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Choices, Chores, and Cheerleading:

A Study of Hartford Public Housing Residents' Perceptions of Parent-School Involvement

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Abstract

A growing body of research suggests that parents' involvement in their children's schooling is an important factor for student academic achievement. In the Greater Hartford area, the changing landscape of public education options emerging from the 1996 Connecticut Supreme Court ruling in *Sheff v. O'Neill* has put an emphasis on understanding factors impacting academic achievement for low-income students of color. This study examines how parents of color living in public housing perceive their role in their children's schooling. Through semi-structured interviews, parents expressed which forms of involvement are most important to them as well as their perceived barriers and motivations for school involvement. Data was collected from parents ($N = 11$) who have children in elementary school, kindergarten through fifth grade. Findings suggest that parents perceive their role to be crucial to their children's success and social mobility. Parents indicate that the forms of involvement most important to them pertain to choosing the best school for their children; helping their children with their academic work; and supporting their children with overall school preparedness. Parents also expressed varying degrees of alienation from or pressure for involvement based upon the type of school their children attend. This study implicates the need for an approach to the analysis of low-income parent-school involvement that is considerate of the nuances of this group as well as the changing educational environment.

Keywords: parent-involvement, public housing, Sheff v. O'Neill

Introduction

Parent involvement and student achievement seem to be inextricably linked. There is a growing body of research that suggests that more parent involvement in schooling results in better academic outcomes for their children. When the cultural practices of school and home are aligned, students are better equipped to successfully navigate the expectations of school faculty and staff (Lareau, 1987). The socio-economic positioning of working class parents differs from that of teachers and school personnel, which can cause both groups to misinterpret what meaningful parent involvement looks like in practice. This misinterpretation of expectations and outcomes for involvement can mean lower academic achievement for students from working class backgrounds. School

and family partnerships or “overlapping spheres of influence” are important to student academic success (Epstein, 1997). In order to improve academic outcomes for low-income students of color, it is important to understand the dynamics of their parents’ relationship and involvement with their schooling.

For this study, I focus on how low-income parents of color on Hartford’s north end perceive their role in their children’s schooling. What forms of involvement do they feel are most important? What factors motivate them to be involved in their children’s schooling and what are their impediments to school involvement? An understanding of these inquiries from the parents’ point of view reframes the local discourse about parent involvement. Instead of asking how schools get what they need from this demographic of parents, we can move to what schools can do to better meet the needs of this demographic.

These questions have real world significance, because the city of Hartford is at the center of a landmark civil rights case. In the 1989 *Sheff v. O’Neill* case, plaintiffs challenged the racial and economic segregation of Hartford area schools. In 1996, a Connecticut Supreme Court ruling ordered the state to integrate schools in the Greater Hartford region (American Civil Liberties Union, 2014). Since the case began over 25 years ago, the landscape of Hartford area schooling options has changed drastically. The State of Connecticut has poured a great deal resources into Hartford area schools struggling to boost student achievement (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2014). From Open Choice, to magnets, to charters, to neighborhood schools - Hartford parents now have an overwhelming number of schooling options available to choose from for their children. My research questions examine how low-income parents of color

see themselves and their involvement in their children's schooling within Hartford's changing educational landscape.

Literature Review

Much of what is said about working class parents and school involvement is less than hopeful. It is commonly noted that working class parents have fewer resources and less confidence to request more resources for their children (Lareau, 2000). Add the challenge of being a member of a marginalized racial group and the hurdles of severe poverty to the sample set, and the patterns pertaining to parent-school involvement can be disheartening (Auerbach, 2007). Because of a culture of deference to authority, working class parents have been found to rely heavily on the opinions of professionals (Lareau, 1987). I had similar findings in my research, however; the idea of low-income parents' blind faith in their schools' professionals is complex. How that faith impacts their involvement is meaningful. The nuances of the perceptions of their role(s) in schooling, their interpretation of what it means to be involved in schooling, and the differentiation of how involvement is received by schools significantly impacted my findings.

