
Identifying and Decreasing Barriers to Parent Involvement for Inner-City Parents

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Abstract

Previous studies demonstrate the positive effects of parental involvement on student grade point averages (GPAs), standardized tests scores, and other academic outcomes. Because of the positive role of parental involvement on youth academic achievement, many parents and school personnel desire more collaboration between the family and the school. However, obstacles often arise prohibiting such positive interactions, especially for inner-city African American parents. In this study, parents and school personnel at a predominantly African American inner-city high school completed in-depth interviews regarding the barriers to involving parents in their children's education. Parents and school personnel identified barriers that fit into four descriptive categories: (a) time poverty, (b) lack of access, (c) lack of financial resources, and (d) lack of awareness. Suggestions for decreasing barriers were also discussed. Findings suggest that taking family context into consideration during the planning phases of school-based programs and events improve parental involvement. Implications and recommendations for practitioners are discussed.

Keywords

parental involvement, African American parents, inner-city schools

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Parental involvement, both at home and school, has consistently been found to be positively related to student academic achievement, school engagement, and school adjustment (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009). However, actively involving parents, particularly those in low-income communities, in their children's education remains one of educators' greatest challenges (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). It is likely that parents who lack the resources to help their children academically may have more difficulty in assisting their child with academic success. Limited knowledge and resources may explain past researchers' findings that more involved parents are of higher socioeconomic status (SES) and have higher education levels compared to less involved parents (e.g., Englund et al., 2004; Feliciano, 2006). Unfortunately, working and lower class parents experience more challenges with regard to their children's schooling than middle class parents (Minke & Anderson, 2005).

Low-income youth have been shown to be at particular risk for educational challenges that are, in part, attributable to low-income students' resource-poor neighborhoods and schools (Kozol, 2005; Rothstein, 2004). In the current study, the term "inner-city school" refers to a particular kind of urban high school. In contrast to other schools in urban areas, which include various income levels and White students, inner-city schools tend to be public and serve largely poor students of color (Brunetti, 2006). Many families in inner cities are impoverished and live in neighborhoods characterized by high crime, high unemployment, gang activity, illegal drug dealing, and perpetual violence (Zhou, 2003). Moreover, inner-city high school students have higher rates of academic failure and greater school behavioral problems than their peers living in other areas (Bemak, Chung, & Sirokey-Sabdo, 2005).

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Cooper and Crosnoe (2007) argued that the lack of money, time, and energy limit economically disadvantaged parents' involvement in their children's education. Moreover, Lareau (2003) indicated that parents living in low-income neighborhoods do not have access to the same financial and educational resources as their middle-class counterparts. Although many parents are required to balance their work life with children's school, this may be especially difficult for low-income parents, who may have less flexible work schedules. Because of this, they may experience time poverty, which refers to the lack of poor working families' free time to dedicate to their child's educational concerns (Newman & Chin, 2003). Coupled with economic disadvantage, being a single parent makes it more difficult to get involved.

Single and teen parents are less likely to be involved in their children's schooling because of other family or work obligations (Lee, Kushner & Cho, 2007; Smith-Battle, 2007). In addition, many African American parents have other children to care for or work schedules that prohibit them from attending school activities, meetings, and parent-teacher conferences (Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005).

Other barriers faced by African American families arise from the interactions between parents and school personnel. Harry (1992) noted that African American parents reported feelings of isolation, alienation, disengagement, and an array of other negative feelings regarding interactions with personnel at their child's school. In their frustration and anger toward the school, parents voiced being treated like second-class citizens. Other African American parents are reluctant to become involved because of their own negative experiences as students (Lightfoot, 1978). Prater (2002) noted that it is difficult for some African American parents to dispel the misconception that they do not care about their children's education if the parent was not successful in school. Thus, negative interactions with school personnel and negative experiences during childhood also serve as potential barriers to parental involvement among African American parents.

Decreasing Barriers to Parental Involvement

Despite these barriers, most school personnel would like to involve families but do not know how to build positive and productive programs and are consequently apprehensive about trying (Epstein, 1995). Machen and colleagues (2005) argued that school personnel should establish workable and realistic ways to involve parents in education. Recent findings suggest that several approaches can be effective in increasing parental involvement among inner-city families. For example, Eccles and Harold (1993) identified three ways to involve parents: give them more meaningful roles, keep them informed, and present opportunities for them to support educational and developmental progress at school and home. Graham-Clay (2005) reasoned that strong communication between parents and school personnel is fundamental to this partnership and to building a sense of community between home and school. Therefore, school personnel must continue to develop and expand their skills to maximize effective communication with parents.

