CHAPTER 1

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

Honoring and Supporting Parent Involvement

Stuart Greene
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Initiatives designed to foster increased parent involvement have been prevalent in education policy during the past 2 decades. These initiatives have taken on greater urgency since the Clinton administration reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and set aside funding to support parent–teacher "compacts" in 1996 (Domina, 2005). In 2002, then Secretary of Education Rod Paige called energetic and enthusiastic involvement from all parents "the most important help of all" in achieving effectiveness for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Therefore, it is not surprising that NCLB mandates that elementary schools provide "parents with the tools they need to support their children's learning in the home, communicate regularly with families about children's academic progress, provide opportunities for family workshops, and offer parents chances to engage in parent leadership activities at the local site" (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2006/2007, p. 1).

A growing number of studies have established a positive relationship between parent involvement and student achievement. For example, Greenwood and Hickman (1991) suggest that parent involvement enhances a child's attitude, sense of well-being, and educational aspirations, while also improving grades and readiness for school. Students are also less likely to be placed in special education, repeat a grade, or drop out when their parents are involved (Anderson, 2000). Still, meta-research studying the effects of parent involvement on children's academic progress, or achievement, is inconclusive (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007) and calls attention to the complex array of factors in children, parents, and communities that affect student learning (see also Prins & Toso, 2008).

However, the notion of parent involvement is not well defined. Caspe and her colleagues (2006/2007) underscore the fact that no single factor in what educators refer to as parent involvement is responsible for making a positive difference; instead, multiple factors must occur simultaneously. Specifically, these factors include parent–child relationships at home, the extent to which parents identify with and depend upon communities of adults from different socioeconomic backgrounds, the extent to which parents are a presence at school, and the kinds of support in reading, writing, and math that parents provide for their children. As in Epstein's (1995) model, these factors bring into focus the ways social, cognitive, and affective forms of involvement can influence students' behaviors, sense of competence, and achievement.

COMPLICATING COMMONSENSE VIEWS OF PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES

A number of studies suggest that parents of low SES tend to be less involved in their children's education than higher SES parents, at least when measured by traditional forms of involvement, such as classroom volunteerism and working with children at home. Further, Lareau's (2000) in-depth study reveals that low-SES parents are less likely to supplement curriculum with closely related work at home, to challenge teachers' expertise, and to communicate with other parents about their children's educations.

However, multiple studies also point to the obstacles inadvertently created by school administrators. For example, "mainstream discourses" about reading, which often blame parents for children's reading difficulties, can absolve teachers, schools, and society of responsibility for the educational challenges faced by urban students (Handel, 1999). Discourses like this persist, permitting the rationale that poverty, substandard living conditions, and the like are caused by their victims. Even when schools attempt to reach out to low-income minority parents, too often the focus is solely on the parents and perceived inadequacies on their part (Compton-Lilly, 2003).

Moreover, the tendency in studies of parent involvement is to limit definitions to parents' presence at schools. Yet, as Norton and Ordoñez demonstrate in their respective chapters in this volume, parent involvement can manifest itself in the ways in which parents educate their children as moral, empathic individuals who will live out their lives with integrity, not just in the ways in which they contribute to children's achievement at school. Without a broader conception of parent involvement, it would be easy to ignore just how involved many parents are in helping their children flourish. In keeping with some key themes in this volume, and to more fully realize the context that has shaped parents' views about school, we draw upon parents' voices as they help us understand what they think parent involvement means and the local knowledge in which they live and work.

AN EXAMPLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

Ultimately, our investigation is motivated not only by what we see as possible limitations in current research, but by the work we have done together as members of a community-based research (CBR) initiative that focuses upon local educational issues (for a brief history of CBR and its efforts, see Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker & Donohue, 2003). The group includes teachers and principals from local schools and researchers who have a long history of teaching—in public and private schools. Since the emphasis in CBR is on local knowledge and questions that emerge from conversations with stakeholders in a local context, our ensuing community and faculty dialogue identified a number of issues that we have since refined in preparing for this study: What do we mean by parent involvement? How is it conceptually defined? How has parent involvement been measured in empirical studies? What is the payoff at elementary and middle schools? Have empirical studies identified forms of parent involvement that are most productive? What kinds of incentives increase parent involvement and what obstacles hinder parent involvement?

