



# ***EFFECTIVE TO GREAT EDUCATION***

## **The Disparity in Parental Involvement: Its Significance, Causes, and Solutions**

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### **Introduction**

The significance of parental involvement in children's K-12 schooling has been extensively documented globally. Although it may have different impacts depending on age/grade level and background, parental involvement is essential to a child's academic achievement and wellbeing. When policymakers develop education policies, especially concerning communities that have been historically underserved and disadvantaged, parental involvement as a research area and policy option has been explored extensively as a means of closing the achievement gap and also addressing student wellbeing (Desimone, 1999; Marschall & Shah, 2016). According to Desimone (1999), parental involvement is viewed as an attractive intervention because it is far more accessible and pliable compared to other inequalities in the education system, such as racial/ethnic and income disparities. Schools are directly involved in the policy implementation and can, therefore, readily alter program interventions when needed to broaden parental participation (Desimone 1999). The policy traction, coupled with the wealth of research attributing enhanced parental involvement in a child's education to positive academic achievement and overall wellbeing has made parental involvement a persuasive educational intervention.

However, even with considerable attention, the rhetoric-action split has resulted in the persistence of the gap in parental involvement, especially among communities with a large minority population (Johnson 2015; Dolph 2016;). Given that policies tend to be one-size-fits-all and based on the dominant narrative and understanding of parental involvement, existing efforts to increase parent participation severely overlook and marginalize nondominant practices (Souto-Manning & Swick 2006). Subsequently, without reconsidering the current practices and paradigm in parental involvement, the disparity in parental involvement itself will only exacerbate and perpetuate inequality in involvement and achievement gap. Therefore, it is vital

to understand these barriers and challenges that inhibit parental involvement among marginalized families and address them to reduce the parental involvement gap.

With the help of ample literature, the paper adds to the limited body of literature studying the disparity in parental involvement and the barriers and challenges that drive that gap. In six sections, we explore parental involvement and its significance in student outcome and wellbeing, focusing on Black and Brown low-income families. By reviewing the roles of parental involvement in a child's schooling and its impact on academic achievement and wellbeing, we establish the severity of the unrealized gains and disadvantages the low-income minority children face in the absence of “parental involvement.”

The first section briefly explores the normative understanding of parental involvement and its complex nature and then gradually focuses on the disparity. It is then followed by two separate sections discussing the overwhelming significance of parental involvement, which also informs the severity of its absence in a child's education and development. The two sections explore the link between parental involvement and academic achievement and student wellbeing. The following section critically examines the normative understandings of parental involvement and how it inherently fosters inequitable practices that adversely affect the nondominant, low-income minority families while privileging the dominant, white, middle-income group. After discussing the systemic inequalities entrenched in the prevailing notion of parental involvement, we examine the barriers and challenges extensively. This section is structured into two parts. The first section is a mini-literature review studying hurdles and challenges to parental involvement. Using Dr. Epstein's framework of six types of parental involvement, in the second section, we delve into each type of parental involvement and analyze potential barriers and challenges low-income minority parents may encounter that deter or prevent them from participating in specific involvement activities under the six main types. The six types of parental involvement are *parenting*, *communicating*, *volunteering*, *learning at home*, *decision making*, and *collaborating with the community* (Epstein 2016). And the final section shares recommendations that schools can implement to gradually transform the understanding of parental involvement by expanding ways for parents to be involved equally in dominant and nondominant practices, making it community-oriented, accessible, and inclusive.

### **Overview of Parental Involvement:**

While the definition of parental involvement continues to vary within the literature, it broadly refers to parents' participation and engagement in their child's educational and developmental process (Jeynes, 2005). By that definition, parental involvement includes forms of activities and behavior parents engage in as part of their children's learning at school, at home, and beyond. However, extensive literature employs more popular and traditional parental involvement frameworks, such as that of Dr. Epstein, a leading scholar on parental involvement. Epstein (2016) identifies six types of involvement based on her research: *parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community*.

Parental involvement is traditionally categorized as school-based or home-based, expanding on Epstein's model (Walker et al. 2005; Shute et al. 2011). As so, these types of activities are most commonly studied in parent involvement literature and then utilized in policies. School-based parental involvement practices require parents to have direct contact with schools, including attending parent-teacher conferences, participating in parent-teacher organizations (PTOs), and volunteering. Of these activities, a national survey reported that 89% of parents attend general school or PTO meetings, the most popular among school-related activities (U.S. Department of Education 2019). Involvement was positively correlated with the educational attainment of parents and also parents' ability to speak English (U.S. Department of Education 2019).

Meanwhile, home-based involvement considers parents engaging with their child's education outside of school through checking homework, hearing about school activities, communicating aspirations and expectations, reinforcing class learnings, and adult supervision (Zeynep, 2016; Shute et al., 2011). The national survey recorded that half of all parents attended community/religious/ethnic events, the most popular home-based activity. Black, non-Hispanic parents had the highest level of participation in these activities, with 61% of them (U.S. Department of Education 2019).