Abdul-Adil and Farmer (2006) also identified three strategies that might increase inner-city African American parents' involvement: (a) empowerment, (b) indigenous resources, and (c) outreach. In particular, Terrior (2006) believed that vulnerable families, who suffer from high levels of stress and

isolation, could be empowered by school-based programs that contribute to the production of social capital, a sense of connectedness and a sense of knowing. Furthermore, programs with both school- and home-based components have been shown to provide a partnering relationship between schools and parents where both groups are supported by the other (Koonce, 2005).

Current Study

Cohen, Linker, and Stutts (2006) noted that an ideal collaboration on behalf of children should have participation from all parties with an interest in the child, which includes parents and school personnel at various levels. Examining the barriers to parental involvement in schools from multiple perspectives allows researchers, parents, and educators to identify the areas in which collaborations between parents and school personnel can be enhanced. However, earlier studies have focused primarily on parent's perspective and have not included those of school personnel. Furthermore, few studies have examined the barriers to parental involvement in an inner-city high school context. In this study, we examined specific barriers to parental involvement from the perspective of parents and school personnel at a predominantly African American inner-city high school. We also explored the ways in which participants believed these barriers were minimized within the context of an inner-city school. Using these perspectives we provide recommendations on ways to increase parental involvement among inner-city African American parents in schools.

Method

This study is part of a larger investigation on parental involvement at a predominantly African American inner-city high school. Whereas the larger study broadly examined the conceptualizations of parental involvement, the current study focused specifically on the barriers to and facilitators of parental involvement. The study was conducted at a large urban school district in the Midwest. This school district is composed of nearly all students of color (92%), almost half of whom are African American (47%); the preponderance of students who are also from low-income families (86%). *Everett Public High*¹ was selected in October 2007 using a two-step process. First, because the current study is focused on African American, inner-city families, a homogeneous case sampling technique was used (Patton, 2002). Thus, schools whose student populations are over 95% African American were eligible to participate in the current study. Of the schools that remained,

Table 1. School Personnel Composition by Years of Experience ($N = 10$)

Demographic characteristic	<5 years	5+ years
	n (%)	n (%)
Age ^a		
Under 40	3 (30%)	2 (20%)
41 and above	1 (20%)	3 (30%)
Gender		
Female	4 (40%)	4 (40%)
Male	1 (10%)	1 (10%)
Race		
African American (Black)	4 (40%)	4 (40%)
European American (White)	1 (10%)	1 (10%)
Highest level of education		
Some college	0	1 (10%)
Completed college	2 (20%)	0
Some graduate school	1 (10%)	0
Completed graduate school	2 (20%)	4 (40%)

a. One participant did not report an age.

a school was randomly selected. Nearly all of the high school's 1,135 students are African American (98.3%) and from low-income households (92.8%).

Participants

The current study involved 25 in-depth interviews, which is consistent with typical qualitative studies (Creswell, 1998). School personnel and parents were recruited using a criterion sampling technique (Patton, 2002). Parents and school personnel who had contact with the other group in the past 3 months were selected. Eligible forms of contact included phone conversation, face-to-face meeting (scheduled and impromptu), and discussions about the schools' rules, regulations, and policies. A maximum variation sampling technique (Patton, 2002) was also used to recruit participants. We sought diversity in the number of years that school personnel worked at the school; five school personnel had worked at the school fewer than 5 years and five school personnel had worked at the school 5 years or more (see Table 1). School personnel participants held a variety of positions at *Everett Public High*, including assistant principal, teacher, counselor, social worker, and

Table 2. Participant Demographics ($N = 25$)

Demographic characteristic	Parents	School personnel
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
Age ^a		
Under 30	0	1 (10%)
30-50	12 (80%)	7 (70%)
51 and above	3 (20%)	1 (10%)
Gender		
Female	15 (100%)	8 (80%)
Male	0	2 (20%)
Race		
African American (Black)	15 (100%)	8 (80%)
European American (White)	0	2 (20%)
Highest level of education		
Some high school	2 (13%)	0
Completed high school	3 (20%)	0
Some college	6 (40%)	1 (10%)
Completed college	1 (7%)	2 (20%)
Some graduate school	0	1 (10%)
Completed graduate school	1 (7%)	6 (60%)
Other (e.g., technical training)	2 (13%)	0

a. One participant (school personnel) did not report an age.

security guard. Four parents with above average students ($GPA > 3.0$), 4 parents with below average students ($GPA < 2.0$) and 7 parents with average students ($GPA = 2.0-2.9$) were selected. Parent participants included biological parents, adopted parents, and grandparents raising their adolescent grandchildren as well as single and married parents.