Our study builds upon a pilot study at a local primary school in collaboration with the same principal with whom we have collaborated on the current study. Specifically, Mangeney (2007) tested Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995) model of low-SES, parent-involvement decision making. Her findings revealed that the most prominent factors included general opportunities and invitations for involvement, demands on time and energy, and perceptions of personal skills and knowledge. For the most part, all the parents did not believe they had the expertise to challenge teachers' decisions, and most agreed that they did not feel welcome at the school. Some parents seemed to lack a general awareness of what types of activities even constituted parent involvement. For example, when asked what they did to demonstrate involvement in their children's education, parents answered that they took their children to the movies, the mall, and the skating rink. Interestingly, they mentioned helping with homework and reading to children only after being prompted. Moreover, some parents stated that they felt unsure about how to be involved.

The local primary school, Ida B. Wells Primary (a pseudonym), is a neighborhood school in a Midwest city of approximately 110,000 residents. Its 275 students are instructed in 16 K–4 classrooms. Eight additional instructors provide supplemental resources (e.g., art, music, curriculum). Of these 24 teachers, two are male and three are African American. The remaining teachers are Caucasian females. Collectively, they have been at the school for an average of 7 years, but the range of teaching experience extends from 1 year to 27 years.

Since 86% of its students qualified for free lunch in 2005–06, the school is categorized as a Title I school. Data for the 2006–07 school year (when this study was conducted) estimate the following racial composition: 48% Black, 21% Hispanic, 15% White, 12% multiracial, and 4% Asian. According to the 2000 Census, 14.2% of families living in the census block groups that the school serves live below poverty. Furthermore, 30.4% of children under 18 in the main census tract within the school's boundaries live in poverty. Data on educational attainment show that roughly 75% and 25% of the population over age 25 have graduated high school and college, respectively. Although these data hint at the low SES of the surrounding community, they are also somewhat misleading since the neighborhood includes professional families, many of whom work at a local university. However, very few children whose families are associated with the university actually attend the school.

The No Child Left Behind Report Card for Ida B. Wells from 2004–2007 showed passing rates below both district and state rates in every category except one. (The school's passing rate in math for paid-lunch students was 4 percentage points higher than the district rate.) Some of the most disconcerting statistics include a 26% passing rate in math for African American students, compared with 42% in the district and 45% in the state; a 31% passing rate in English/language arts (LA) for Hispanic students compared with 44% in the district and 54% in the state; and a 0% passing rate in English/LA for special education students.

Moreover, large gaps exist between free-lunch and paid-lunch students and between minority and White students. For example, 80% and 70% of paid-lunch students passed math and English/LA, respectively, while only 33% and 36% of free-lunch students passed these tests. Moreover, only 32.4% of students at Ida B. Wells passed both the English/LA and math portions of the state standardized test in the 2006–07 school year, compared with 64.2% statewide.

With the principal of the school, we organized a series of workshops with parents to identify the ways in which parents perceived what it meant to be involved, to consider ways that they could build upon the things they were already doing, and to enter into a sustained conversation

with teachers, so that they could work together as partners to ensure that children were flourishing. Altogether, 11 parents consistently attended the workshops—seven females and four males, with an average age of 36. Five had completed high school; two more had passed their GED equivalency exams. Demographically, one was Caucasian, one Latino, and nine were either African American or African American mix. Parents' ethnic backgrounds represented the community's demographics. At the outset, three identified themselves as being married—although one couple wed midway through the project.

