced while the school establishes trust with children's parents and families (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). As one uninvolved parent, Kendra, explained,

They should have a GED program in the school where parents and children can learn together. Imagine what kind of picture that would make. Imagine when you see that on the front page of the paper, on the TV, in the community. That would really help. And, you'd be surprised how many parents they'd get at the school. "Oh, you're here to help me, instead of knock me." And that's the frustration you see here today, that people don't, but should have, the same piece of the pie as everyone else does.

Although many of Garfield's parents are hopeful that the school may provide additional resources to help foster the capabilities of families, they are unsure if Garfield would want to undertake such a responsibility. Because Garfield's parents believe that the school is currently focused on its responsibility of educating children, they

are skeptical that the school would be willing to change its focus and/or environment. Latosha, an involved parent, noted:

There are a lot of parents here who don't have any type of employment here. So, if the schools offered parents some sort of program that could lead up to a job, you know, a better life, then I think that the community and parents would start really working with the school. But I don't know if schools could handle that, cause that's a big responsibility too, and I don't know if they care about that. I mean, that probably wouldn't work, cause, they want to teach children, you know? And though that is their job, I don't know, I can't speak for nobody else, but it sure would help if they could help the parents out, you know?

In conclusion, Garfield's parents are fighting for the lives of their children, their families, and their community. They cope with the challenges of each day by clinging to gilded memories of a time in which they felt a belonging to a larger whole. Garfield's families are searching, clawing, and scratching to retain a sense of "community."

Although they feel alienated by the school and feel isolated in their own community, many of Garfield's parents desperately want Garfield Elementary to play a central role in a renewed Grace Point. As Sheri said,

We have to bring the school and this community together if anything ever gonna change. Teachers have to go to the home. Parents have to go to the school. Teachers, parents, and children got to learn together. Once we all start talking, we'll get to know each other. When we get to know each other better, we'll want to prove ourselves to each other. Not like, "I'm bad so I'm gonna prove what I can do to stop you." But, more like, "I like you, so I'm gonna do this, this, and this, to show you that I care." Cause this used to be a community. And a community it will be again. If we can work together, listen, and share.

And they will continue to fight, pray, and believe until they can access the vehicle to take them to their promised land: a renewed and revitalized Grace Point that is a safer and better place for future generations.

TEACHERS

Garfield's teachers are largely an amicable and caring group of hardworking individuals who are clearly committed to their twin passions: children and teaching. Their collective orientations toward parents, families, and the overall construct of parent involvement are embedded in two fundamental questions. First, how can parent involvement activities enable and facilitate teachers' abilities to educate children? Second, how can parents and families enhance the lives and educational experiences of Garfield's children? Garfield's teachers perceive school-family relations almost exclusively within the context framed by these twin questions (Epstein, 1995, 1996, 2001; Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997).

Parent Involvement Defined by Teachers

In keeping with the above, Garfield's teachers define parent involvement as a means for parents and families to cooperate and acquiesce to the needs of the school as defined by teachers. As John, a fourth grade teacher, noted,

Parent involvement, in my mind, is having parents who are interested in their child's education and are willing to cooperate with the school. . . . So, I think teachers tend to think that if parents are cooperating when they are asked to do certain things, then teachers would tend to think that, "Ya, there is parent involvement at the school."

For Sylvia, a fifth grade teacher, parent involvement meant that "whenever I need my parents, I can call them and they are here." And for Doddy, a third grade teacher, parent involvement entailed "seeing what the teachers ask is done." Although their responses varied as to how parent involvement is operationalized in practice, teachers' descriptions of the meanings of parent involvement can be categorized as either school based or home based (e.g., Comer, 1995; Dornbusch et al., 1987; Eagle, 1989; Epstein, 1996, 2001; Swap, 1993).

School-based parent involvement. School-based parent involvement means volunteering to participate at the school itself. As Barbara, a fourth grade teacher, said, "It could be in the library, the playground, the cafeteria, monitoring the halls, the restrooms." Phyllis, a third grade teacher, believed that parent involvement includes "coming to field trips to get involved." And David, a sixth grade teacher, believed that school-based parent involvement can be channeled to create powerful and effective classroom aides and allies:

For the school, parent involvement can be a second pair of eyes, and maybe even a support system for the child and the teacher while we're trying to teach. If a parent knows where you're coming from as far as our goals, when that child needs some extra help, or a child begins to back up off of it, then the parent knows exactly how to push him. The ones that participate here, when there's a problem with their child, they're right on top of it.

In short, although teachers describe multiple settings for school-based parent involvement, the function of each activity is the same. First, school-based parent involvement should facilitate and enhance students' learning experiences. Second, it should help students succeed by adhering to the needs of the school and its teachers.

Home-based parent involvement. The second conception of parent involvement revolves around home-based activities that help reinforce the school's mission and teachers' work practices through positive parental social modeling (Epstein, 1996). Here, it is important to emphasize that Garfield's teachers view parent involvement as a means of facilitating their ability to teach. Thus, home-based parent involvement and subsequent positive social modeling are perceived as an important vehicle to make teachers' jobs easier. As David explained,

Parent involvement is essential in order for teachers to do their job effectively, because, after all, parents are the first teachers; and, with their input, then we could improve on what we do. Because, we just pick up the ball later after the first 5 years of life.

Although home-based parent involvement is perceived as an important and vital component of the educational process, teachers view a lack of parent involvement in the home as a hindrance and detriment to children and teachers alike. Because teachers believe that children's valuation of education is directly linked to the expectations and values of their parents, home-based involvement is perceived as the primary means of stressing educational importance. As Barbara said,

Parent involvement is very important, because, parents, they're where the children get most of their values and belief systems. If the parents believe that school is important, then the child believes that school is important. And their involvement in the school shows that. . . . If they send kids to school without ever mentioning or asking what's going on in school, or rarely ever knowing what's going on in school, then kids tend to believe that school must not be an important facet of their parent's lives. So, why should it be important in their lives?

Garfield's teachers are satisfied with the parents that have been involved in the school. However, teachers constantly lament the parents who are not involved. Indeed, concerns about uninvolved parents guide many of their conversations. Because they believe that school-based and home-based parent involvement activities are extremely important to the educational well-being of children, Garfield's teachers tend to draw divisions between parents who are involved in their children's education and those who are not. These distinctions between different "types" of parents provide a launching pad for teachers' explanations and attributions toward children who come to school ready and able to learn and those who come to school challenged by barriers (Lipman, 1997; Thompson, 1996, Zill, 1996).

Teachers' Beliefs and Attributions

Garfield's teachers rarely mentioned explicitly the racial or cultural demographics of Grace Point (see also Lipman, 1997). They nonetheless believe that the majority of their children do not come to school ready and able to learn. As Doddy noted,

The needs of this community are very, very great. It starts out with health and even nutrition needs . . . living needs. . . . Children come to school without a good breakfast—a lot of children at this school. And, all of these needs come before their educational needs.

