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ABSTRACT

Few studies have observed what teachers actually do in the classroom to encourage parental involvement in their children’s education. Over the school year, the various teaching practices and strategies of two teachers in an inner-city elementary school that has had public recognition in its efforts to involve parents were gathered through interviews and observations. The five main teaching practices and strategies to engage parents are practicing parent outreach, establishing relationships with the parents, creating a positive classroom climate, teaching to involve parents, and making the community-school connection. This study offers insights into teachers’ classroom practices that are connected to various specific strategies to involve parents.

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Parents’ involvement in their children’s education has been suggested as a way of increasing school effectiveness worldwide. In the U.S.A., parental involvement improves children’s academic achievement (Epstein, 1991; Hill & Craft, 2003; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Stevenson & Baker, 1987) and reduces disruptive behaviors (Domina, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). In the United Kingdom, parental involvement at home and in school is among the factors thought to improve children’s affective and academic performance (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004; Reynolds, Muijs, & Treharne, 2003). Research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s searching for variables related to differences in parental involvement focused on deficiencies of parents (Edwards & Warin, 1999). Single parents are less likely to assist their children at home (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000) and at school (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000). Parents with low socioeconomic status (SES) are also less likely to assist their children with their studies at home (Domina, 2005; Lareau, 1987) and at school (Domina, 2005; Grolnick et al., 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Lareau, 1987). However, in the 21st century, influenced by Epstein’s research of the 1980s and 1990s, many studies in the U.S. (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Kim, 2009), U.K. (e.g., Edwards & Warin, 1999; Tett, 2001), and Canada (e.g., Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Li, 2003, 2006) have begun to critically examine previous work and to move the focus from deficiencies of parents to increasing parental involvement through school leadership.

Although parental characteristics may prevent parents from participating in their children’s education at home and at school, the practices of teachers and schools to involve these parents also influence their level of involvement (Barton, Drake, Perez, Louis, & George, 2004; Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, & Henrich, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987, 2005; Seitsinger, Felner, Brand, & Burns, 2008; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). In particular, parents’ perception of teachers’ specific invitations to become involved better predicts parents’ involvement behaviors than schools’ general invitations can (Walker et al., 2005). Parental participation in school, including participation by minority parents, increases when teachers demonstrate more receptive and supportive attitudes toward parental participation at school and actually reach out to parents to bring them into the school (Desimone et al., 2000; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Epstein, 1984, 1986; Kohl et al., 2000). Studies have also shown that parents are more involved at home when they perceive teachers’ efforts to reach out to them (Grolnick et al., 1997; Kohl et al., 2000; Watkins, 1997).

Although the importance of teachers’ leadership in initiating minority parental involvement has been studied, the characteristics of teachers who make such efforts have received little attention.

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While the most studied characteristics of teachers are their attitudes toward and perceptions of parents as well as the importance of parental involvement, the variance in their general teaching practices has been studied less frequently (Kim, 2009). Garcia (2004) stated that teachers who are efficacious in their parental involvement practices also perceive themselves as being efficacious in their teaching practices. What remains unknown are the kinds of general teaching practices that teachers who engage in specific parental involvement activities, such as sending notes home, asking for volunteers, holding conferences, or assigning homework, show in the classroom. It has been reported that teachers who try to involve parents in their children’s education use culturally relevant teaching materials in their instruction (Moosa, Karabenick, & Adams, 2001) and adopt more child-centered teaching approaches (Corter & Pelletier, 1995).

Because parental involvement in their children’s education is a product of the interrelationship between individual barriers and school barriers (Barton et al., 2004; Epstein, 1987; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2003; Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993; Peña, 2000), it is necessary to improve teachers’ practices as well as identify parental obstacles to involvement in their children’s education. However, it may be more effective to focus on improving teacher practices rather than on parental variables because schools have more resources than parents in terms of educated teachers, established in-service programs, and funding for programs (Moles, 1993). Improving school practices to encourage active parental participation may be less of a challenge than improving the demographic status of low-SES and single parents would be (Pryor, 2001).