In a study about the barriers to school engagement faced by parents who live in public housing, Jamie Rae Yoder and Amy Lopez (2013) used responses to interview questions and handwritten surveys within a focus group to understand what factors impact parents' involvement in their children's education. They found that the public housing parents they sampled would like to be more involved in their children's schooling but are deterred by feelings of marginalization. One issue with this study is that the focus group model prevented access to in-depth responses that only one-on-one data

collection would yield. Individuals' responses could have been impacted by the influence of the focus group dynamic however they recommend conducting follow-up individual interviews to provide additional data points and strengthen the methodology.

Rae Yoder and Lopez frame the importance of parental involvement in schools as it relates to positive academic achievement and development. The study examines a deeper understanding of parent school involvement and construct varying definitions of parental involvement. They briefly discuss the multitude of activities that can be interpreted as parent involvement in schooling: from helping with homework to attending school events. Families of color, immigrants, and families with low economic status may have barriers that make it "impractical if not impossible to be involved" (Yoder & Lopez, 2013). Individual ability also plays a role in parents' willingness to get involved. The authors assess resources such as social network, finances, childcare options, transportation, and work obligations as prominent barriers to parental involvement. Ultimately, they discover that the reality of marginalization for black, Latino, low-income, and immigrant parents creates a more significant set of barriers to school involvement for parents within those groups than lack of resources, like time or money. Parents' feelings of societal alienation lead to alienation from school involvement. Rae Yoder and Lopez conclude that school choice is a way to address feelings of helplessness and marginalization for parents. The study suggests that allowing parents to make an educational decision on behalf of their children leads to increased parent involvement.

In a study of the nuances of parents' involvement in their children's education, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, and Closson (2005) used empirical works around the constructs in the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of the

parental involvement process to understand what parents' motivations are for involvement in their children's education and what practices strengthen parent involvement in school communities. They found that parents' involvement in their children's education is influenced by role construction, self-efficacy, invitations to involvement, and also the school's responsiveness to those variables. Since this a meta-analysis, the methodology was not specific. In order to know of other recommendations or critiques, it would be necessary to review the methodology of each study analyzed to develop a proper evaluation of the findings. In the conclusion, the authors make recommendations for triangulation of data. Instead of relying solely on parents' self reports, students and school personnel would also contribute data about parents' involvement.

The work of Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, et al. offers a broad review of works on constructs based on Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of explanations for parental involvement. These constructs are centered on three areas. The first is role construction for involvement and parent efficacy. The second is perceptions of invitations to get involved either from the student or directly from the school. The third area is the parent's life context, which will enable or deter school involvement. In addition to a review of literature on the aforementioned areas of involvement, the authors move to detailed lists of actions that both the school and/or parent can take to strengthen parent involvement. This study emphasizes the school's role in motivating parental involvement.

There is considerable agreement on the importance of parents' roles in student success. Parents, regardless of their demographic, desire to be involved in their children's education. Jamie Rae Yoder and Amy Lopez (2013) and Hoover-Dempsey, Walker,

Sandler, et al. (2005) agree that schools have the ability to motivate and initiate parent involvement in student's education, but Yoder and Lopez are most concerned with examining intangible barriers to involvement like marginalization and Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, et al. focused on tangible barriers and constructs that promote involvement, like school initiated communication efforts and parents' access to economic resources.

Through my research, I examined motivations and deterrents to involvement in children's schooling for parents living in Hartford public housing. Like both of the studies previously mentioned, I constructed definitions and categories for variances in parental involvement based on the responses received from my informants. Like Yoder and Lopez, I assessed parents' desired levels of involvement. I have looked closely at Yoder and Lopez's recommendations for data collection. Instead of the sole focus group approach they employed to collect their interview data, I used a combination of group and individual interviews to capture the breadth and depth of responses to my research questions.

Hartford's north end is home to the groups identified by Yoder and Lopez as having significant barriers to involvement. Low-income residents, immigrants, and people of color are found in large numbers on the city's north end (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2010). My sample set does not reflect the racial diversity of the community members sampled in the Yoder and Lopez study. Because of the north end's racial and economic segregation, it was interesting to see that feelings of marginalization had the same impact on parents who had children in schools that were more socio-economically and racially balanced than the ones in Yoder and Lopez' study. Also, because of the state

of mandated integration initiatives many of the parents within the sample set have children in schools of choice. Yoder and Lopez make a broad claim that the act of school choice gives parents a sense of agency in their children's education and strengthen their involvement within schools. This study gives us additional insight on the implications of school choice as it relates to parent involvement in education. The study of north end Hartford parent's involvement in their children's schools adds depth to the initial study done by Yoder and Lopez. Because of vast demographic similarities, it will be interesting to see how these parents view their roles, barriers, and motivations for involvement.