A NOTE ON METHODS

We examined parents' perceptions about what it meant to be involved in their children's education by collecting life histories. We asked parents about their backgrounds (Can you tell me about the neighborhood where you live now? How is it the same as or different from the neighborhood where you grew up?) and their education (How much schooling did your grandparents have? What about your parents? Can you tell me a story about your education, something that stands out or that you remember at any point in your education?).

One week after the interviews, we began a series of 10 workshops. At the first meeting, each parent completed a survey designed to gather information about how parents feel about the school their children attend (e.g., whether they feel welcome), the extent to which parents feel that teachers invite them to be involved, and what they need in order to support their children's learning (Epstein & Salinas, 1993). In addition to completing the survey, each parent participated in a focus group, which directly focused on their perspectives about parent involvement (Fine & Weis, 1998): "How involved are you in your child's education? Would you like to be more involved? What keeps you from being involved?" A second informal focus group was conducted following the workshops' conclusion to revisit parents' definitions of parent involvement and obtain specific examples of how they were involved in their children's schoolwork.

Finally, we asked the schools' classroom teachers and resource instructors to complete a teacher version of the same survey, asking teachers to judge their school's role in supporting involvement and to describe activities they themselves employed for engaging parents in their classrooms. In addition, we asked the teachers about their definitions of parent involvement, ways to encourage involvement, and formats used to communicate with parents (e.g., newsletters, phone calls, home visits).

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM PARENTS ABOUT PARENT INVOLVEMENT

In general, parents not only described their relationships with children as being close, but were able to cite examples of activities they shared together that confirmed the depth of their affection for their children. Parents spoke of playing baseball or basketball together, going fishing, redecorating the child's bedroom, playing video games, going to the park, skating, watching movies—whatever the child felt like doing. One parent proudly boasted of his daughter's writing three stories about her friendship with her father, and another shared that he took his son to work frequently.

In addition to stories about activities they shared together, parents also spoke of their children's weaknesses and strengths, indicating they knew the personalities of their children, and how children differed from one another. Boys frequently were referred to as being active and needing to play outside, because they have "energy to burn, apparently." Other children were described as liking computers, reading, or arts and crafts. One parent went out of her way to support her daughter's interests:

> So I just encourage that and she might be a home interior decorator, I don't know. So, anything that's artsy-crafty I try to buy that for her. And just to keep her encouraged in that area. You know, maybe she'll be a jewelry designer, who knows.

Although the focus of our project was on parent involvement with school, these limited references in the data indicate that parents enjoy their children and are intent on developing warm relationships with them in their homes. Even when employment demands forced limits on the amount of contact one parent might have with children, we heard many spontaneous stories that demonstrated the extent to which both parents coordinated their schedules so that children generally were supervised and cared for.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT AT HOME

One parent, Lamont, captured others' concerns when he explained that he is "very involved" with his son: "You know, when I'm not working on my second job, when I'm always, when he comes straight home from school, homework first. I make sure he do that before he go outside, or he do anything, you know, and he take off his coat, I say homework, homework, homework. You know, to let him know that's instilled in his mind, homework. Get that work done, make sure it's right." Lamont creates a structure of expectations for his son after school, so that he gets right to work.

This is a significant concern for all of the parents, who expressed concern over the number of distractions (e.g., computer games, television, and bicycles) that interfere with children's focus on schoolwork. They uniformly agreed that children, after a full day of school, would much rather engage in other activities than attend to homework. Like other parents, Lamont tries to let his son figure out ways to do his work independently. Thus, he just monitors his son's progress. "What I do now is let him do it himself, and then I check it and see if it's done right. Most time it is done right." Similarly, Beth explains that she sits all of her children down at the dining room table, "and if it gets to the point where nobody can figure it out, which is rare, then, you know . . . I do that, but as far as the homework helping goes, . . . I have them do it with each other a lot more. And I think that helps 'em, you know, to just look out for one another." Still, parents often gave some direct instruction when helping with homework, as was the case for Carol: "Sometimes I have to, you know, [*inaudible*] and show him words and that he missed and stuff like that, but he, you know, instill in him homework, you know. Before you go outside and play, homework."