For teachers, health needs are directly attributed to an inadequate home environment. Parents are held responsible. When parents do not provide stable and nurturing home environments, students come to school ill prepared, and teachers' jobs are made more difficult (Katz, 1980). Furthermore, without stable home environments, children tend to require additional teacher attention, and behavioral and disciplinary problems ensue. As Patricia, a fourth grade teacher, explained,

When you're working with kids that have a lot of instability at home, they have to get to you first in the morning. And they have to tell you what went on in their home last night, and they have to give you a hug, because they haven't had a hug. And they have to tell you about what happened to their sister last night. . . . And, they have to tell you that "my mom did this, this, and this . . . and my mom's boyfriend, and my sister . . ." Before they can learn, they have to be able to release what has happened in their situation. And, if you never allow them to release what happened to them the night before, you never gonna get anything done. Therefore, you end up with a whole lot of behavior problems, because that child just really didn't get to say what they had to say. "It's not important to anybody, so I'm just gonna clown today. Somebody's gonna pay attention to me today."

Although health and wellness are perceived as important predictors of family stability, teachers also extend the concept to include children who lack long-term places of residence. For example, teachers described some of their children as "homeless," whereas others described them as "transients." Furthermore, many teachers are concerned that children's unstable home environments are caused by parents who are narcissistic. As Maria, a third grade teacher, described,

They need to know they're going to have a location to go to—if it's in the same place, if they are going to be in the same school all year, if they are going to have the same support group around them—as far as parents and teachers. So many of our children, they may be

living with mommy today, but then mommy gets tired of them because she wants to do her own thing, and now they're living with auntie. Auntie gets tired of them because she has things to do and now they're living with grandma. They are missing a real stable factor in their lives.

Although teachers vary in their responses to the causes of parental narcissism, they tend to attribute self-serving and negative parenting practices to the behaviors modeled by a previous generation of parents. Here, intergenerational patterns, beliefs, and attributions serve to structure implicit theories of action (Swidler, 1986) that help teachers explain how some negative parenting practices are normalized. As Patricia explained,

I think that part of the problem is that it goes beyond just the parents. The parents need attention and the love, and some of them did not get it as a child. Therefore, they don't know how to give it. And they feel that what they're doing is good because that's what their parents did to them.

In addition to the above, teachers tend to interpret their intergenerational theories of action to determine which parents will or will not be involved. Phyllis drew in part from her own experience:

I think that some of them are second or third generation who have not seen parent involvement. You know, myself, and the people that I know . . . they were in PTO [Parent Teacher Organization] all the years that my children were young. And, I was involved. Their mothers were the same ones who were running the PTO every year. So, you have to see it modeled.

Teachers' belief that negative social modeling correlates with uninvolved parents often leads them to believe that parent involvement activities need to be geared toward educating parents on how to be involved in and around their children's schooling (Epstein, 1996; Lodge, 1998). Teachers reason that parents need to be taught by the school that education and parent involvement are important. As David explained, "Part of the education, in my opinion, is that parents need to be educated as to involvement in their child's lives. . . . It's a necessity."

Moreover, teachers also tend to believe that some parents may also need to improve their parenting skills, as well as their communication skills with teachers, to help their kids in school (Lodge, 1998; Thompson, 1996). Here, teachers believe that when parents can increase their skills, the benefits will be twofold. First, parents' senses of efficacy will increase (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Second, teachers will be better able to use parental resources. As Maria noted,

We have a parent center now, and that's working to teach parenting skills; and I think that it's building confidence in the parents that are coming to that. And, they're showing them how they can become involved in the classroom. . . . I think things like that are very helpful. Maybe if we had evenings explaining to them how to talk to the teacher, how to bring up a question to the teacher?

Deserving (employed) versus undeserving (unemployed) parents. Although teachers view many uninvolved parents as points of concern, they do not believe that all of their parents are inappropriate role models. In fact, Garfield's teachers are quick to defend the parents whom they believe are hard working and unable to come to the school because of conflicting time and work schedules. Teachers see some parents as deserving and others as undeserving (Halpern, 1998).

Teachers do not forgive the nonworking parents they view as capable of being involved. In fact, teachers tend to view the noninvolvement of nonworking parents as a gross neglect of parental responsibility. When teachers perceive parents as irresponsible and/or unresponsive, they tend to believe that their efforts in the classroom are fruitless. In turn, when teachers believe that they are unable to do their jobs effectively, not only are parents blamed but parental beliefs, values, and expectations are pathologized. Jamie, a third grade teacher, provided an excellent example of the preceding,

A student took a writing assignment home, and they brought it back, and I asked the student, and the parent signed it. I said to the student, "Did your mother talk to you about this?" "No, I was asleep." So, I said, "When did you give this to your mother?" "When . . . right

before I went to bed, and she was doing something. So, I just laid it on her bed, and I went to sleep." I said, "Did you say anything in the morning when you woke up?" "Na, she just put me on the bus." So, I was outdone! . . . It's just like sometimes it's all in vain. Sometimes, you feel that it's all in vain. . . . But the part that I had a problem with, is that there's no discussion about it. And, I feel that if there's no discussion about it, then there's nothing that's being learned. You know, there's nothing that's being carried over from the behavior, to the punishment, to the understanding of why they're doing the writing, and what the expectations are in this household. Well, if there was expectations.

Although Garfield's teachers find such stories and experiences frustrating and exasperating, 11 of 12 teachers interviewed in the study believe that the overall success of their students, as well as their own senses of professional efficacy, depends on an important conversion process: Uninvolved parents must become involved. To accomplish this end, teachers search for appropriate incentives.

Incentives for parent involvement: conflict of values. Teachers believe that involvement in children's education is a fundamental responsibility of parenting. But value conflicts cloud their search for incentives. Parents get blamed again (Lightfoot, 1978). As Maria noted,

Unfortunately, we're frustrated because we're not seeing parents making that commitment. And, I think that it's gotten to the point where the staff feels that we're bribing parents to come in. "We're serving dinner." "If we serve food, they'll come." "If we give out prizes, then they'll come." And, we should not have to bribe them to come in to be involved! And, I think that it's sad that we've come to that state, but we have to do that.

Because teachers perceive these "bribery" tactics as a signal of parental deficits, the practice of providing additional incentives for parent involvement also reinforces teachers' beliefs that they are charged with reversing negative parental social modeling. As Barbara explained,

And to get them in here, we are planning doughnuts and coffee, and all of this stuff and door prizes. And that's not right. It's the only way

that we can get them in here to show them what's good for them. To show them what they need, and what their children need, to help benefit them. But, I don't agree with that technique. I believe it should be intrinsic, you know?