Research consistently reports varying levels and types of parental involvement practices across racial/ethnic and socioeconomic statuses and their impacts (Desimone, 1999; Hayes, 2012). This includes variation across domains of involvement, such as home-based and

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school-based, in which parents might engage. For example, Marschall and Shah (2016) report that school-based involvement is consistently lower among minority parents. Similarly, Hayes (2012) found in his study of urban African American families with high school students that home-based involvement was most predictive of student achievement and outcome. However, Reynolds (1992) reported that school-based involvement had a more significant effect on their children's attainment among low-income African American families than home-based involvement. Specifically, he found teacher ratings of parental involvement had the most important influence on the outcome. Their studies and varying findings and methods emphasize the complex nature of parental involvement. Desimone's study of 12 types of parental involvement and their effectiveness based on race and income also shed light on the multidimensional nature of parental involvement. For example, one of her findings suggested that "school-level volunteering was a better predictor for White and middle-income student achievement than for Asian, Black, Hispanic and low-income students" (Desimone, 1999). Ultimately, there is a consensus on the importance of these parental involvement practices and their link to student outcomes (Desimone 1999; Epstein 2016; Gonzalez-Dehass and Willems 2003; Hornby and Lafaele 2011; Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack 2007; Iinks).

### *The disparity in parental involvement:*

Yet research consistently indicates a discrepancy in the rhetoric around the effective and proper implementation of parental involvement (Shores, 1998; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Hart Research Associates, 2017). A 2017 national survey among 1,423 parents and guardians of public elementary and middle school children showed that parents consistently wanted to be more involved in their children's learning but, in practice, fell short, citing concerns over failure in two-way communication and lack of resources and information to effectively help their children (Hart Research Associates, 2017). Studies further document the pervasive parental involvement gap among minority communities because of the level of barriers and challenges they confront (Marschall & Shah, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 1998; Dolph, 2016). Even when parental involvement is employed as an intervention to reduce the inequalities in education and the persistent achievement gap, parental involvement itself is plagued with inequity. Desimone (1999) argues that the traditional understanding of parental involvement

tends to be advantageous for white, middle-income populations as it conforms to their values and expectations (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Kainz & Aikens, 2007). As the following sections will demonstrate, this inhibits and disadvantages Black and Brown low-income families and severely impacts their children's academic outcomes and wellbeing.

### **Parent/Parental Involvement and Achievement:**

Within the literature, parental involvement is associated with a plethora of effects on students, including boosting school motivation (Fan, Williams, and Wolters 2012), reducing disciplinary issues (Sheldon and Epstein 2002), and positively impacting mental health (Suldo, Shaffer, and Riley 2008), and ultimately fostering academic success. Research, reviews, and meta-analysis spanning decades consistently demonstrate the positive effects of parental involvement on a child's academic achievement (Hornby and Lafaele 2011; Jeynes 2005; Zeynep 2016; Desimone 1999; Epstein 2016; Robinson and Harris 2014; Gonzalez-Dehass and Willems 2003; Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack 2007).

For example, Jeynes, a leading meta-analytic scholar, conducted seven (2003, 2005, 2007, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2022) meta-analyses studying the effects of parental involvement on academic achievement. Although these meta-analyses (more than 250 studies in total) varied in their focus across ethnicity, grade level, and gender, they consistently demonstrated positive effects of parental involvement on a child's academic achievement. To further study if enhancing parental involvement influences student achievement, Kim (2022) designed a second-order meta-analysis, a systematic review of available meta-analyses that analyzed the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement. After examining 23 meta-analyses with 1,177 studies, Kim found that parental involvement positively correlates with student academic achievement.

Studies linking the effects of parental involvement and academic achievement have also been explored among minority communities. Although the literature is not as extensive, findings continue to demonstrate broad concurring results in parental involvement literature (Yan 1999; Jeynes 2003; Jeynes 2016a; Jeynes 2016b; Madison and Jones 2017). For example, Jeynes' analysis of 42 studies exploring the relationship between parental involvement and academic success for African American students from pre-K through the first year of college found strong

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effects of parental involvement on academic achievement, particularly for standardized assessments (Jeynes 2016a). Therefore, highlighting the value of involvement also implies the loss and harmful effects when parents are “uninvolved” and societally constrained from participating in their child’s learning. Therefore, understanding and addressing these barriers is imperative to ensure the best chance of success for Black and Brown students.

### **Parental involvement and Wellbeing:**

Enhancing student mental health is as important as academic success, especially in light of the pandemic; mental health has gained considerable traction and attention as a focus of education policy. However, there is more literature on the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement than there is on the relationship between parental involvement and mental health. The underappreciation of parental involvement and its effects on a child’s wellbeing doesn’t mean the relationship doesn’t exist, nor isn’t significant. Students’ mental health is vital to their ability to perform effectively at school (Vander Stoep et al. 2003). Vander Stoep et al. (2003) found in their paper that students with emotional and mental health disturbances, or “psychiatric disorders” as they are described, were strongly associated with failing to finish secondary education. Masten et al. (2005) reveal in their findings that fostering positive mental health experiences benefits students' academic success and has lifelong positive impacts.