A recent literature review on school improvement reported that, “Achieving parental involvement is one the most difficult areas of school improvement in economically disadvantaged areas” (Muijs et al., 2004, p. 164). One of the reasons for the difficulty may be related to the lack of pre- (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Graue & Brown, 2003) and in-service education (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002) for teachers on ways to initiate and practice parental involvement in the classroom. As a result, many teachers have reported a lack of relevant knowledge and have experienced uncertainty regarding ways to encourage parent involvement (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1991; Henderson, 1987; Krasnow, 1990; Lightfoot, 1978; Department of Education, 1994).

Therefore, research that documents a detailed account of successful teachers’ general teaching practices and specific strategies regarding how they develop connections with parents and encourage parental involvement can be beneficial for teachers who would like to replicate and adapt some of these teaching practices and strategies themselves. Teachers’ efforts to initiate and support parental involvement are even more critical in poor communities because disadvantaged parents are eager to receive help from their children’s educators (Moles, 1993) and view teachers as a vital source of information regarding what their children are learning at school (Moles, 1993).

This study explores how two teachers in an inner-city elementary school that has received public recognition for its educational efforts successfully involved African American parents in the academic efforts of their children. Special attention is given to the teachers’ general teaching practices that can be linked to their specific parental involvement strategies. Few studies have observed and explored what teachers actually do in the classroom to encourage parental involvement in their children’s education (Seitsinger et al., 2008). Most studies have used questionnaires to capture teachers’ relevant actions, whereas few studies have observed and interviewed teachers to learn about their parental involvement practices in the classroom.

Furthermore, minority parents’ reports of teachers’ parental involvement practices have not presented positive images of the teachers (e.g., DeMoss & Vaughn, 2000; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Tett, 2001). Therefore, this study capturing teachers’ efforts toward initiating parental involvement may contribute to the body of research on the relationship among teachers’ initiation of parent involvement practices, their general teaching practices, and subsequent parental involvement by adding descriptive data from a field study as well as presenting positive images of teachers. The Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992) may take effect when parents view teachers as contributing agents rather than insensitive authorities. With an expectation of positive results, more teachers may join in the effort to improve their practices to involve parents in their children’s education.

1. Definition of parental involvement and theoretical perspectives

There has been no consensus on a definition of parental involvement (Seitsinger et al., 2008), possibly because the definition depends on who is asked to provide it. It has been reported that parents and teachers have distinct views on the meaning of parental involvement. Teachers in high-performing Hispanic schools defined parental involvement as parents’ participation in formal school activities, such as school events, meetings, workshops, governance activities, and working as teachers’ aides, tutors, and school advocates. However, parents in the same study considered parental involvement to mean their participation in informal activities at home, such as checking homework assignments, reading to their children, listening to their children read, getting tutorial help, providing nurturance, instilling cultural values, talking with their children, and sending them to school fed, clean, and rested. Both teachers and parents may thus have limited views on what constitutes parental involvement (Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999).

Even though this study was performed from the perspective of teachers who appear to have a limited definition of parental involvement, this study used the definition of parental involvement conceptualized by Epstein (1995) to compensate the limited views. Epstein defined parental involvement as having six components: participating in parenting (Type 1); communicating with teachers and schools (Type 2); volunteering at school (Type 3); helping children learn at home (Type 4); participating in decision making at school (Type 5); and collaborating with the community (Type 6). In the same article, she proposed ways for teachers to help parents participate in each type of involvement. The effectiveness of each type of parental involvement has been supported by various studies that have connected it to students’ academic, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.

Epstein (1995) defined parents’ participation in parenting (Type 1) as their establishment of a home environment that supports their children as students. Teachers can help parents to establish this type of parental involvement by providing workshops on parenting and child rearing; organizing training for parents, such as GED preparation, opportunities for college credit, and family literacy training; assisting in locating family support programs that improve health and nutrition; and doing home visits. Researchers have reported that parents who are involved in this type of parental involvement have children with better gains on reading and math standardized tests (Norwood, Atkinson, Tellez, & Saldana, 1997) and fewer disruptive behaviors (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002) than children whose parents are not involved.