Fifteen parents of high school students and 10 high school personnel (see Table 2) participated. Participants were mostly female and African American. Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 62 years ($M = 41$; $SD = 10$). The highest level of education ranged from some high school (8%) to graduate school (28%).

Procedures

The first author obtained approval to conduct this study through her home institution's Institutional Review Board and the school district's Office of

Research, Evaluation, and Accountability. Following approval, participants were recruited through a variety of mechanisms, including attending school events, attending school governance meetings, and snowball sampling. A screening tool was used to ensure that school personnel met the criterion to participate. If eligible, contact information was obtained so that a time and location for the interview could be scheduled. Written consent was obtained from participants on the day of their interview.

All interviews were conducted by the first author and completed between September and December 2008 and occurred at a location and a time convenient for participants (e.g., participants' homes and school classrooms). Interviews ranged from 16 to 87 minutes. Each interviewee was compensated with a US\$25 Visa gift card on completion of the interview.

Measures

Two semistructured interview protocols (i.e., one for parents and one for school personnel) were developed. The protocols had four sections that asked participants about (a) their personal history, (b) their conceptualizations of parental involvement, (c) home-school interactions, and (d) strengths and weaknesses of home-school communication. The protocols were piloted on a high school teacher and parent of a high school student not affiliated with *Everett Public High*. The interview protocols were revised after they were piloted and as data were collected and analyzed (Creswell, 1998). The final interview protocols each consisted of 19 questions. For the purposes of this study, questions regarding the barriers to and facilitators of parental involvement among inner-city parents were the focus. Sample interview items include, "What challenges do parents you know face when it comes to being involved in their child's education?" and "Tell me what could help parents be more involved, or free up their time to be more involved in their child's education." Participants also completed a brief questionnaire assessing participants' demographic information, such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, family structure, and educational level.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection. An inductive approach was used to analyze data, in which study findings emerge from the data and through the researcher's interactions with the data (Patton, 2002). The audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim. The first author verified all transcripts against the original audiotapes to ensure that the transcripts

were accurate. Transcripts were imported into a qualitative software program, NVIVO (QSR International Pty Ltd, Version 8.0, 2006), to assist in data analysis.

Coding process. As each interview was completed, the interviewer created a file for each participant that described the context of the interview, summarized participants' responses, and listed the most salient topics discussed by each interviewee. Codes were developed during transcription and combined to create a preliminary coding manual. These codes served as descriptive codes, which provided attributes to clusters of text and entailed little interpretation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Examples of descriptive codes included definitions of parental involvement, barriers, and facilitators. As knowledge and familiarity of the dynamics of parental involvement at the school increased, interpretive codes were assigned to the data. Interpretive codes reflect the complexity of the context and are categorized with other sections of text that have similar meanings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The unit of analysis was each participant's response to a question. Because many responses contained multiple beliefs, the number of codes assigned to each unit of analysis varied.

Through the continual process of coding, descriptive and interpretive codes were collapsed with other similar codes, certain codes were expanded to include a broader range of ideas, irrelevant codes were eliminated, and new codes emerged. Once descriptive and interpretive codes were refined, the relationships between the codes were examined through the process of pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Pattern codes were developed later in the course of data collection as patterns became clearer. The code "time poverty" is an example of a pattern code. This code reflected the activities at home or away from the school that consume parent's time, such as outside employment and caring for other children/family members. All participant interviews were used to develop the coding manual and achieve a consensus of the ideas presented. The final coding manual contained 54 unique codes and their definitions, each corresponding to various aspects of parental involvement stated by at least one or more of the 25 participants. Of the 54 codes in the complete coding manual, six described barriers to parental involvement and six described facilitators of parental involvement. The resulting themes reflect codes discussed by at least 25% of participants.

Evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative findings. Four techniques were employed to augment the credibility of findings. The goal of this process is to ensure that the interpretations of the researcher reflect the perspectives of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Toma, 2006), which included prolonged engagement (i.e., first author built trust, learned the culture of the

environment, and checked for misinformation that stems from distortions introduced by the researcher or the participants), journaling, peer debriefing (i.e., first author discussed results with professionals not involved in the study to challenge researcher bias), and member checking (i.e., first author discussed major themes with two parents and one school personnel to determine the degree to which findings reflected their experiences and descriptions of parental involvement; Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). All of the interviews were coded in two phases. First, the first author and a second coder (an undergraduate senior trained by the first author) individually read and coded an interview in its entirety. Then they met to discuss their codes and resolve discrepancies in data interpretation. When they disagreed about the codes for a section of data, they resolved disagreements by discussing the disputed text until consensus was reached about the appropriate codes.

Results

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Over half of the participants acknowledged that some parents would like to be more involved in their child's education, but faced barriers that prevented them from being involved in the ways and levels that they desired. Four themes emerged to describe the parental involvement barriers: time poverty, lack of access, lack of financial resources, and lack of awareness. Table 3 lists the various barriers to parental involvement as discussed by participants. Each theme is discussed below in detail.

Time poverty. Interview data revealed that a significant barrier to parental involvement was time poverty, which referred to the activities at home or away from school that consume parents' time. More parents discussed time poverty as a barrier to their participation than school personnel. Of the participants who discussed this theme, most stated that employment was the primary task that consumed parent's time and prevented them from being more involved in their child's education.

I know parents are working two and three jobs because of how the economy is so bad . . . You may have a mother there in the morning to see the child gets off to school, but she's not in there in the evening because she works nights (School personnel No. 6).

Although participants acknowledged that many parents spend considerable time working, they also discussed other activities that limited parents'

Table 3. Frequency of Participant who Discussed Barriers and Ways to Enhance Parental Involvement

Theme	parents (n = 15)	School personnel (n = 10)
	n (%)	n (%)
Identifying barriers		
Time poverty	14 (93%)	6 (60%)
Unawareness	9 (60%)	9 (90%)
Students as messengers	10 (67%)	7 (70%)
Inaccurate contact info	3 (20%)	6 (60%)
Lack of access		
Parents	4 (27%)	3 (30%)
School	9 (60%)	4 (40%)
Lack of financial resources	3 (20%)	4 (40%)
Decreasing barriers		
Involvement opportunities	14 (93%)	9 (90%)
Incentives	5 (33%)	7 (70%)
Effective communication	12 (80%)	8 (80%)

participation in their child's education. These activities included substance abuse problems where parents are assumed to spend time "getting high" or "trying to get a fix," additional child care responsibilities, and being preoccupied with their partner/spouse.

Lack of access. Twenty participants said that it was sometimes difficult to gain access to the school. Most frequently, participants discussed the physical structure of the school building and the scheduling of school events as barriers to access. Seven participants stated that it was difficult for parents with disabilities or illnesses to participate in their child's education at school.

Right now I'm on sick leave because I fell down the stairs and I have a slipped disk in my back and broken bones up in here, so it's kind of hard. I can't even stand up for more than ten minutes; I have to come sit back down. But that causes a lot of problems that I can't do a lot of activities that I used to (Parent No. 24).

In addition to the physical limitations of the school, 12 participants noted that the schedule of school events and meetings conflicted with parents' schedules. In particular, participants noted that the school's scheduling of events and operating hours were not sensitive to the schedules of parents who work during the day.

First of all, they have the meetings at 11 o'clock in the daytime. If a parent is working, he can't come to an 11 o'clock meeting, that's the first thing. (School personnel No. 9).

When they have their teacher's meeting or when parents can come up to the school, it's always during the day. Well I work in the daytime so it's not like I don't want to partake. I just can't miss work. I'm [my children's] sole support (Parent No. 12).

However, a school employee who has worked at *Everett Public High* for more than 5 years stated that although the scheduling of school events may be an issue for parents, the school tries to accommodate parents' schedules by having events on different days and times.

Lack of financial resources. More school staff than parents cited lack of financial resources as a barrier to parental involvement. Six participants believed that some parents thought their participation in their child's education was uninvited and unwanted because they did not have the money to pay their child's school fees.