Many parents talked about "maintaining high expectations." For example, Devon reflected on his daughter's interest in watching medical shows and has told her that she should consider being a doctor. Moreover, because he works as security guard at a local university, he makes sure that she comes to the university with him as often as possible. Although Beth and Devon have made it clear to their children that they are expected to attend college, presurvey data revealed that only 78% of the parents frequently emphasized that school is important. By the end of the workshops, data from the survey revealed that nearly all of the parents stressed the value of school in their conversations with their children.

Parents placed considerable emphasis on who their children are as learners, which was reflected in students' apparent interests and desires. Devon explained, "Whatever they do in the computer lab—that's what mine likes—working in the computer lab. Whatever stuff they have them doing, you know, she likes. She loves being on the computer." Therese also emphasized the need to "find out what your kid really likes, what he really likes in school. If it's math, reading, English, or art, whatever. You have to find that out, in fact, like I find out my little boy, he loves math but, you know, a whole lot so sometimes I take him to my job." Unfortunately, Therese continued by conveying that she is not always certain that teachers know what the children are interested in and that, to teach effectively, teachers need to ask both the parents and the children.

Parents also described examples in which they intentionally created and participated in interactive instructional lessons with their children to help them learn a variety of academic skills. Examples included playing store with a cash register so children would learn how to estimate the price of items in the home and be able to give correct change. Indeed, one parent described learning as an "everyday process" that could be incorporated in play:

> I don't care who you are, how old you are, you learn something new every day, and it can either be really exciting for you to learn, or it could be boring and then the kids are like, you know, they're really not excited. I mean, you know, you can play to learn.

Some parents also conducted spelling bees in which children could earn prizes purchased from the local dollar store. In both examples, parents demonstrate the ways play can scaffold learning.

Another parent related stories of taking his child to his job site and letting him use the cash register there. This same parent, whom we later realized was only functionally literate, took his son grocery shopping, let him pick out the kind of food he liked, and then gave him a $100 bill to cover the total amount. The father had prearranged with the cashier to give back incorrect change, so when the child was asked to figure out how much money he was supposed to receive, he had to perform math calculations and excercise conflict resolution skills in talking to the cashier. After sharing this example, the parent also suggested that learning could be improved if involved adults found out what children really liked and enjoyed. Readily admitting that his son had problems with math at the beginning of the year, he "found the fun part of him," and practiced those skills so now "he's doing pretty good in math." When you find the fun part of it, he claimed, "they catch on real quick, you know, after awhile." Apparently these parents recognized the need for reinforcing academic skills in their children and assumed they could design practical, innovative, and effective ways to help them learn without seeking professional input.

TEACHERS' DEFINITIONS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Teachers' responses were very similar when asked to define what they meant by parent involvement and the extent to which they had invited parents to participate in school activities (both formal and informal). Although teachers' definitions of parent involvement did include occasional references to experiences at home "with the fun things and also the academics," their expectations centered primarily on two factors traditionally noted by researchers: (1) communicating with teachers, and (2) participating in school events (parent–teacher conferences, visiting the classroom, performances, field trips, volunteering). Interestingly, few teachers personally knew any parents who helped at the school. This difference in definitions of parent involvement helps explain some significant gaps in parents' and teachers' thinking about what it means to be involved in children's education.

In interviews, most teachers suggested that parents were unresponsive; however, findings indicate that there could be mismatches between teachers' expectations and parents' understanding of how to respond to phone calls or letters sent home. After discovering that his daughter had not completed seven assignments, one parent solved the "problem" by sitting down with her and showing her how to do the assignments.