Indeed, teachers feel caught in a value conflict. Providing incentives for parents troubles them. Even when parents become involved in school, incentives lead teachers to view parents as not intrinsically valuing education (Lightfoot, 1978).

Barrier: Silences, Educational Background, and Status

Although Garfield's teachers were candid about their frustration with the lack of parent involvement in the school, they were less comfortable talking explicitly about teacher-parent conflicts. Although conflicts were evident throughout their discussions, teachers appear to believe that a focus on negative teacher-parent interactions served to undermine hope that school-family relations will improve (Thompson, 1996). Rather than talking about specific incidents of conflict, teachers cope by trying to understand the roots of parent-teacher tensions.

Nevertheless, their silences are revealing. Instead of examining the differences and challenges posed by race, class, and culture on Garfield's school community, teachers tend to dismiss poor school-family relations as by-products of personality incompatibilities (Lightfoot, 1978). One fourth grade teacher, Lisa, demonstrated this process,

I think that sometimes there's a hidden conflict between parents and teachers where, you know, teachers feel that they should be getting more support from the parents, and the parents feel that the teachers should be doing more with the child. And, so I think that if you get the wrong personalities coming together, that it's not going to be beneficial to the students.

When asked to further examine the origins and root causes of negative school-family relations, Garfield's teachers tend to attribute such conflicts to parents who are intimidated (Epstein &

Becker, 1982). Teachers believe that when parents perceive themselves in lesser terms than teachers, they do not feel welcome. When parents feel unwelcome at the school, their insecurities lead them to feel that teachers will not listen to their concerns. In short, Garfield's teachers attribute parental intimidation to teachers' educational attainment and class standing. As Lisa noted,

I think that some parents do not feel comfortable going to school, because the staff is very well educated. Sometimes they dress very nice. And I think that sometimes parents feel uncomfortable. They feel that they are not welcome, or whatever. They feel that they will not be listened to very fairly.

In addition to the above, teachers also tend to associate parents' educational attainment as a key indicator of the degree to which parents are intimidated. Many teachers tend to postulate that an inverse relationship exists between intimidation and school involvement. Thus, parents who have low levels of educational achievement are more likely to be intimidated and are therefore less likely to be involved. Conversely, parents with higher levels of educational attainment will be less intimidated and more involved. For example, Jamie elaborated, in part from her own personal experience,

A lot of parents in my classroom that are involved are the ones who did get a high school diploma or maybe went on to college beyond that, and the ones that don't want to come in are maybe the ones who maybe did not get a high school diploma—which makes them intimidated. Because, they see us as someone who might be looking down on them or something. I know my own sister has a child in school and she did not want to help, and she was always intimidated, and that was the reason. And, I don't doubt that's why some of our parents don't come in.

On the surface, Garfield's teachers claim to be at a loss when it comes to what can be done to decrease parental intimidation and increase involvement at the school. However, when given the opportunity to "brainstorm" on the ways and means to provide additional supports for children and families, they become quite engaged. In fact, Garfield's teachers have a plethora of ideas to increase parent involvement, including helping families access

services by using the school as a social service referral agent, creating school-based health clinics to help the school serve the health and medical needs of children, and mobilizing local business resources and moneys to create school-community-corporate partnerships that provide additional educational supports to low-income children and families. Nonetheless, the interview process uncovered several areas of doubt and discomfort for Garfield's teachers. These areas further describe barriers to parent involvement and improved school-family relations.

Barrier: Teachers' Lack of Ownership, Loneliness, Skepticism, and Withdrawal

Garfield's teachers tend to feel a genuine lack of ownership over many programs and policies currently existing in the school, including parent involvement (Epstein, 1996; Funk & Brown, 1996). This lack of ownership stems, in part, from teacher exclusion from planning the programs in which they are expected to participate which, consequently, decreases their faith that new reform initiatives will result in any type of "real" change in the school (Adelman, 1996; Epstein, 1996; Funk & Brown, 1996; Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997). When teachers feel a lack of ownership over such programs, they are less likely to become involved, and their subsequent lack of involvement then diminishes the chances that "real school" will change (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As John explained,

I can't say that it's system wide. But, here, I think that it's such a huge school and there's so much to do. I'm not passing blame on anybody, but I think that there are so many people trying to do different things that we just do get left out of a lot of issues—not just parent involvement. The grant that I've talked about, that the school received to increase parent involvement . . . and I still think that there are a lot of teachers that don't really know what it's all about. There's a vague idea that there's money there to increase parent involvement, but we just don't know what it's for. And, the feeling that I have is that a lot of these activities are thrown together at the last minute. . . . And it just seems like such a shotgun approach that's not really thought out, and it really isn't. . . . I think that when teachers are included in the planning, they are much more willing to

participate. . . . The problem I see here . . . I just have a feeling that a lot of these activities are planned kind of at the spur of the moment. . . . And the attitude of teachers is, "that's someone else's deal. It's not really mine. I don't have any stake in it. I don't know who it's for, why, or who planned it, so I'm not gonna go."

Such a lack of ownership is compounded when some teachers are involved in and aware of planning and implementation processes when others are not. When teachers become aware of school practices already existing in the building, they feel unappreciated, and skepticism in the process of school reform increases. The dialogue between Barbara, Kristen, and John about the school's new parent center and the coordinator hired to manage it provides an illustration of this process:

Kristen: That's why we have our parent coordinator.

John: I don't know anything about a parent coordinator. I'm fully aware that there is a parent center, but I had no idea that the parent center was involved in bringing parents into the building. That was never communicated to me.

Kristen: That's the sole purpose behind it.

John: Well, that may be, but there's a problem. I'm not involved in all the planning efforts, and the various grants that have been awarded to the school involving that, but I feel that I try hard to be fairly knowledgeable about what's going on. But, I think that there have not been super efforts, or even moderate efforts to get the staff involved in what's going on in all this.

Barbara: The volunteer for the parent center? Isn't that more around the whole school through the office rather than being focused on different classrooms?

Kristen: Eventually, but to give a base of starting, we wanted to just narrow it on particular classrooms to see if we could find or see improvement. You can't test the whole school. So, we started off by selecting certain classrooms as our target areas to see what kind of improvement we could get in there before we went and expanded.

Barbara: Is that really currently happening in specific classrooms?

For Garfield's teachers, lack of involvement in the reform planning process leads to feelings of loneliness and an aura of marginalization. In turn, both lead to teacher isolation and withdrawal. When teachers feel isolated, they feel that they are charged with tackling school and educational reform by themselves.

Consequently, when teachers begin to map their ideas on how the school can begin to help serve its families with greater responsiveness, they tend to consider the addition and/or expansion of such services and supports as one more change initiative that would be launched on their backs (see also Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997).