Well if I can't afford to pay the fee for my student to come to school, am I going to be open to come and participate and be involved? No, because I'm gonna feel like I'm already at a disadvantage (School personnel No. 4).

Six participants relayed stories of parents whose lack of participation was an attempt to avoid the school's request for money rather than neglect their child's education. Three participants believed some parents who lacked financial resources also had difficulty with reliable transportation or money for public transportation. In these instances, participants stated that when funds for transportation were an issue, parents opted to ensure that their child made it to school.

Lack of awareness. More school personnel than parents cited lack of awareness as a barrier to parental involvement in a child's education. Lack of awareness meant that parents were unfamiliar with school policies or were not properly informed about a particular situation or event. School employees viewed parents' lack of knowledge and understanding of what the school could and could not do often strained the interactions between the home and school system. School personnel said that they attempted to inform parents of school functions through several mechanisms, including recorded messages from the school, personal phone calls from faculty or staff, mailings, messages

on the marquee, and flyers sent home through students. Yet parents remained unaware of the events and issues taking place at the school.

Ok, the things that make it harder for parents to be involved is when they don't know what is going on. (Parent No. 17).

Participants cited two major reasons for lack of awareness between the home and school environments: the use of students as messengers and inaccurate contact information. Both parents and school personnel recognized that their heavy reliance on students to communicate messages between home and school is partly responsible for parents not having information about events and issues at *Everett Public High*. Although students routinely fail to relay the messages from one setting to the other, parents and school personnel continued to rely on students to communicate across the home and school environments. Participants also discussed other ways in which students hinder healthy, effective relationships between parents and school personnel. For example, some students fail to include important information regarding their role in an infraction at school. Participants, especially school personnel, accused students of fabricating stories about their performance and involvement at school. Both parents and school personnel discussed parents who come to the school to accuse rather than inquire. They noted that parents who intended to be advocates for their child were often shocked by evidence from a school employee that is inconsistent and more convincing than their child's story.

The lack of accurate and updated contact information for parents was also a reason that parents were uninformed and misinformed. Having called disconnected phone numbers and with mail returned to the school, many school personnel believe that inaccurate contact information severely cripples many of the school's attempts to inform and involve parents.

. . . And a lot of addresses that we receive are from our students are from elementary school the database is wrong [and goes] right into Everett Public High, so a lot of numbers are old. Our students move; mobility rate is high . . . Numbers change. You know, with cell phone numbers, you lose a phone, you turn on a new phone. And parents will say, "oh that number was 10 phones ago." Well you didn't tell anyone . . . How can we contact you and there is not a number or address on record? (School personnel No. 11)

Three parents and six school personnel believed that the inaccurate contact information contributed to lack of awareness among parents and limited

regular contact between home and school. Of the six school personnel who discussed this theme, their estimates of the percentage of inaccurate student/family contact information ranged from 40% to 60%.

Decreasing Barriers of Parental Involvement in Inner-City High Schools

Just as many participants acknowledged that some parents encountered barriers to stagnate their involvement in their child's education, so too did they describe activities that lessen or reduce the barriers to parent involvement. Three different yet related themes emerged: involvement opportunities, incentives, and effective communication (see Table 3).

Involvement opportunities and incentives. Nearly all participants believed that opportunities for involvement made it easier for parents to participate. Examples of parental involvement opportunities included parent meetings, school governance meetings, social events, workshops, and classes for parents. Furthermore, participants suggested that some form of child care be provided at events to which parents are invited. Participants thought that school personnel need to take the context of families into account as they plan events. Otherwise, parents may not view the opportunities as viable because they are not planned or designed with them in mind.

That is my main issue with the school, having flexibility with the families. What is going to be good for me may not work for another. Maybe if we would have three different dates. Call us back with the date that gets the most response it will get used. You didn't ask us. You just told us. How did you know everyone was able to come that day (Parent No. 13)?

In addition to involvement opportunities, participants believed that offering incentives to students and parents encouraged parents to be more involved. More school employees discussed this theme than parents. Some incentives included food, raffle prizes, button/pins of appreciation to parents, and extra credit for students.

[We could have a] Parent night, maybe cook dinner for the parents and give them a night off. Or give them a token of appreciation to parents' like little pendants saying "good mom," "good dad," "keep doing the good work" (School personnel No. 19).

Interestingly, 10 participants who discussed opportunities for involvement also believed that those opportunities should involve incentives for parents.