> I do get the notes, you know, but they're doing better and we know, we stay on 'em about their school, I mean we stay on 'em, checking homework daily and whatever, and, you know, I ask 'em, "How you doing? You have any problems, what is it?" Just like my daughter brought home some homework and I was looking at it this morning and she had missed like seven—she said these are new problems that are hard. I said, well I'll go through this, and then we'll pick out the problem that you're having a hard time with and then I'll make up some problems for you to do when I'm off Wednesday and Thursday and we'll go through 'em and get you going good on 'em. So, you know, I stay on 'em.

On the one hand, this parent feels like he is following through with his responsibility as a supportive parent. On the other hand, the teacher was probably frustrated because her student missed numerous assignments, but the parent never replied to her attempts to communicate with him.

Another teacher observed that the challenges to ongoing communication and participation are quite real and reflect the larger socioeconomic concerns that face the urban poor: "Mostly the parents that I wanted to see were the ones that didn't come in. And a lot of times it's difficult to contact them, there's not a working telephone or, you know, no other way to get hold of them." Similarly, teachers noted that many of their students were in single-parent families where the parent worked at least two jobs, did not have transportation, and dealt with language barriers.

POSSIBILITIES FOR YOUR CLASSROOM, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY

Most telling in our study was that teachers emphasized parents' lack of participation in formal and informal activities at school, and stressed their attempts to communicate information to parents. In contrast, parents focused on the ways they helped children with homework, but rarely addressed their participation at school or communication with teachers and administrators. Even if teachers believe they are communicating *to* parents, communication *with* parents does not necessarily occur. In fact, although they do not know that they agree, both parents and teachers believe that meaningful dialogue is absent from their contact. Until each group begins to talk to, know, and understand the other, it is virtually impossible for a parent–school partnership to form.

Our research indicates that parents need to realize that their role at school is significant. Yet history shows us how disempowered and diminished low-income parents can be within a school. There are many painful reminders that invisible forces impede low-income urban parents from coming to the schoolhouse door, ranging from Kozol's (1965) chronicle of parent protest in *Death at an Early Age* when the superintendent of schools in Boston referred to parents as "stains" in the community, to Purcell-Gates's (1995) description 30 years later of how parents are overlooked or silenced by teachers and administrators. These vestiges of unfortunate legacies suggest that initiatives must totally redefine what is possible and then their implementation must be actively supported until mature connections are developed.

Despite the public's belief that low-income minority parents are not invested in their children's education, our study supports other research results (e.g., Compton-Lilly, 2003), demonstrating that parents not only are interested in their children's schooling, but also want to participate in supporting them. However, it also appears that parents in our study have been unaware of the fact that teachers and administrators have expectations of them that remain unfulfilled.

One teacher aptly characterized the problem of encouraging increased parent involvement at school as a "block," and pointed out that neither parents nor teachers know how to come together to help students. This teacher helps to pinpoint one of the real challenges before us, and the extent to which parent involvement needs to be seen as a reciprocal partnership that unites parents and teachers.

> There's this block as far as, I think in general, across the United States, that the parents are on one side and the teacher and the school is on the other side. But everybody really wants the same thing. It's just how to come together to reach that goal. . . . And, I think neither side really knows how to come about that, and I see the, it being more of an outreach from the school side than the parents' side, because the parents are in a different place. They don't have as much capability to plan things out. And I think when some parents want to get involved, it's not so readily acceptable.

As this teacher suggests, schools need to reach out to parents. And teachers must listen to parents, especially if they understand that they need to reach out to parents by encouraging parent input and volunteerism.

Parents are not always cognizant of their potential role. They simply and implicitly trust teachers to provide their children with the formal skills and content knowledge equated with learning. Although they want their children to receive a good education, they do not view themselves as educators. Not until the last workshop, when parents were given their children's standardized test scores for a second time, did they begin to realize that their children were not doing well at all. Their children's academic performance was below par, and the parents realized that they needed to play a more active role in their children's education.