Of the few overarching studies on parental involvement in schooling and its impacts on wellbeing, Suldo, Shaffer, and Riley (2008) found parental involvement in schools predicted a higher level of student wellbeing. Similarly, it also affirmed the significance of parent-teacher relationships, where students who “perceive high levels of support from teachers” rated higher levels of life satisfaction and wellbeing. This may result from more parental involvement, particularly school-based involvement, that improves parent-teacher relationships in which teachers perceive students as having fewer “self-regulation” problems (Zulauf-McCurdy and Loomis 2022). This perception positively influences the child’s confidence and overall wellbeing (Cripps and Zyromski 2009). Noble and Wyatt (2015) identified in their research that parental involvement under the “supportive, inclusive, and caring school community” pathway

to student wellbeing significantly contributed to the children's wellbeing, which translated into better attendance, motivation, engagement, and ultimately better academic performance.

Other research centers on specific facets of parental involvement practices and their effects on protecting students from developing depressive symptoms. Wang and Sheikh-Khalil (2013) found that parental involvement in 10th grade improved student academic outcomes and mental health in 11th grade. Specifically, they learned that when parents engaged in “academic socialization, the communication of parental expectations about schoolwork and the importance of education, encouragement of educational and career goals, and making plans and preparations with adolescents that support their future goals,” it was highly predictive of students' academic success and related to lower chances of developing depression (Wang and Sheikh-Khalil 2013).

As previously mentioned, student wellbeing is a quintessential aspect of quality education and student achievement. Enhancing student wellbeing means students are adequately equipped to learn, engage in school, and deliver successful outcomes. In her study exploring the question of what makes one happy among children from eight through eighteen years of age, Chaplin (2008) revealed that students attributed the achievement to happiness, reinforcing the understanding that academic achievement and student wellbeing impact each other. For example, better mental health translates into stronger academic achievement, and when students perform better, they are more likely to be happier and have lower chances of developing depressive symptoms. Ultimately, parental involvement in a child's learning positively benefits their academic outcomes and wellbeing, directly or indirectly (Wang and Sheikh-Khalil 2013). Therefore, it is imperative to reimagine an inclusive understanding of parental involvement that poses fewer barriers and challenges to marginalized groups.

### **Problematizing current understanding of parental involvement:**

Despite the widely accepted understanding of the central importance of parental involvement in a child's education for their academic and wellbeing outcomes, research consistently shows stark equity issues in parental involvement that harm and further marginalize Black and brown low-income families. Part of this is explained by the fundamental understanding and discourse around parental involvement that has been primarily shaped by the dominant, white, middle-class family values, expectations, and goals (Baquedano-López et al. 2013). Naturally,

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decades of research and discourse have disproportionately been centered on this dominant group, which has dictated and defined the normative understanding of parental involvement. As discussed in the previous sections, the traditional perspective of parental involvement is valuable; however, it has considerably restricted the role of parents, often viewed them as unequal partners in a child's education, and privileged the dominant white group (Christianakis 2011). Naturally, it has adhered to a limited understanding of what constitutes parental involvement, overlooking and excluding "valuable and legitimate" forms of involvement that non-dominant families practice (Baquedano-López et al. 2013; Souto-Manning and Swick 2006; Kim 2009; Tinkler 2002). For example, black families often engage in racial socialization, which familiarizes and communicates to their children about race, racial history, navigating a racialized society, and possible discrimination (Neblett et al. 2016). In fact, some studies point out that racial socialization positively impacts student mental health and enhances academic outcomes, having learned to cope with discrimination (Scott 2003; Banerjee, Harrell, and Johnson 2010). Yet, traditional involvement behaviors do not consider racial socialization as a form of involvement as we understand it.

Moreover, Baquedano-López et al. (2013) problematize that "school goals are largely based on White and middle-class values and expectation," which systematically institutes values and expectations that inform and shape parental involvement as school-centric. Allen & White-Smith (2017) point out that, given the primary discourse on it tends to be led by schools based on their goals and not the community needs, these school-centric involvement measures privilege certain groups over others. The traditional perspective does not account for the intersections of race and class that many Black and Brown low-income families experience (Baquedano-López et al. 2013). Schools actively support the traditional understanding of parental involvement that caters to the dominant group and expect historically disadvantaged groups to have access to similar resources and capital that allow meaningful involvement in their children's schooling. Therefore, it becomes clear that schools play a central role in understanding parental involvement. More specifically, Bourdieu's (1973) theory on social and cultural reproduction contends that the school culture reflects the social culture and, therefore, the harmony of home and school culture influences a student's academic performance and parental involvement (Kim 2009). As such, the cultural incongruence between nondominant families and schools demonstrates how the traditional paradigm advantages the dominant group



and disadvantages the nondominant. Desimone (1999) found in her study that the parental involvement model “was a better predictor for White, Asian, and middle-income students than for Hispanic, Black, and low-income students” achievement. As we will discuss later, this further marginalizes minority households from engaging in parental involvement and builds these structural barriers and challenges to involvement that ultimately deprive their children of academic success and personal wellbeing.