It is important to note that I was most inspired to research school involvement for low-income parents of color through my study of Annette Lareau's work. I found Lareau's observations of black and white middle and working class families to be insightful. The conclusions she drew about how social class standing impacts child-rearing practices in *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life 2nd Edition* (2011) helped me to develop the conceptual framework for this project. Lareau says that race has less to do with parents' experiences with schooling involvement and more to do with their class positioning; this study demonstrates that it is far more complex. Another of Lareau's projects finds that there are certain forms of parental involvement that are seen as more/less desirable by the school (Lareau, 2000). While my findings were similar to hers in *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, this study goes a step farther by demonstrating how different types of schools invite or deny opportunities for parent involvement.

In sum, I am building upon this body of research by inviting low-income parents of color into the conversation about parent school involvement with a focus on their

perceptions of their role(s), motivations and barriers to fulfillment of that role, and how their children's schools respond to their definition of that role.

Methodology

To answer my research questions, I used qualitative methods. I also used several smaller quantitative data sets to provide contextual information for my analysis. Through snowball sampling, I conducted eleven interviews. Informants signed a consent form and were given a copy for their records. They were asked to answer a series of questions related to their definitions of and feelings toward involvement in their children's schooling. Four of the interviews were individual interviews with North Community¹ parents. I also conducted one group interview with seven people. One-on-one interviews lasted approximately an hour each. The larger group interview last nearly two hours. Six of the eleven informants are black, four are Latino, and one is Afro-Latino. I interviewed eight women and three men. All of the parents have children currently enrolled in elementary school (K-5). Seven of the eleven parents interviewed have children attending "schools of choice," or schools that have a formal selective application process. The other four parents have their children enrolled in a neighborhood elementary school. Of the four individual interviews conducted, one took place in my home and the other three took place via telephone. All four interviews were voice recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for content. The group interview was conducted in my home and video recorded, so I could attribute comments to the correct individuals. I used the same interview guide for all participants (Appendix A). Informants were assured that their identities would remain

¹ Pseudonym for Hartford public housing community

anonymous. While analyzing data, informants were identified only by their race, gender, and assigned number (Appendix B).

To analyze the data, I reviewed each interview and developed a coding scheme that categorized the responses. Since there were ~~only~~ eleven interviews, I went through each research question and coded responses by hand. For the first research question, *How do North Community parents perceive their role in their children's schooling?*, I coded using two groupings. The first grouping is Level of Involvement Importance with a rating system from one to three. One was 'crucial' and three is 'important'. The second grouping is Purpose of Involvement. Answers in this category portrayed involvement to be a means of guaranteeing social mobility, personal fulfillment, and a way to deter future negative behaviors. The second question, *What forms of involvement do they feel are most important?*, yielded a myriad of responses that I grouped into three categories; Choices, Chores, and Cheerleading. Choices are the informed decisions that parents made about schooling options. Chores represent the labors parents endure to keep their children on task academically, like communicating with teachers about academic progress or helping with homework. Lastly, Cheerleading is the broadest category and encompasses the actions parents take to support their children in school, like getting them to school on time and supporting them at school functions. For the third question, *What factors motivate them to be involved in their children's schooling and what are their impediments to school involvement?*, my sample set was small enough to list all the motivations and barriers for involvement that parents mentioned. I grouped those responses into two themes for each. Under the category of Motivations I had items listed under Hopes or Fears. Under the category of Barriers, I had items listed under Tangible,

like money or work schedules and Intangible, like marginalization and school rejection. After developing the coding scheme, I went back and logged the frequency of each response and did a cross analysis that linked responses to the types of schools the children attended (either Community or Choice). Families in the data set with multiple children sent all of their elementary school aged children to the same type of school, so there was no conflict.