Whether or not parents and schools can forge partnerships may very well be a function of how fluid schools and their communities become. Parents can and are willing to change, as our data indicate, and to become more involved in their children's education. But schools must change, especially their tendency to isolate both teachers and students from the wealth of knowledge in local communities. And this will mean listening to parents' stories, understanding who they and their children are, and expanding a curriculum that bridges the school and community. The implications can be powerful when parents see that schools are committed to them and build on what they know. But invitations to participate must be authentic, not just rhetorical. Parents and teachers need spaces where they can talk about the purpose of education and the value of different curricula for helping children flourish. Here parents and teachers can begin to connect the process of teaching and learning to local communities, where teaching and learning occur all the time.

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A Response to Chapter 1

Catherine Compton-Lilly

Greene and Long document the lessons that educators can learn from parents, highlighting the dreams and concerns parents have about their children and the challenges they encounter when dealing with schools and teachers. They show teachers and researchers how they can interview parents and use their reported life histories to design workshops that cater to parents' concerns.

Educators tend to define parent involvement in traditional ways—as communicating with teachers and participating in school events. However, discussions with parents revealed a much broader range of activities. Greene and Long describe parents playing sports and video games, fishing, redecorating, going to parks, and skating with their children. While these are not the traditional indicators of parent involvement that schools might expect, they are significant and must be recognized as contributing to strong foundations upon which school learning can be constructed. Greene and Long note that "parent involvement can manifest itself in the ways in which parents educate their children as moral, empathic individuals who will live out their lives with integrity" (p. 10).

By revealing the vast range of activities that parents share with children, Greene and Long provide readers with data that challenge deficit models of parents and can begin to mend the gap between parents and teachers and thus address some of the tensions that often accompany school and home relationships.

However, Greene and Long raise one more important point. They remind readers that just as teachers often carry negative assumptions about parents, parents are often unaware of their own potential and fail to recognize the significant role they play in their children's educational lives. Rather than challenging teachers' judgment, parents "simply and implicitly trust teachers to provide their children with the formal skills and content knowledge" (p. 27). While efforts to support parents often privilege dominant perspectives and practices, rejecting the strengths that families possess, Greene and Long use research as a means to empower parents, validate their contributions to schooling, and address local educational issues.

In Chapter 2, Patricia Snell also explores the obstacles faced by parents who might want to be more involved with schools. She employs a participatory action research project to document the challenges parents face and to explain the various stances parent take toward becoming engaged.

Then, in Chapter 3, Long returns to the study presented in Chapter 1. Rather than focusing on the lessons researchers and educators can learn from parents, Long highlights how parent involvement can facilitate the development of parental academic identities that support parents as educators in their own homes.

PAR process =

CHAPTER 2

PARENTS DEFINING PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Patricia Snell

"Now I know how to talk to teachers."
"I always attend meetings and am part of the parent group."
"I learned from other parents' advice."
"I understand more about the norms of the school."
"I am prepared to be involved in the school. I have more power, more action."
—Parent Promotora Researchers

Parent involvement within schools can lead toward measurable school improvement outcomes. However, many struggling schools do not see their parents as being regularly involved in schools. As discussed by Greene and Long in the previous chapter, commonsense notions often paint low-income and minority parents as particularly uninterested or unengaged in their children's education. In this chapter, I ask: How might schools better connect with low-income and minority families and work toward further involving them in schools?

As described in Chapter 1, understanding parents' existing definitions of involvement is key to increasing parent involvement with schools. However, it is also essential that educators and researchers attend to the barriers that parents face as they strive to become involved. Taking a collaborative approach not only acknowledges parents' current efforts but actually can increase their engagement within the school by helping them to overcome barriers that often separate low-income and minority parents from their children's school environments. Collaboration must involve efforts to hear parents' voices and seek ways to help them feel welcomed in schools.

This chapter examines the implementation of a particular type of research investigation called participatory action research, or PAR. PAR designs are meant specifically to investigate ways of hearing from people who often are marginalized by mainstream society. Employing PAR as a

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