Another key issue dealing with the traditional paradigm is that it largely functions on a deficit model that views the parents, particularly minority parents, as lacking and as a problem. This theory reinforces the view that schools serve to alleviate the “perceived weakness and inadequacies in those who are poor and experiencing discrimination” (Souto-Manning and Swick 2006; Tinkler 2002). Given the already limited roles parents play under this traditional paradigm, the deficit approach similarly informs of a power dynamic where schools hold the majority of the say leaving families with little agency over the construction of parental involvement (Love et al. 2021). Although schools seemingly encourage parental participation, often Black and brown parents are ostracized and viewed in a negative tone that further deters them from engaging in school-based activities (Love et al. 2021). Baquedano-López et al. (2013) extensively discuss the emergence of deficit framing in parental involvement and how it has subsequently largely shifted the conversation away from social injustices embedded in the school systems to “uninvolved” parents. As a result, when parents confront structural barriers—*unaccounted by the normative understanding of parental involvement*—that hinder their ability to be actively involved, teachers often internalize it as uncaring and uninvolved (Souto-Manning and Swick 2006; Tinkler 2002; Kim 2009). Alternatively, when Black and brown low-income families engage with their children in ways that don’t conform to the traditional notion of “parental involvement,” they may be similarly perceived as uninvolved.

As a consequence of the deficit outlook and the fixation on the normative understanding of parental involvement, valuable and effective parenting strategies implemented by nondominant parents are underappreciated because it doesn’t fit in the school culture (Souto-Manning and Swick 2006). This even includes the depreciation of rich and diverse cultural capitals these families possess as they do not match the dominant cultural capital. Fundamentally there is an equity issue on what constitutes parental involvement and who decides that. The prevailing narrative has primarily been constructed by the dominant, white,

middle-income family and accordingly favoring their needs and expectations. Meanwhile, nondominant groups are scrutinized under the same framing, which systematically disadvantages them and inhibits their ability to participate and involve themselves in their child's learning as they desire. The following section delves into these adverse barriers and challenges minorities, specifically Black and brown low-income families experience that deter and prevent their involvement.

### **Barriers and Challenges in Parental Involvement:**

Under these contexts of how parental involvement is understood, historically marginalized folks, notably Black and brown low-income families, are disproportionately subjected to obstacles and challenges compared to their white, middle-income counterparts; that constrain their ability to utilize parent involvement and subsequently have made it harder to realize gains in their children's academic achievement and wellbeing. In this section, we explore the barriers and challenges that inhibit parental involvement by briefly reviewing the literature and followed by a more in-depth discussion of barriers using Dr. Epstein's typologies of parental involvement to identify barriers and challenges associated with them. The two parts pair together to inform a broad understanding and also an expansive study in some aspects. The first part of this section helps ground the available research and varying approaches to understanding barriers and challenges. The second section examines Dr. Epstein's six types of involvement and studies the barriers that Black and brown low-income communities face in (a) *Parenting*, (b) *Communicating*, (c) *Volunteering*, (d) *Learning at Home*, (e) *Decision-making*, and (f) *Collaborating with Community*.

#### **A brief overview of the literature on barriers and challenges:**

Knowing the significance of parental involvement as an education policy, identifying these barriers has been central to enhancing parental involvement practices. Hornby and Lafaele's (2011) article, *Barriers to parental involvement in education: an explanatory model*, one of the leading papers studying barriers and challenges in parental involvement, presents a unique and comprehensive model adapted from Dr. Epstein's overlapping sphere of influence to explicate the complex obstacles parents, especially minority parents confront across domains.

Their model proposes four primary factors acting as barriers to parental involvement: “broader societal factors, which influence the functioning of both schools and families; parent-teacher factors; individual parent and family factors; as well as an additional focus on child factors” (Hornby and Lafaele’s 2011). Figure (1) presents the model.