**Barrier: Teachers' Responsibility
Versus Parents' Responsibility**

Garfield's teachers define themselves proudly as educators. Their professional identities are deeply rooted in the classroom. However, for them, additional responsibilities that extend beyond the classroom tend to create a dissonance between what they feel they are being asked to do and the job for which they were "trained." Moreover, because Garfield employs only one school nurse and one part-time counselor to meet the extraeducational needs of Garfield's 851 students, Garfield's teachers believe that they are often charged with picking up a significant amount of social service duties. Although Jamie's plea, "And, all we want to do is teach . . . all we want to do is teach," is an example of the preceding, John provided a more expansive illustration:

I think teachers feel that they're having to act as social workers. The kids come to school with zillions of problems and we're asked to deal with those everyday and to be accommodating to all those problems. And, I think that if you ask any teacher in the building, they will say they were not trained as social workers, they were trained to teach. And, there's less and less teaching going on, and more and more scrambling by teachers trying to find ways to accommodate these kids and families who have all these problems. And, we're not social workers!

In addition to the professional dissonance illuminated above, Garfield's teachers are also ambivalent that the provision of additional supports and services for families at the school may serve to continue to let parents "off the hook" from their primary responsibilities. Although many of Garfield's teachers want to support kids and families, they still, nonetheless, want to make sure that parents fulfill their responsibilities of meeting the social, clinical, and med-

ical needs of their kids. While Maria laments, "I wish that I could bend over backwards and do things for these kids . . . but if we keep doing that, the parents will never take that responsibility," Jamie provides another illustration:

We should have a facility here, but mom should come to that facility. I don't want to take responsibility away from the parents, I do want to provide them with more opportunities to get what they need. But if the facilities are in the school, or we get more facilities, make sure that mom brings the child . . . the scary part is if we take too much responsibility from the parents.

In the end, Garfield's teachers enter school each day with a passion to educate children and a commitment to do their jobs to the best of their abilities. Nonetheless, they often feel alone. As they struggle to work within a system that often deprives them of the opportunity to define the parameters of their work, and as they struggle to educate children who they believe are often deprived of their right to a safe and healthy home and family, Garfield's teachers often leave school in the afternoon pondering the ways in which they can make a difference. As Jamie concluded, making a difference in Grace Point is a daunting, if not overwhelming, prospect: "It's a vicious circle! It's nonstop. And, I don't know what else to say."

SUMMARY

The findings of this study suggest that parents' and teachers' perceptions of the meanings and functions of parent involvement are different but at times may include overlapping elements. The parents' narratives in this study reflect a communitycentric orientation to involvement that may include, but largely supercedes, the schoolcentric forms of parent involvement defined by teachers. Although teachers struggle to search for and provide incentives that bolster parent involvement in schoolcentric activities at Garfield Elementary, the process of providing incentives to parents erodes teacher faith that Garfield's parents intrinsically value education. Deficit orientations toward parental behaviors and worldviews stem from this suspicion. In turn, teachers' deficit orientations toward parents contribute to a fairly systematic silencing of the

strengths, struggles, and communitycentric worldviews evident in the parents' narratives.

However, the parents and teachers in this study were alike in their struggle to find legitimacy in institutional and community contexts that make them feel devalued, marginalized, silenced, and victimized by their respective "others." In this respect, parents and teachers were alike in their needs to have their voices, experiences, and "expertise" viewed as "legitimate." Table 1 categorizes some of the major differences and similarities between parents' and teachers' responses to the questions probed during interviews. These categorized findings provide the framework for the discussion and conclusions advanced next.

DISCUSSION

CONFLICTING WORLD VIEWS

In this study, teachers and parents talked differently about their meanings and experiences. Their discourse revealed different thoughts, interpretations, and belief systems about the same concept—parent involvement—and related processes and phenomena. They have different worldviews.

Teachers' responses were delivered in linear, technical, and job-related terms. Parents' responses were embedded in stories that exceeded the technical specifications of the questions.⁴ On the few occasions in which teachers told their own stories, they did not discuss specific events of teacher-parent conflict. Instead, their stories were driven by their personal, nonprofessional experiences, which in turn were used to evaluate, and at times judge, the behaviors and decision-making processes of parents.

This ethnocentrism of sorts (Lightfoot, 1978) indicates a barrier to teachers' understanding of parental and community worldviews. For the uninvolved parents in particular, teachers' worldviews were reflections of ideological visions about "how things should be," which were used to both further shape and reinforce teachers' deficit-based, pathological assumptions about parents' beliefs and behaviors. It also contributed to the silencing of parents' voices.

TABLE 1
Categorization of Findings From Parent and Teacher Narratives

<i>Categorization</i>	<i>"Involved" Parents</i>	<i>"Uninvolved" Parents</i>	<i>Teachers</i>
Nature of response	Narratives that exceed the technical specifications of the question	Narratives that exceed the technical specifications of the questions	Linear and clichéd responses that seldom exceed the technical specifications of the questions
Epistemology of school-family relations	Personal, nonprofessional experience	Personal, nonprofessional experience	Personal, nonprofessional experience
Definitional and operational characteristics of parent involvement	Involvement in children's schooling (at the school) and involvement in children's education (in the community)	Involvement in children's education in the community and when crisis occurs at the school	Involvement in children's schooling at home and at the school
Primary goal and function of parent involvement	Support children who need social, behavioral, and academic assistance in the classroom and in the school; make sure kids are treated fairly; support teachers	Protect children's safety and well-being so they may attend school; protect children from being treated poorly, labeled, or neglected by teachers and the school	Support teachers' needs and school-defined goals; help reinforce at home and at school what is taught or modeled in the classroom
Primary manifestations of parent involvement	Volunteering at school and in the classroom; keeping children out of trouble at school and in the community	Children attending school each day; children staying out of "the system"	Reinforcing and modeling at home the values emphasized by teachers; meeting children's basic needs; volunteering at school; attending conferences

Construction of the parental role (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997)	Positive and communitycentric, includes schoolcentric involvement practices	Positive and communitycentric	Positive and schoolcentric
Sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997)	Low	Low	Low
Level or sense of positive invitations to become involved in activities at the school (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997)	Low	Low	Low
Primary orientation toward the "other"	Appreciation of teachers tempered by suspicions generated from personal experience and/or observation	"Experts" who "label" but do not or will not listen	Deficit-based evaluations of parents' values and behaviors, especially of "uninvolved" parents
Strategies for improved involvement	School as a community-serving institution; more services and opportunities for parents that parents identify; improved communication and respect	School as a community-serving institution; more services and opportunities for parents that parents identify; support for parents' opinions and experiences.	Incentives (food and money); more services for parents that teachers identify, without compromising parents' responsibilities

On the other hand, because Garfield's teachers are professionally trained educators, they believe that their values and opinions should govern issues surrounding children's education and schooling (Katz, 1980). Moreover, teachers' perceptions that many of Garfield's parents do not intrinsically value education serve only to reinforce their belief that they are "bowling alone" (Putnam, 2000). As Barbara noted in her remarks about incentives for involvement, "It's the only way that we can get them in here to show them what's good for them. To show them what they need, and what their children need to help benefit them." Indeed, for many of Garfield's teachers, they are the experts charged with identifying the educational needs of children and parents alike.