Effective communication. Both parents and school personnel discussed ways in which the school and home environments maintain successful communication. Examples included the school's open door policy, parents informing the school of changes in their home life that might affect their child or relationship with the school, as well as parents and teachers sharing their cell phone numbers and email addresses to expand the ways in which they communicate.

Rather than view parental involvement as simply the duty of parents, most participants discussed the ways in which parents and school personnel work together for parents to be involved. Participants thought that planning school events with parents, expanding the ways and times that parents can communicate with school personnel, better advertising of school events, and treating students with respect would improve communication between parents and school personnel. Some participants also expressed the need for the school to broaden their modes of communication beyond the telephone and postal mail.

And it's like Everett Public High is kind of behind the times. So that would make it easier for me because sometimes I'm not able to drop, stop, and run up to the school but if I could email, it's something we could talk about (Parent No. 16).

Participants believed that if some or all of these tactics were implemented, parental participation in student's education at school would be easier and eventually increase in frequency.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine specific barriers to parental involvement from the perspective of parents and school personnel at a predominantly African American inner-city high school. In an effort to develop a localized understanding of parental involvement, we also sought to gain insight about the ways in which this sample believed that barriers to parental involvement could be reduced. Based on the information gathered, we were able to generate concrete recommendations on ways to increase parental involvement among inner-city African American parents in schools.

As noted in the study findings, there are many factors that make it harder for parents to be involved in their child's education. One of the reasons that low SES may negatively affect children (Lareau, 2003) is because lower income parents have less time to participate in their child's education

compared to higher income parents. Consistent with Newman and Chin's (2003) concept of time poverty, participants stated that parents' time was often consumed by other activities unrelated to their child's education. Study results further supported earlier findings (e.g., Machen et al., 2005; McWayne et al., 2004) that the major activity that kept parents from participating in their child's education was work obligations, namely, parents who work many hours and multiple jobs to provide for their families. Moreover, in instances of family emergencies, poor, working parents may have fewer opportunities to leave work than those parents who are above the poverty line (Bracey, 2001). Participants noted that parents with inflexible work schedules had difficulty participating in their child's education both at school and home. Thus, understanding the time constraints of parents and families within this context may be the first step to working with and engaging them in their child's education.

Even when parents do have time to participate, participants mentioned lack of school access as a barrier to their involvement at school. Previous research on parental involvement has not fully considered the impact of parental disability on the degree to which parents can be involved in their children's education. Ensuring that school buildings and classrooms are accessible to the disabled should be an important consideration for schools. Participants noted that parents who have illnesses or disabilities have a difficult time getting into and around the school. Because of these disabilities, parents may be less likely to come to the school for any reason and school personnel are less likely to expect their presence. In future studies, it may be beneficial for school administrators and researchers to further consider the ways in which disability status might severely influence the level and type of involvement from parents. Given the fact that adults from poor families, like many of those in the current study, are twice as likely than those from families who were not poor to have difficulty performing basic physical activities (e.g., climbing 10 steps without resting, standing or sitting for 2 hours, or using fingers to grasp small objects; Pleis, Lucas, & Ward, 2009), it is likely that understanding ability status may lead to a greater understanding of parental involvement within this population.

In addition, the timing of events seemed to be a major problem for some parents' work schedules. As Koonce and Harper (2005) noted, some parents may feel frustrated about their role in their child's education when schools arrange conferences and meetings with little regard to working parents' schedules. Given the nature of time poverty and lack of access, some parents might eventually opt not to participate in their child's education at school because it requires more time and effort than they are able and willing to expend.

Participants also expressed lack of financial resources as a potential barrier for parental involvement at school, which is consistent with previous research (e.g., Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007). Insufficient money to pay school fees and acquire reliable transportation directly affects the quality of the relationship between families and school faculty and staff. This finding sheds light on an important social condition that may prevent parental involvement for some families living in poverty: limited assets. Whereas a family's SES is determined by the flow of income for current or deferred consumption, a family's assets reflects their net worth, which includes savings, property values, and incomes. Zhan (2006) argued that assets could bring about financial security in times of hardship or economic stress. Based on the results of this study, it appears that some parents only have enough money to meet their family's basic needs and may not be involved in their child's education when it requires more money than they have. Regrettably, school fees and additional money spent on parental school visits are not included in the realm of basic needs. During times of financial stress, assets could serve as a cushion for families to obtain the necessary funds to meet the financial demands of their child's school. In the absence of such assets, small amounts required by the school seem monumental for some families and therefore become a barrier to parents who want to be involved but do not have the monetary resources. It seems that schools and our society need to better adapt to the needs and demands of families in inner-city communities to foster greater parental involvement.