Findings

Through my detailed categorization of interview responses, I found that North Community parents perceive their role in their children's schooling to be crucial to their children's future success. The parents also frequently referred to activities under the three categories of involvement, Choices, Chores, and Cheerleading, to be of the most value to them with an overwhelming emphasis on the category of Choice. Surprisingly, parents conveyed that there was a difference in the way their efforts for involvement were received based upon the type of school their children attend. The interview responses and anecdotes help to give a better understanding of the North Community parents' lived experiences.

Education the Escalator

Parents from the North Community perceive their involvement in their children's schooling to be the most direct path to social mobility. To this end, the parents view their role in school involvement to be of the utmost importance. All of the parents interviewed said that this role was a one or 'crucial'. Some expressed that the fulfillment of their

schooling involvement role is as important as any of the initiatives they could take to improve their family's socio-economic standing. For instance, one mother stated:

It's pretty much over and done for me. I'll probably never make the kind of money that I need to, but [he] can do it. He can go far. Who knows? Maybe one day, he'll be the one taking care of me. That's why I stay on him. That's why I push him to do good, so he can be successful, be comfortable, you know, have things. - LF4

The parents seemed to believe that their investment and involvement would lead their children up the social ladder and out of the pitfalls of poverty. Parents see their role not only as a way to promote a better quality of life, but also as a deterrent for negative choices. A mother says:

It's very important to show your kids that you are invested in them at such a young age, because it starts with school and expands to the extra stuff. It gives them the extra confidence to get involved with other positive things and to not stray. - BF5

A black father expressed the belief that if his son does well in school he will improve the quality of his life and counter some degree of negative stereotypes about black males.

I want [him] to have a better life than I have. If he is gonna live good, especially as a black man, he's gotta do good in school. - BM1

Helping their children to avoid the wrong path seemed to be just as important as assisting them with navigating the right one. Eight of the parents expressed a desire more involved, but experienced some form of barrier to the levels of involvement they desire. North Community parents have defined their roles in school involvement to be imperative to their children's success both inside the classroom and in the large world.

Choices, Chores, and Cheerleading

In order to fully understand the findings for this project, it is important to understand the ways in which North Community parents define school involvement. I started with

Joyce Epstein's Six Types of Involvement as a theoretical framework for this categorization (1997). Epstein lists parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community as her categorization for parent involvement. Through an analysis of the coded interview responses, I was able to pick out three clear themes amongst North Community parents. The parents expressed that the most important forms of involvement in schooling for them are what I have labeled as Choice, Chores, and Cheerleading.

The first theme, Choice, was the most frequently mentioned of the three. In this category parents listed the ability to choose the best schooling option for their children as an important form of involvement. It is important to note that seven of the eleven informants have children that attend schools of choice. These parents expressed that getting their children into a "good" school was one of the most important forms of involvement for them. A father reflects on his experience applying to a school of choice:

[I] went through that long ass application process. Followed up, the whole nine to get her in that school. I can't always make it to events and all that, but I know that she's gonna do good cause the teachers care there. – LM2

The findings suggest that parents' faith in the quality and effectiveness of their children's school also impacts how they construct their roles for involvement. A community school mother who expressed some level of distrust in the ability of her neighborhood school to address the academic needs of her son said:

I don't him sliding through the cracks. Those teachers know I don't play. I live right around the corner and will be up there fast, quick, and in a hurry if there is a problem. -BF5

Although there were varying levels of trust amongst the parents that didn't appear to have a direct correlation with the types of schools students attend, there did appear to be a

relationship between levels of trust and attitudes toward involvement. Less trust in the ability of the school to help their children succeed seemed to yield more involvement and more school trust seemed to yield less involvement from parents. Whether choosing the best school or choosing the school where they can best achieve their desired levels of involvement, New Community parents perceive the ability to choose to be the most important form of involvement.