Nevertheless, parents believe that their knowledge and experiences are also important. However, because parents lack the power to assert themselves in school decision-making processes (Lareau, 1996), their voices and opinions are heard only insofar as they acquiesce to the needs of the school. Consequently, when parents disagree with existing school practices and perceptions, they are left with little recourse but to become confrontational or stay uninvolved in their children's schooling. This "no-win" dilemma serves to both alienate parents and further teachers' deficit assumptions about existing parenting practices and educational values (Lightfoot, 1978). In short, this divisive process occurs in part because within the context of parent-teacher interactions, teachers possess the power to uphold their values and epistemologies as "legitimate," whereas parents lack the resources, social standing, and capital to make their voices and opinions heard (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). The political, ideological, economic, and social dynamics of Garfield's teacher-parent interactions call into question whose knowledge is important, under what conditions, when, and why?

COMPETING THEORIES OF ACTION

Theories or strategies of action incorporate and are dependent on habits, moods, sensibilities, and views of the world (Swidler, 1986). They are formal, scripted mechanisms for framing and nam-

ing practice-related needs and challenges. Because group and organizational structures and cultures influence the construction and maintenance of these theories, their joint and interactive impacts on individuals, and individuals' influence on them, are always contextual. Like scientific theories, theories of action represent ways to meet needs, solve problems, explain and interpret events, as well as attribute causality and relationships (Lawson et al., 1999).

In this study, teachers' implicit theories of action mirror *social reproduction theories* in which certain causal chains of events lead to predetermined outcomes (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Here, teachers believe that familial intergenerational patterns of low educational attainment, unemployment, parental narcissism, and negative social modeling structure an environment of hardship and failure that is reproductive and inescapable for many of Garfield's students. Consequently, many of Garfield's teachers structure and develop their work practices to compensate for those deficits in children that teachers believe are caused by their parents and family (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). However, contrary to Coleman and Hoffer's (1987) findings, Garfield's teachers do not think schools, or themselves, can reverse such cycles alone.

Instead, teachers believe that healthy parents and families are a prerequisite for improved student welfare. Nevertheless, because their worldviews and perceptions tell them that many current familial and community practices are detrimental to children, teachers tend to believe that parents need to be trained to maximize the learning capacities of their children. Although Adelman (1990) described this process as a socialization agenda aimed at decreasing perceived parental deficits, it is nonetheless a two-generation change strategy (e.g., Haveman & Wolfe, 1995) in which parents' needs for development and capacity building are met by the school.

However, unlike many conceptions of parent empowerment and family support in which parents define their own needs (e.g., Alameda, 1996; Family Resource Coalition, 1996; Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997), teachers' conceptions of a two-generation change strategy are based on defining and then reluctantly meeting the needs of parents. Moreover, the purpose and function of such strategies is to enable parents to erase their parenting and/or educa-

tional deficits enough to aid teachers who are desperately trying to help children succeed in school. Therefore, teachers do not appear to want to help parents for the sake of helping parents. Rather, teachers believe that such supports should be levied to help children while facilitating teachers' wants and needs to be educators. In this regard, teachers can be characterized as both child focused and schoolcentric.

Parents' theories of action are embedded in their worldviews that their children and community can do better (see also Winters, 1993). Unlike social reproduction ideologies, which assume passive, albeit generative, responses to oppressive structural conditions, Garfield's parents are active agents struggling to build better futures for their families. Although parents are concerned first and foremost with the well-being of their own children, the social and environmental conditions and hazards of Grace Point force them to think ecologically when they strategize ways and means to increase their children's welfare.

Although Garfield's parents are seriously concerned with their children's educational futures, they also believe that the school should implement school-based job training programs and GED classes to increase the skills and capacities of parents and community members. Without healthy families, Garfield's parents believe that Grace Point's social and environmental conditions will continue to inhibit children's chances of succeeding. In this regard, parents' conceptions and strategies for parent involvement are both child focused and communitycentric.

Consequently and paradoxically, teachers' and parents' theories of action run both parallel and in near opposition to each other simultaneously. They are parallel because both teachers and parents are child focused. They are also nearly oppositional because teachers' schoolcentric and parents' communitycentric frames of reference consistently put them at odds with each other.

For example, teachers want to define the educational and social needs of children and parents, and they expect parents to acquiesce to their assessments (Katz, 1980). Parents, on the other hand, believe that their lived experiences qualify them to help define the needs of their children and community, as well as to formulate strat-

egies to address those needs (Lightfoot, 1978). In addition, parents' twin senses of agency and urgency necessitate that schools honor and listen to them when crisis and conflict occur.

For teachers, parental ideas are important insofar as they serve to meet the needs of the school. For parents, teachers' wishes are important insofar as they meet the needs of their children and community. These dynamics inhibit both teachers and parents from reaching common ground around their one area of consensus: child welfare. Instead, teachers and parents are constantly competing and conflicting. As one teacher, Jamie, concluded, "It's a vicious circle! It's nonstop. And, I don't know what else to say."

In sum, teacher-parent interactions and school-family relations are largely defined by opposition and conflict. Moreover, these complex (negative) interactions occur because teachers and parents have separate worldviews, conflicting epistemologies, and competing theories of action, all of which serve to highlight a significant finding: Teachers' and parents' perceptions of the meanings and functions of parent involvement are different.

CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of this study, the investigator went to lengths to recruit uninvolved parents, in part because of a hypothesis that noticeable differences would emerge between involved and uninvolved parents' perceptions of schools, schooling, and school-family relations. Instead, analyses of the data supported similar perceptions and attributions to the vast majority of subjects and concepts probed during interviews. Both involved and uninvolved parents struggled to find ways to convert optimistic messages of "hope" and "resilience" within community contexts that fostered distrust and negativity both inside and outside institutional frameworks. Their primary differences stemmed from their (obvious) behavior: Involved parents could be found at school. Uninvolved parents ventured inside the school only when problems or crises emerged with their children.

Nevertheless, during fieldwork, the investigator witnessed that all of the involved parents, at some point, experienced direct con-

flict with teachers. Moreover, during interviews, all involved parents expressed doubt that "the system" worked for them and their children (Ogbu, 1995a, 1995b). Yet when the school bell rang, their faces could be seen and their voices could be heard in the hallways and the classrooms, every day.