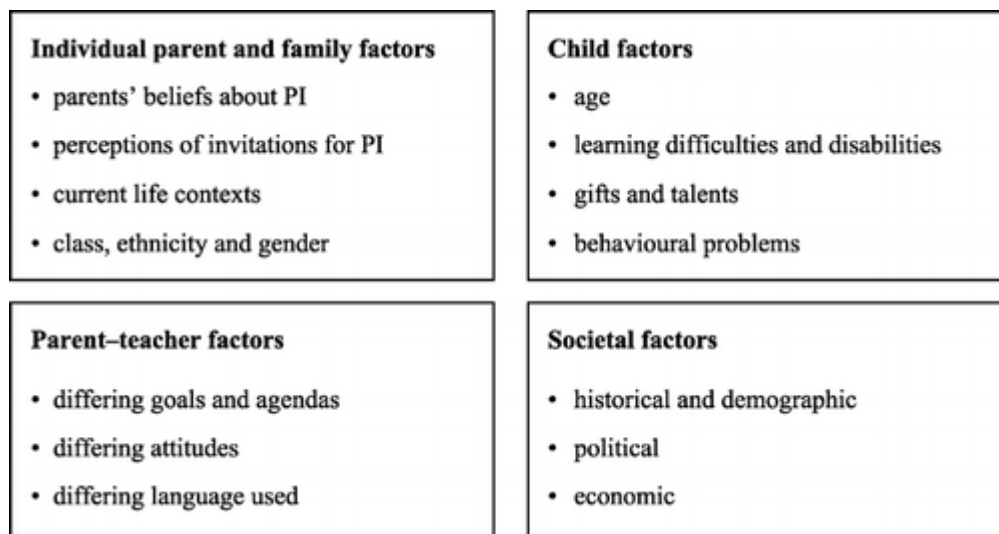


Figure (1) (Hornby and Lafaele’s 2011)

Meanwhile, Murray et al. (2014) studied barriers to parental involvement through a semistructured interview of a primarily African American parent sample using the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of the parent involvement process with a focus on motivational factors to parental involvement, Murray et al. (2014) Varying themes of parental involvement are identified and categorized into the three motivational factors: (a) motivational beliefs, (b) parents’ perception of invitations to become involved, and (c) parents’ personal life context. Some of the barriers it identified include the lack of teacher invitations, lack of coordinated and convenient school invitations, hostile and unwelcoming school climate, lack of contact with other parents, and work and scheduling issues that were especially common in this sample of predominantly African American parents.

Much of the research has documented this set of barriers that individual minority parents confront and has paid little attention to the issues in the school system that inhibit parental involvement. This is profoundly important as the traditional paradigm gives schools a large role, and also parental involvement affords schools the ability to implement changes readily. Kim (2009) discusses that “schools have more capacity in the pursuit and initiation of greater

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collaboration than parents in terms of money allocation, educated staff, and established ways for training staff (Moles, 1993).” Meanwhile, Kim (2009) contrasts the considerable practical challenges in transforming these individual constraints that are shaped by societal forces and require investment in large social intervention. Kim’s (2009) study offers a fresh perspective by centering on the challenges within the school system that prevent or hinder parental involvement among minority parents. Titled *Minority parental involvement and school barriers: Moving the focus away from deficiencies of parents*, Kim (2009) identifies six primary school barriers that stifle minority parents’ involvement. The barriers include

- (a) teacher’s less-than-positive perception toward the efficacy and capacity of minority parents
- (b) teachers’ beliefs in the effectiveness of parental involvement
- (c) teachers’ self-efficacy in teaching effectiveness
- (d) school friendliness and the initiation of positive communication
- (e) diversity of parental involvement programs
- (f) school policies and leaderships

### Identifying barriers and challenges using Dr. Epstein’s framework of six types of parental involvement:

Central to Dr. Epstein’s theory of parental involvement is its emphasis on the partnership between parents, educators, and communities. According to her theory of *overlapping spheres of influence*, she contends that the most effective form of partnership occurs when all three spheres overlap one another, recognizing the interdependence and mutually reinforcing nature of their relationship. Based on this theory, she proposes the framework of six types of parental involvement that integrate these spheres to ensure the highest chance for student academic success. While this framework is used widely and has been studied extensively to measure student achievement, it embodies a traditional perspective toward parental involvement that is narrow, informed primarily by the dominant experience, individualistic, and school-centric (Warren et al. 2009). Although the emphasis on partnership and mutuality are core to its theory

and rhetoric, in reality, the traditional paradigm rarely strays away from the school-centric form of involvement (Warren et al. 2009) that places schools at the front and center of it.

### **Type 1: Parenting**

Under this form of parental involvement, *Parenting* refers to activities that foster a child's learning and development as a student. In particular, involvement behaviors include basic parenting skills that ensure the child's wellbeing and safety and provide a home environment conducive to learning (Epstein 2016). According to the model, schools also assume a responsibility to support parents in ways to raise their children most effectively and help them as students. As a basic involvement behavior expected of families, studies generally reveal high participation rates in *Parenting* practices (Goshin and Mertsalova 2018; Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman 2007). As straightforward as *Parenting* sounds, however, when the expectations set by schools are incongruent with the parents' own culture, life contexts, and abilities, parents confront variables that prevent them from participating in *Parenting* effectively.