The second and third themes, Chores and Cheerleading, seem to work hand in hand. New Community parents expressed that Chores came in a close second to the ability to choose. Chores are the tasks parents complete to keep their children on task academically. This form of involvement is helping with homework, communicating with teachers about course material, and reinforcing good study habits at home. Cheerleading is the form of involvement that parents are most well-versed at doing. Making sure kids get to school on time, making sure they have the materials they need, attending school events, and providing overall student support are under this category of involvement. A mother says:

I spend the most time on homework and extra fact fluency work. I communicate most with the teacher about what they're working on in the class, what's expected, so I can reinforce it at home. - BLF10

Although New Community parents said they put the most effort into these activities, they rated them to be of the least importance to them. This category was almost always mentioned in conjunction with Chores. For instance she goes on to state:

I work really hard to make sure the homework is done the way the teacher expects. I get them to bed on time, so they are well rested ... after breakfast, I check backpacks to make sure they have snack and pencils and stuff then we hustle to get to school on time. - BLF10

New Community parents view Choice to be the most important form of involvement and see Chores as the second most important form. Cheerleading is seen as the undergirding for Chores to provide overall support once the school has been chosen.

Location and Invitations

Lastly, the key finding from this study is that schools' opportunities for and attitudes about parent involvement vary according to the school setting. Parents who had children attending schools of choice expressed feelings of marginalization and rejection from schools when they offered their attempts at involvement. When speaking of her experiences at a Parent Teacher's Organization meeting, one choice school mother said, "It's like they don't even need me there." She described a crowded room with little opportunity for her to engage in discussion. Another choice parent complained about not making the cut to chaperone a class trip, "I had to beg to chaperone her field trip, because there were so many other parents that wanted to. The teacher said she would put me on the wait list for next [time]." The experiences of the few parents who had children in community schools differed greatly. One mother bragged of the close relationship she had with school personnel, "His teacher loves when I come to volunteer in the classroom. She calls on the parents to do all kinds of stuff." Another community school parent spoke of being guilt-tripped into attending more events:

The principal stood up at assembly and started to tell us about how *they say* we don't show up for our kids, but *they* are wrong. She was directing that at the wrong audience. We were in the building. She shoulda sent a letter home to the parents who weren't. - LF11

Conclusion

Throughout my research, I discovered that New Community parents see their role for involvement in their children's schooling to be a direct connection to upward mobility and a way to prevent them from making poor choices that will lead to a life of crime or impoverishment. They perceive their most important form of involvement to be choosing the best educational environment for their child. Once they've secured a school, they support their children's academic success through a variety of tasks that help them to build reading, writing, science, and math skills. They take seriously the task of supporting these activities with daily commitments to their children's preparedness, but they don't view that to be supplementary to choosing and academic rigor. Lastly, New Community parents' attempts at involvement are received differently based upon the school's culture. Community schools pressure parents to get involved, while schools of choice reject certain forms of involvement.

Recommendations

These findings could be helpful for those in the Greater Hartford area looking to bolster parent involvement in schooling. Moving forward, I would recommend further research around the subject of school involvement for low-income parents that is considerate of the nuances within this group along with the changing dynamics of the local educational landscape. With an attempt to increase levels of involvement for low-income parents in Hartford area schools, it is also important to examine potential impact on school communities where resources may be limited.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide*

1. Who makes educational decisions for your child?
2. What school do your children attend?
3. How did you decide on that school?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your child's school?
5. What do you feel are your most important forms of involvement in schooling?
6. What would you say are your motivations/barriers to school involvement?
7. Can you give me an example/story of when you were happy/unhappy with involvement in your child's school?
8. Tell me about the ways in which you are involved in your child's schooling?
9. How often do you participate in those forms of involvement?
10. Are you pleased with your level of involvement in your child's schooling?
11. How do you think your school involvement impacts your child's schooling?

*The number and order of questions used from this guide was contingent upon informants' responses.

Appendix B: Informants Profiles

	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Number of Children (K-5)	Community	Choice
1	Male	Black	1		X
2	Male	Latino	3		X
3	Male	Black	2	X	
4	Female	Latina	2		X
5	Female	Black	1	X	
6	Female	Black	3		X
7	Female	Latina	4		X
8	Female	Black	2		X
9	Female	Black	2		X
10	Female	Black/Latina	3	X	
11	Female	Latina	1	X	