Although the investigator probed involved parents' attributions for why they stayed involved in school and schooling whereas other parents did not, such questioning tended only to generate uneasy, closed-ended question-statements such as "what else am I gonna do?" and "we just different, but that's what makes the world go round, you know?" Although parents' reluctance to hypothesize as to why a majority of the community's parents were uninvolved could be attributed to many factors, including suspicions toward the intentions of a White, professional, student investigator, involved parents were nonetheless willing throughout interviews and "member checks" to provide rationales for behaviors that they considered to be problematic, unethical, or even illegal. In short, such questioning revealed that involved parents were not afraid to make attributions toward behavior that they found lamentable or negative. Instead, because parental disengagement from activities at the school was viewed as understandable by involved parents who had shared many of the same negative experiences, differential levels of parent involvement between involved and uninvolved parents were hypothesized by involved parents to stem from individual choice alone, not from different experiences or cultural frames of reference, as the investigator initially suspected. Future research is needed to more clearly understand differences in involvement choices between involved and uninvolved parents in schools serving low-income communities.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) suggested that parents usually become involved in their children's education when three necessary conditions and preconditions exist: (a) Parents have developed a parental role construction that is affirming to parent involvement in education, (b) parents have a positive sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed, and (c) parents perceive positive opportunities and invitations to become involved in their children's school. Without dismissing the importance of the latter

two conditions, they suggest that absent a positive role construction that encourages involvement, prospects for parent involvement in schooling decrease.

The findings from this school community suggest that parents' role construction toward involvement in their children's education was strong, albeit unconventional. As a consequence, the involvement of both involved and uninvolved parents in their children's education was also strong. Although these findings affirm the impact that community expectation has on the construction of the parental role, they may also extend it.

Uninvolved parents in this study do seem to abdicate many educative responsibilities to teachers during school hours. In that light, they are seldom involved directly in their children's schooling. However, on further probing during interviews, both involved and uninvolved parents nonetheless considered themselves to be actively involved in their children's education. This subtle twist emanates from an important and unique communitycentric perspective that manifests itself in the tireless effort expended by parents to ensure the safety and well-being of children. Moreover, because education is viewed as the "great equalizer" by Garfield's parents, much of this "involvement" is school oriented. As Vanessa noted, "That's our job, you know, taking care of business and making sure that they have the opportunity to go to school each day."

What appears additionally salient is that these seemingly basic obligations of parenting (e.g., Epstein, 2001) are viewed as anything but basic from the parents' perspectives. Parents in this study view the time that they spend assuring their children's safety, so that they may attend school each day, as inordinate in relation to their perceptions of the time their parents spent with them in similar capacities. Moreover, Garfield's parents are also always mindful of their struggles compared to their perceptions of the responsibilities that help define how the "other half" lives. As parents noted and lamented constantly during interviews, "things here are different," and "life is much harder here."

This communitycentric construction of the parental role is important because parents in this study do not believe that their engagement with teachers will necessarily result in positive out-

comes for their children, nor do they feel that there is a real, genuine invitation for parents to become meaningfully involved in helping address and solve the school's central challenges. Yet in spite of those barriers, they are nonetheless active agents in their children's education.

Teachers, although strongly sympathetic to the circumstances and conditions that shape the lives of Garfield's children, do not view the support levied by parents toward children's safety and well-being as particularly remarkable or resilient, because the supports parents provide do not exceed what teachers feel parents should be doing in the first place, nor do they affect teachers' wants and needs to be educators, "not social workers."

From this frame of reference, parent involvement appears to be both a limited and limiting concept in low-income, ethnically concentrated school communities. It is limited because the term itself tends to be almost exclusively operationalized by teachers within a narrow, albeit important, schoolcentric context. It is limiting because parents' perceptions and descriptions of the meanings and functions of parent involvement are not schoolcentric, and the largely technical nature of teachers' responses indicate that the term may elicit only part of their experience and knowledge of school-family relations. In short, it appears that significant needs remain for new languages and practices that support (low-income) schools wishing to forge and establish meaningful connections with their communities.

Epstein (1996) claimed that parent involvement was replaced by "school-community partnerships" in the mid-1980s. Although that shift in language was not supported within Garfield Elementary, the concept of school-community partnerships also seems limited and limiting because the term *partnership* seems to connote equal representation among persons or groups who share equal power and access to resources (see also Lareau, 1996). Because Garfield's teachers and parents have considerable differences in power, and because parent representation in school decision-making processes is often not equal (Lareau & Horvat, 1999), the term *partnership* may be inappropriate and exploitative for parents living in culturally diverse, low-income communities. Moreover, terms such as

parent empowerment and *family support* were absent from teachers' and parents' dialogues, even when their strategies for action mirrored those concepts.

These findings serve to illuminate an apparent disconnect between those languages aimed at supporting school-family relations in the literature and those in use in one practice context. They also highlight the need for mutual empowerment strategies that meaningfully support the wants and needs of parents and teachers alike (see also Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997).

Gore (1993) asserted that the creation of new languages in schools that support transformative goals involve contested processes that are highly vulnerable to harmful power dynamics. It is therefore suggested that those persons and processes that frame and guide the construction and development of a new language set for mutually empowering, school-family practices should make clear provisions (e.g., mechanisms for recognizing and "leveling" power differentials and dynamics) for the inclusion of those subjugated forms of involvement evident in parents' communitycentric frames of reference (see also Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). Such provisions and efforts to recognize and uphold the strengths and worldviews of parents as legitimate should occur without (a) dichotomizing the import of those schoolcentric involvement activities that may further support children's learning and healthy development and/or (b) minimizing or ignoring teacher's legitimate needs for meaningful support, development, and recognition. In addition, just as this study's findings and analysis are rooted in context, the processes of developing new ways to name and frame, as well as frame and name, positive school-family relations, connections, and practices should be undertaken in each context to minimize the potential disconnect between those practices espoused and those in use.

TOWARD CONSENSUS AND MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL PARTNERSHIPS

Teachers' responses clearly indicated that they believe that parents and families should serve the school's needs in helping children achieve academically, but teachers believe that parents are currently neglecting such responsibilities. Furthermore, teachers'

perceptions of such neglect contributed to labeling and stigmatizing practices of parents, which in turn alienated parents from the school. Although parents want to facilitate teachers' abilities to educate their children, teachers' nonresponsiveness to parental concerns often leaves parents with little recourse but to become confrontational with teachers or stay uninvolved in the school.