Studies have also shown that parents' income, educational attainment, language, and time constraints impact *Parenting* practices (Ringenberg, McElwee, and Israel 2009). In particular, time constraints are shown to be a consistent barrier to *Parenting* activities that limit their participation in child-rearing practices as they desire (Baquedano-López et al. 2013; Hornby and Lafaele 2011; Gonzalez-Dehass and Willems 2003). This is especially true for Black and brown low-income families, who generally represent the working class with minimal flexibility in hours and often work multiple jobs/shifts (Tinkler 2002). Ringenberg, McElwee, and Israel (2009) recorded in their study that parents that reported no issues with time constraints documented considerably higher *Parenting* than others. Even with activities associated with the school that aims to assist parents in developing their parenting skills, minority parents may be reluctant to engage in such activities due to their negative experiences and lack of confidence to do so (Tomichek-Michalowski 2017; Williams and Sánchez 2011). Another potential challenge to *Parenting* arises when parents are unable to access/provide the necessary resources to ensure physical health with proper nutrition, mental wellbeing, and space conducive to learning (Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman 2007). Ultimately, among Black and brown low-income families, the lack of time and resource access poses the greatest challenge to engaging in parental involvement broadly and *Parenting* practices.

## Type 2: Communicating

This type of activity involves communication between homes and schools, with Dr. Epstein's emphasis on the two-way communication between the parents and teachers about student progress and school programs and activities. Schools employ various methods to keep parents informed about their children and school programs, while parents can easily communicate with school and educators about their children. Examples of involvement activities in this category include emails, phone calls, newsletters, parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, social media, informal meetings, and many more (Epstein 2016). *Communicating* practices function as a fundamental tenet of the normative view of parental involvement and positions as the typical method of involvement.

Yet, Black and brown low-income families confront barriers and challenges with communication practices that impede parental involvement in their child's schooling and development. For example, language has consistently been shown to be a barrier for these demographics where English may not be a first language (Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman 2007; Johnson 2011; Epstein 2016; Kim 2009). Since verbal English and written fluency are essential aspects of communication between parents and teachers, parents confront significant challenges in participating in these kinds of communication activities. Often, instead of approaching non-English speakers and helping, schools dismiss and solicit involvement less frequently to non-English speaking families, thereby deterring participation from minority parents (Kim 2009). Moreover, parents' lack of English proficiency is linked to a lack of confidence in engaging in conversations and, evidently, their inability to be involved (Sohn and Wang 2006).

Another possible challenge associated with this typology of parental involvement is the risk of one-sided communication initiated by the schools. Although two-way communication remains central to Dr. Epstein's model, due to its school-centric approach, communication activities might not accommodate the needs of the student and parents and, as a result, impede involvement (Kim 2009). For example, employing communication methods that either don't reflect the community (Williams and Sánchez 2011) or only function to relay information but do not encourage or provide the opportunity for discussion. Ironically, the lack of effective communication challenges parents in *Communicating* activities.

Another potential barrier to parental involvement broadly and *Communicating* activities is cultural incongruence between parents and educators (Vinopal 2017). For example, this is

reflected in the representation of educators and its effects on the parent-teacher conference attendance, where Vinopal (2017) found in her investigation of the role of representation in parental involvement that “compared to parents of nonwhite students with a white teacher, parents of nonwhite students with a nonwhite teacher are 39.2 percentage points (42%) more likely to report conference attendance.” Moreover, since traditional school culture mirrors the dominant, white, middle-class family culture, minority/nondominant families confront additional barriers due to cultural mismatch (Kim 2009).

### **Type 3: Volunteering**

*Volunteering* practices include the recruitment of parents as volunteers to assist educators, students, and school programs (Epstein 2016). In addition to being one of the principal examples of involvement practices under the prevailing perspective, the 2001 NCLB Act stipulates that schools ensure opportunities for parents to volunteer and thus reinforces parental volunteerism as a form of involvement (Wang and Fahey 2010). Yet, the rhetoric-action split demonstrates the disparity in volunteering. Given this typology stems from the traditional paradigm, which primarily “reflects the practices of the dominant culture,” Black and brown low-income families face obstacles and challenges that impede their ability to participate in *Volunteering*. For example, the traditional involvement practices tend to have a narrow and limited understanding of volunteering and innately cater to the white, middle-income family. As a result, creating a limited opportunity for low-income minority parents to volunteer. Ringenberg, McElwee, and Israel (2009) found in their study that being white predicted higher *Volunteering* type activities. Some of the barriers discussed within other typologies that also inhibit *Volunteering* practices include cultural mismatch, language barriers, and the lack of time (Wang and Fahey 2010).

Additionally, financial barriers and logistical challenges for Black and brown low-income families adversely undermine their ability to Volunteer. Individual barriers include access to child care and transportation (Tinker 2002). On the other hand, school barriers such as the perception of teachers considerably impede parents from *Volunteering*. For example, an unwelcoming school climate, where minority parents are viewed more negatively and harshly than their white, middle-class counterparts, discourages and limits participation (Kim 2009). Moreover, with the deficit framing embedded in the traditional school system, educators and

school administrators may not value minority parents' contribution and *Volunteering* as much. In turn, discouraging parents from participating in *Volunteering*.

#### **Type 4: Learning at home**

This type of involvement considers learning opportunities at home that involve families with their children. Activities in this typology include helping with homework, setting goals, decision making, engaging with school curriculum and children's learning, interactive homework, talking about school, and developing skills, among others (Epstein 2016). These forms of involvement crucially impact a child's self-confidence, motivation, and performance in school and promote two-way communication without needing to go to school (Epstein 2016).