Previous researchers have not considered, however, the extent to which the heavy reliance on students to deliver messages between their homes and school and inaccurate parent contact information affect lack of awareness among parents and ultimately their limited involvement. As found at *Everett Public High*, communication between parents and school personnel through students is often unreliable. Moreover, over half of school personnel believed that inaccurate contact information played a major part in parents being unaware of school events and meetings because phone calls and mailings do not reach the home. At *Everett Public High*, the use of a broader range of technologically driven communication modes may combat claims of lack of awareness, offer opportunities for more meaningful conversations about student progress, and make it easier for parents to be involved. However, for any communication methods to be successful, parents need to ensure that school personnel have their updated contact information. Unfortunately, providing accurate contact information and email communication may be an additional burden and unrealistic for the most vulnerable families from low-income households with higher rates of mobility, lack of computer/Internet access at

home, limited computing skills, limited free time and financial resources. Thus, schools should do outreach to these families (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006) to facilitate communication.

Similar to participants' suggestions, Pinto and others (2007) found that providing incentives was a viable method to improve parental participation in school-based activities. However, given that the use of extrinsic rewards might negatively affect intrinsic motivation (Wiechman & Gurland, 2010), it is likely that incentives alone will not persistently increase parental involvement among inner-city parents. Furthermore, Overstreet and colleagues (2005) found that the degree to which parents felt the school listened to and hosted events with them in mind was a significant predictor of involvement from economically disadvantaged African American parents like many of those in the current study. Participants in the present study believed that if events were planned collaboratively, advertised widely, and included incentives, parents will be more likely to be involved.

Limitations and Strengths

This study was not without limitations. Future researchers might consider replicating the study with other populations, including student and parent perspectives, and using a variety of methodologies (e.g., ethnographic methods and longitudinal designs) to study the barriers of parental involvement in school settings. Although not a goal of qualitative methods, it is unlikely that the results can be generalized to similar populations given the small sample size. Furthermore, many of the participant responses focused primarily on factors that affected parental involvement at school, but not necessarily outside of school. Future researchers might want to consider addressing circumstances that affect parents' ability to be involved with their child's education outside of school as well.

Despite the limitations, this study has several strengths. Study findings introduce barriers to parental involvement that have been rarely addressed, namely, parental disability and lack of awareness issues due to lack of correct contact information and students hindering home-school communications. Furthermore, this study included in-depth, rich perspectives of a variety of adults who play a role in the home-school relationship. In particular, this study included school personnel other than teachers (e.g., a security guard, social worker, and assistant principal) as well as other parental figures besides traditional biological parents (e.g., grandparents and adopted parents). Kowaleski-Jones and Dunifon (2006) found no evidence that, compared to living with biological married parents, living in any of the other family

structures is associated with measures of youth well-being among Black youth. Thus, this diversity of views presented a more representative understanding of how participants at this high school and in this community defined parental involvement and described their interactions. Finally, the qualitative methodology allowed us to provide a more nuanced and contextualized perspective of parental involvement.

In conclusion, the findings presented here add to the understanding of barriers to parental involvement in education in a predominantly African American inner-city high school. Although some findings are consistent with previous studies, this study highlights additional considerations in working with inner-city families. This is one of few studies to qualitatively examine parental involvement within an inner-city high school and highlight the barriers to and facilitators of continually involving parents in their children's education beyond grammar school. In particular, by revealing a broader range of barriers to school access, both parent and school personnel now have specific areas to focus their efforts to engage inner-city parents in high schools. Furthermore, detangling the ways in which parental lack of awareness hinders the involvement efforts challenges researchers and teachers to rethink the ways in which information and communication between the home and school occurs. It is probable that increasing the type and number of methods used to contact parents will foster more consistent parental involvement from a wider range of parents. Furthermore, including parents in the planning process, providing opportunities for involvement, and offering incentives may further enhance the home–school collaborations involving parents within inner-city high schools.

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Note

1. A pseudonym was used for the high school to protect confidentiality.

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