Bond and Keys (1993) described the importance of *boundary spanners*, who can relate to multiple groups and constituencies and help mediate the differences between them. Although they cautioned that role conflict and role ambiguity (as articulated here) can make boundary spanning not only difficult but counterproductive, it nonetheless appears that persons and professionals who can help negotiate and mitigate the boundaries and overlapping spheres of influence between families and schools are urgently needed. Without such persons, the impetus for improving school-family relations may continue to fall on teachers, who in spite of important preservice training (e.g., Katz & Bauch, 1999) and improved time to work with parents (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997) may (continue to) find themselves without the time or resources needed to transform the most challenged school-family histories and relationships.⁵ Yet in spite of these complex needs and challenges, there also is considerable reason for hope.

Teachers and parents in this context are alike in their passion, caring, and commitment to the welfare of children. In fact, their consensus in this area provides real optimism that existing school-family relations can change. If teachers and parents can truly reach a level of mutual understanding and acknowledge their different worldviews, epistemologies, and cultural frames of reference without pathology, it is believed that their common grounds and interests will become more readily apparent. And if they can reach that next step, their caring and commitment to children promises better outcomes for all.

NOTES

1. Comments, critiques, and suggestions from reviewers of *Urban Education* on earlier versions of this article reflected the diverse and at times competing theoretical and

methodological paradigms and orientations “at work” in the multidisciplinary literature on school-family relations. For example, reviewer comments and criticisms mirrored the teachercentered and schoolcentered assumptions evident in much of Epstein’s (1992, 1996, 2001) work; the strengths-based, parent empowerment models of Delgado-Gaitan (1992) and others (e.g., Alameda, 1996; Chavkin, 1993); as well as other critical works that situate “deficit model” orientations of teachers in sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts (e.g., Lareau, 1996; Lipman, 1997; Valdes, 1996; Valencia, 1997). The findings of this study may implicate (yet) another approach to research on families and schools, one that attends to the strengths and needs of parents and teachers as legitimate without minimizing the import of conflict, race, class, culture, and power in the development of meaningful and positive school-family relations and practices.

2. All 7 uninvolved parents described themselves as uninvolved in part because of school labeling practices (see also Bowditch, 1993), in addition to their infrequent visitations to the school proper.

3. All names and descriptors in the study are pseudonyms.

4. It was suggested during a “debriefing” session that the disclosure of parents’ stories and the technical nature of teachers’ responses could have been caused by the investigator’s interviewing style. In addition, it is possible that the existence of the grant at the school, as well as the mandates included therein, skewed the responses of teachers. Because parents felt that their voices were so frequently silenced by teachers, it is also possible that the nature of the research questions elicited a one-time “venting session,” or Hawthorne effect, which would not be replicated in future studies.

5. Over the past decade, coordinators of school-linked and school-based services have been employed in many vulnerable school communities to serve in similar boundary-spanning capacities (Lodge, 1998). However, as Smrekar (1994) cautioned, the untoward focus on coordinating services and improving community access to formal services by these coordinators often neglects needs to transform challenged school-family relations. Moreover, the successful engagement of uninvolved parents by the community guide in this study suggests that perhaps the best boundary spanners can be found in parents and residents who are living in vulnerable school communities (e.g., Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2001; McKnight, 1995).

REFERENCES

- Adelman, H. (1990). *Parents and schools: An intervention perspective*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Adelman, H. (1994). Intervening to enhance home involvement in schooling. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 29*, 276-287.
- Adelman, H. (1996). *Restructuring education support services: Toward the concept of the enabling component*. Kent, OH: American School Health Association.
- Alameda, T. (1996). R.A.I.N.makers: The consumers’ voice. In K. Hooper-Briar & H. Lawson (Eds.), *Expanding partnerships for vulnerable children, youth and families* (pp. 46-56). Washington, DC: Council on Social Work Education.
- Alameda-Lawson, T., & Lawson, M. (1999, March). *Parents as the guiding and unifying component for restructuring educational support services*. Paper presented to the Council on Social Work Education, San Francisco.

- Becker, H. J., & Epstein, J. L. (1982). Parent involvement: A survey of teacher practices. *The Elementary School Journal*, 83(2), 85-102.
- Bond, M., & Keys, C. (1993). Empowerment, diversity, and collaboration: Promoting synergy on community boards. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 21(1), 37-57.
- Bowditch, C. (1993). Getting rid of trouble makers: High school disciplinary procedures and the production of drop outs. *Social Problems*, 40(4), 493-509.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Caplan, N., Choy, M. H., & Whitmore, J. K. (1992). Indochinese refugee families and academic achievement. *Scientific American*, 27, 74-82.
- Chavkin, N. F. (Ed.). (1993). *Families and schools in a pluralistic society*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Clark, R. M. (1983). *Family life and school achievement: Why poor Black children succeed or fail*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Coleman, J., & Hoffer, T. (1987). *Public and private high schools: The impact of communities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Comer, J. (1995). *School power: Implications of an intervention project*. New York: Free Press.
- Comer, J., & Haynes, N. (1992). *Summary of school development program effects*. New Haven, CT: Yale Child Study Center.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1992). School matters in the Mexican-American home: Socializing children to education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29, 495-513.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dornbusch, S., & Glasgow, K. (1996). The structural context of family-school relations. In A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 35-44). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dornbusch, S., Ritter, P., Leiderman, P. H., Roberts, D. F., & Fraleigh, M. (1987). The relation of parenting style to adolescent school performance. *Child Development*, 58(5), 1244-1257.
- Eagle, E. (1989). *Socioeconomic status, family structure, and parental involvement: The correlates of achievement*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.
- Eccles, J., & Harold, R. (1996). Family involvement in children's and adolescent's schooling. In A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 3-34). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Epstein, J. L. (1986). Parents' reactions to teacher practices of parent involvement. *The Elementary School Journal*, 86(3), 277-294.
- Epstein, J. L. (1987). Toward a theory of family-school connections: Teacher-practices and parent involvement. In K. Hurrelmann, F. Kaufmann, & F. Losel (Eds.), *Social intervention: Potential and constraints* (pp. 121-136). New York: DeGruyter.
- Epstein, J. L. (1992). School and family partnerships. In M. Alkin (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of educational research* (6th ed., pp. 1139-1151). New York: Macmillan.
- Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76, 701-712.
- Epstein, J. L. (1996). Perspectives and previews on research and policy for school, family, and community partnerships. In A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 209-246). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Epstein, J. L., & Becker, H. J. (1982). Teachers' reported practices of parent involvement: Problems and possibilities. *The Elementary School Journal*, 83, 103-113.
- Family Resource Coalition. (1996). *Guidelines for family-centered practice*. Chicago: Author.
- Fetterman, D. (1989). *Ethnography: Step by step*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Fetterman, D., Kaftarian, S., & Wandersman, A. (Eds.). (1996). *Empowerment evaluation: Knowledge and tools for self-assessment and accountability*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Funk, G., & Brown, D. (1996). A storefront school: A grassroots approach to educational reform. *Educational Horizons*, 74(2), 89-97.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Adline.
- Goldenberg, C. (1987). Low-income Hispanic parents' contribution to their first-grade children's word recognition skills. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 18(3), 447-470.
- Gore, J. (1993). *The struggle for pedagogies: Critical and feminist discourses as regimes of truth*. New York: Routledge.
- Greenberg, P. (1989). Parents as partners in young children's development: A new American Fad? Why does it matter? *Young Children*, 44, 61-75.
- Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Halpern, R. (1998). *Fragile families, fragile solutions: A history of supportive services for families in poverty*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Harry, B. (1992). An ethnographic study of cross-cultural communication with Puerto-Rican-American families in the special education system. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29, 471-494.
- Haveman, R., & Wolfe, B. (1995). *Succeeding generations: On the effects of investments in children*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Henderson, A., & Berla, N. (Eds.). (1994). *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*. Cambridge, MA: National Committee for Citizens in Education.
- Henry, M. (1996). *Parent-school collaboration: Feminist organizational structures and school leadership*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K., & Sandler, H. (1995). Parental involvement in children's education: Why does it make a difference? *Teachers College Record*, 97, 310-331.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K., & Sandler, H. (1997). Why do parents become involved in their children's education? *Review of Educational Research*, 67(1), 3-42.
- Hopfenberg, W., Levin, H., & Associates. (1993). *The accelerated schools resource guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Katz, L. G. (1980). Mothering and teaching—Some significant distinctions. In L. G. Katz (Ed.), *Current topics in early childhood education* (Vol. 3, pp. 47-63). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Katz, L., & Bauch, J. P. (1999). The Peabody family involvement initiative: Preparing preservice teachers for family/school collaboration. *The School Community Journal*, 9(1), 49-70.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32, 465-492.
- Lareau, A. (1987). Social class differences in family-school relationships: The importance of cultural capital. *Sociology of Education*, 60, 73-85.
- Lareau, A. (1989). *Home advantage: Social class and parental intervention in elementary education*. London: Falmer.