Although this form of involvement practice is shown to be more popular among minority parents, barriers and challenges are still prevalent (Kim 2009). Some barriers Black and brown low-income families encounter with *Learning at Home* activities similarly impact other typologies and parental involvement practices widely. They include time constraints, language barriers, lack of resources, and the burden of being a single parent. For example, the lack of proficiency and confidence in their English ability prevents them from learning-at-home activities in several ways. It may deter parents from communicating with teachers about helping their children at home. It can also inhibit parents from effectively helping their children with homework and limit their participation (Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman 2007; Hornby and Lafaele 2011).

Another potential barrier that may arise among low-income minority families is their level of self-efficacy when it comes to assisting their children and learning-at-home activities (Murray et al. 2014). Here, self-efficacy is defined as parents' confidence and belief in their ability to influence their child's educational outcome (Dixon-Elliott 2019). For example, when parents have limited educational resources and knowledge, they might feel less confident in their ability to help their children and may not do so as much (Dixon-Elliott 2019). In fact, research shows that as children grow older, parental involvement declines (Hornby and Lafaele 2011). Especially in a low-income minority family, it may be impacted by the decline in parent efficacy.



### **Type 5: Decision Making**

It includes behaviors that welcome and encourage parent participation in school decisions, governance, and organizations that advocate for their student's interests (Epstein 2016). At its core, it signifies the importance of parent representation and partnership in decision-making. Popular activities include joining PTA/PTOs, school committees, and advocacy groups (Epstein 2016). The active participation of parents in decision-making activities helps support schools and educators and fosters mutual understandings that drive responsive and inclusive decisions.

Though well-meaning, Black and brown low-income families continue to be constrained from decision-making roles and activities by institutional barriers and challenges. Time constraints and language barriers may also commonly inhibit parents from assuming active leadership positions and participation.

One potential barrier emanates from the persistent mismatch between the representation of educators and the diverse families and students they serve. A 2016 report by the U.S. Department of Education documented that while communities of color represented more than half of the student population, less than 20% of the teachers in the educator workforce were from communities of color, whereas white teachers made up a whopping 82% of the workforce (US Department of Education 2016). As a result, often, low-income minority families find it difficult to actively participate in a predominantly white school environment that reflects the broader "legacy of exclusion of Black and Hispanic individuals" (Mowen 2013). For example, minority communities consistently cite negative experiences with schools that translate into institutional distrust, which may deter parents from actively engaging (The National Education Association 2010; Mowen 2013).

Another prominent barrier concerns the growing gentrification and professionalization of parent-teacher organizations. In addition to being a historically white-dominated space (Mackevicius 2022) that has privileged the dominant group, Posey-Maddox (2013) posits that substantial cuts in local and state funding have prompted school districts to actively recruit parent volunteers and involvement, especially middle-upper income families. These parents primarily engaged in helping with fundraising, grant writing, and volunteering, all of which were central to the schools. In this context, schools greatly value the professional skills and social capital middle-upper class parents supply. As Quinlan (2016) points out, "when schools are

cash-strapped, the priorities of the members of the parent organization often become the priorities of the school as a whole.” Led by the middle-upper class parents, the bureaucratization of parent-teacher organizations alienates and further marginalizes historically underrepresented and disadvantaged parents from engaging in *Volunteering* and *Decision Making* activities like parent-teacher organizations.

Moreover, the disproportionate representation of white educators and parents in public schools and parent-teacher organizations may also account for cultural incongruences between educators and families that disadvantage and deter minority parents from involving in *Decision Making* activities. For example, according to Lee and Bowen (2006), Bourdieu points out that with this cultural mismatch, nondominant parents cannot access the necessary connections and resources essential to their decision-making activities. Consequently, low-income minority parents often cannot participate in such involvement practices. *Revisit this:*

### **Type 6: Collaborating with the Community**

Type 6 taps into the third overlapping sphere of influence, the community, which generally has not been studied as much and remains central to strengthening parental involvement according to Dr. Epstein’s School-Family-Community Partnership model. Epstein (1992) explains, “collaboration includes school programs that provide or coordinate children and families’ access to community and support services, such as before-and after-school care, health services, cultural events, and other programs.” These forms of collaboration highlight the immense value and resources communities possess and the tremendous influence they have in shaping a student’s educational success.

Considered to be one of the higher forms of parental involvement, fewer parents engage in these involvement behaviors. Notably, it is often a challenge for low-income minority families to involve in *Collaborating with the Community* type activities due to structural barriers such as lack of financial resources, lack of education/knowledge, and lack of time (Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman 2007; Ringenberg, McElwee, and Israel 2009; Goshin and Mertsalova 2018).