- Lareau, A. (1996). Assessing parent involvement in schooling: A critical analysis. In A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 57-67). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Lareau, A., & Horvat, E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion: Race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education*, 72, 37-53.
- Lawson, H. (1999). Journey analysis: A framework for integrating consultation and evaluation in complex change initiatives. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 10(2), 145-172.
- Lawson, H., & Briar-Lawson, K. (1997). *Connecting the dots: Progress toward the integration of school reform, school-linked services, parent involvement, and community schools*. Oxford, OH: The Danforth Foundation and the Institute for Educational Renewal at Miami University.
- Lawson, H., Briar-Lawson, K., Petersen, N., Harris, N., Hoffman, T., Derezotes, D., et al. (1999). *The development of an empowerment-oriented model for interprofessional education and training, collaboration, organizational improvement, and policy change*. Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada.
- Lawson, M., & Alameda-Lawson, T. (2001). What's wrong with them is what's wrong with us. *Journal of Community Practice*, 9(1), 77-97.
- Lawson, H., & Hooper-Briar, K. (1995, April). Community outreach partnership center: Proposal to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Oxford, OH: Authors.
- Lightfoot, S. L. (1978). *Worlds apart: Relationships between families and schools*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lodge, R. (1998). *California's healthy start: Strong families, strong communities for student success*. Davis: Healthy Start Field Office, University of California, Davis.
- Lipman, P. (1997). Restructuring in context: A case study of teacher participation and the dynamics of ideology, race, and power. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34(1), 3-38.
- Mannan, G., & Blackwell, J. (1992). Parent involvement: Barriers and opportunities. *The Urban Review*, 24(3), 219-228.
- McClure, P. (1994). The new Title I compensatory education program: An analysis. *Chapter One Handbook*, 15(3), 339-365.
- McDermott, R. P., & Gospodinoff, K. (1979). Social contexts for ethnic borders and school failure. In A. Wolfgang (Ed.), *Nonverbal behavior: Application and cultural implications* (pp.). New York: Academic Press.
- McKnight, J. (1995). *The careless society: Community and its counterfeits*. New York: Basic Books.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ogbu, J. (1995a). Cultural problems in minority education: Their interpretations and consequences—Part one. *The Urban Review*, 27, 189-205.
- Ogbu, J. (1995b). Cultural problems in minority education: Their interpretations and consequences—Part two. *The Urban Review*, 27, 271-297.
- Okagaki, L., & Frensch, P. (1998) Parenting and children's school achievement: A multiethnic perspective. *American Educational Research Journal*, 35(1), 123-144.
- Peressini, D. (1996). Parents, power, and the reform of mathematics education: An exploratory analysis of three urban high schools. *Urban Education*, 31, 2-38.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

- Quantz, R. A. (1988). *Culture: A critical perspective*. Paper presented to the American Educational Studies Association, Toronto, Canada.
- Ragin, C. (1994). *Constructing social research: The unity and diversity of method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Reglin, G. (1993). *At-risk "parent and family" school involvement: Strategies for low income families and African-American families of unmotivated and underachieving students*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Rich, D. (1996). Responsibility in education: "For whom the bell tolls." *Educational Horizons*, 74(2), 62-69.
- Shunow, L., & Harris, W. (2000). Teachers thinking about home-school relations in low-income urban communities. *The School Community Journal*, 10(1), 9-24.
- Smrekar, C. (1994). The missing link in school-linked social service programs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 16, 422-433.
- Stearns, M. S., & Peterson, S. (1973). *Parent involvement in compensatory education programs: Definitions and findings*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Research Institute, Menlo Park Educational Policy Research Center. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 088 588)
- Swap, S. A. (1993). *Developing home-school partnerships: From concepts to practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review*, 51, 273-286.
- Thompson, H. (1993). *Quality education program/Mississippi: Program evaluation panel report*. Corona, CA: Quality Education Project.
- Thompson, S. (1996). How action research can put teachers and parents on the same team. *Educational Horizons*, 74(2), 70-76.
- Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995) *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walberg, H. J., Bole, R. E., & Waxman, H. C. (1980). School-based family socialization and reading achievement in the inner-city. *Psychology in the Schools*, 17, 509-514.
- Wells, A., & Serna, I. (1996). The politics of culture: Understanding local political resistance to de-tracking in racially mixed schools. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 93-118.
- Winters, W. (1993). *African American mothers and urban schools: The power of participation*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Valdes, G. (1996). *Con respeto: Bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools: An ethnographic portrait*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Valencia, R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: Falmer.
- White, K. R., Taylor, M. J., & Moss, V. D. (1992). Does research support claims about the benefits of involving parents in early intervention programs? *Review of Educational Research*, 62(1), 91-125.
- Zill, N. (1996). Changes in families and trends in schooling. In A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 130-141). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.