For example, Goshin and Mertsalova (2018) found in their study of parental involvement in Russia using Dr. Epstein’s framework, that the percentage of parental involvement in *Collaborating with the Community* is two-three times higher among educated parents (university degrees v/s secondary education). Although the sample contrasts

significantly, findings are consistent with American studies where parents with a higher level of education also scored significantly higher for *Collaborating with the Community* (Ringenberg, McElwee, and Israel 2009). Ringenberg and colleagues (2009) explain that possibly better-educated parents are more knowledgeable about this type of involvement opportunities around the community. Unlike the dominant group, low-income minority families may not enjoy a similar level of capital and time, thus limiting their participation.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations:**

The previous section identifies many barriers and challenges low-income minority families confront. Although we have identified and discussed these barriers and challenges individually based on Dr. Epstein's six types of parental involvement, put together, we notice the incredible obstacles and challenges that Black and brown low-income families encounter under our normative understanding of parental involvement. As a result, they deter and prevent these families from participating in involvement practices that studies deem crucial to a child's academic achievement and overall wellbeing. In addition to widening the parental involvement gap, they perpetuate the growing achievement gap. As illustrated by Dr. Epstein's model, at its core, the traditional involvement behaviors are primarily school-centric, advantage the dominant group, and serve their goals and expectations. Therefore, prioritizing community needs to increase parental involvement and promoting equity is integral.

### **Key Themes of Recommendations:**

Rethinking and transforming the prevailing notion of parental involvement involves:

1. Increasing mechanisms and programs for families to be involved instead of limiting them to certain practices catering to the dominant group would facilitate greater parental involvement. That is inviting involvement behaviors that nondominant families practice and valuing them equally.
  - a. Increasing studies centered on communities of color that reflect the growing diverse population. It would assist in developing a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of parental involvement necessary to make it inclusive.

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- b. Designate a culturally competent parent and school liaison familiar with the community (The National Education Association 2010; Zaidi et al. 2021). The representative should communicate with parents and initiate parent focus groups to learn how parents stay involved with their child's schooling and what schools can do to help parents become more effectively involved in their child's education. Similarly, the liaison should dedicate time and resources to learning how families understand parental involvement. Doing so can help expand the school's definition and understanding of parental involvement while validating and including minority families in the discussion. Moreover, the individual can serve as a resource for parents and educators.
        - c. Schools should implement cultural heritage months consisting of celebrations and culturally relevant teachings in collaboration with parents (Zaidi et al. 2021). For example, hosting programs/events in parents' native language can encourage participation in parental involvement activities (Kim 2009). Such activities should prioritize parent engagement and provide necessary accommodations, resources, and opportunities for parents to be involved.
2. Another central theme revolves around transitioning towards a more community-centric model of parental involvement, where it prioritizes the needs of the community and accommodates those needs and services—and ultimately enhances involvement by making it more accessible and inclusive for everyone.
  - a. Learn about the families and communities the school serves (Savage 2007). Understanding how to best involve parents based on their barriers and needs is crucial. Listen to the community members; hear them. By initiating conversations, families may be encouraged to participate and also assist in finding unique solutions to accommodate both community and school needs.
  - b. Offer services and accommodations that make school-based parental involvement more accessible. For example, depending on the circumstances of individual parents, services like access to language interpreters, transportation, child care, and meals can alleviate burdens for parents and incentivize them to participate (The National Education Association 2010). Schools can also offer flexible hours to meet with parents to alleviate time constraints. Another

example concerns home visits that can eliminate many barriers parents might encounter and potentially build better relationships. These can help create a welcoming school environment for parents and show schools value parental involvement and engagement.

- c. Schools should collaborate with community-based organizations like churches to assist, equip, and empower parents with the capacity and resources to be involved most effectively in their child's education (The National Education Association 2010). Such partnerships can also reduce the burden on schools and help parents engage with community resources they might otherwise not know about.
3. Moving away from the deficit framing in education is crucial, especially concerning Black and brown low-income communities, where educators often view them as deficient and uninvolved. This worldview significantly undermines and further marginalizes the communities of color and, as a result, straining the relationship (Martin 2020). Therefore, instituting a more culturally responsive teaching approach is imperative to enhance and encourage parental involvement among nondominant families.
    - a. Increase professional development training for educators to foster culturally responsive teaching. Gaining cultural competency can considerably assist in developing positive relationships with parents of diverse backgrounds and students in classrooms (Vinopal 2017). It can encourage educators to be more mindful of cultural differences and accommodate family needs. And it can remedy cultural incongruences and create better relationships.
    - b. Employ an asset-based approach to involving parents (Savage 2007). Prevailing literature notes schools tend to view parent involvement among minority communities in a deficit approach (Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez 2013). This means schools present parents as lacking and a problem. On the contrary, by actively utilizing an "empowerment approach" that emphasizes parents as contributing members and resourceful, schools foster a welcoming school environment (Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez

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2013). For example, schools can celebrate heritage months where parents can coordinate the celebration and programs.

- c. Given the teacher workforce is predominantly white and serves a diverse student population, teacher education programs should teach prospective teachers culturally relevant and informed courses that can better prepare them to gain cultural competency and effectively serve in a diverse school community (Allen and White-Smith 2017).

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