Communicating with teachers and schools (Type 2) can be defined as having effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and children’s
progress. Teachers can help parents to be involved in this way by providing conferences, phone calls, language interpreters, useful notices, memos, and newsletters on school policies, reforms, transitions, choice of schools, and available courses, programs, and activities within schools, as well as by sending home folders of students’ work weekly or monthly for parents’ comments. The parents of disadvantaged preschoolers who participated in at least six of eight parental involvement activities, most of which can be considered Type 2 involvement activities, had children who were less likely to be retained in special education programs up to Grade 8. In particular, parental attendance at preschool assemblies was associated with their disadvantaged children’s reading achievement in Grade 8 (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

Volunteering, the third type of parental involvement, can be defined as the parents’ help and support in the school. Teachers can encourage parents to participate in this type of parental involvement by sending home an annual postcard survey to identify available talents, times, and locations of volunteers; maintaining a dedicated space for families involved in volunteer work to share resources and hold meetings; and establishing classroom volunteer programs, parent patrols, classroom parents, and a telephone tree. Parental participation of this type in children’s early school years has been related to the children’s improved reading achievement one year later (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999) and academic achievement and reduced behavior problems four years later (Domina, 2005). Low- to middle-income African American parents’ participation in their children’s school activities was found to be positively related to their children’s improved reading achievement, better teacher ratings of their children’s academic behavior skills, better maternal ratings of their children’s emotional regulation, and more parental involvement at home (Hill & Craft, 2003).

The fourth type of parental involvement, learning at home, can be defined as parents helping students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. Teachers can help parents to become involved in this way by providing information on homework policies, skills required for students in all subjects at each grade level, how to monitor schoolwork at home, and how to assist students in improving skills on various school assessments; regular scheduling of homework that requires students to discuss with their families what they are learning in class; calendars with activities for parents and students to complete at home; summer learning packets; family math, science, and reading activities at school; and support for families to set goals for their children each year and plan for college or work. Parents’ engagement in homework has been reported to be related to children’s improved reading achievement (Epstein, 1991); increased positive attitude toward homework, personal competence, and self-regulation (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001); and reduced behavioral problems (Domina, 2005). Parents in Title I school who have participated workshops that provided packaged materials for home instruction as well as parenting classes have seen their children accomplish more gains in reading and math achievement (Shaver & Walls, 1998).

The fifth type of parental involvement, decision making, can be defined as parents’ involvement in decision making in school through becoming leaders and representatives. Teachers can help parents to become involved in this way by supporting parents’ involvement in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), advisory councils, and committees; by organizing independent advocacy groups to lobby for school reform and improvement; by supporting parents in becoming part of district-level councils and committees; by providing information on school or local elections for school representatives; and by developing a network to link all families with parent representatives. When parents become involved in these ways, their children seem to receive fewer detentions (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). The last type of parental involvement, collaborating with the community, can be defined as parents’ connection with the resources and services in the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. Teachers can help parents to become involved in this way by providing them with information on health fairs, cultural events, recreational events, social support networks, and summer programs that are available in the community; by integrating school partnerships with other service organizations and businesses; by organizing community service opportunities for students and families; and by encouraging alumni to participate in school programs for students and families. When elementary school teachers gave out information or referrals for health and social services needs for their students, the students perceived that their parents have higher academic and vocational aspirations for them and would provide more help with homework (Seitsinger et al., 2008). Inner-city children whose parents explicitly used community resources for their extracurricular and religious activities were high achievers (Gutman & Mcloyd, 2000). When community volunteers became more involved in schools, students engaged in fewer disruptive behaviors (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

Because various studies have reported the positive effects of each type of parental involvement proposed by Epstein’s model (1995) and teachers’ practices of supporting parental involvement can be successfully categorized according to the model (Seitsinger et al., 2008), this study used Epstein’s model as a theoretical framework to document teachers’ efforts to involve parents. In addition, Epstein’s model is considered to be comprehensive, so the use of this model can facilitate the identification of a broad range of teachers’ practices encouraging parental involvement. In this study, ‘parents’ refer to adults in a child’s home or community who provide significant care and education for the child.

2. Methods

Because there is a paucity of studies that have provided information on what teachers do to encourage parental involvement and how they do it (Seitsinger et al., 2008), and because the nature of qualitative studies provides a holistic view of the process (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in which teachers engage to support positive parental involvement, this study used qualitative study methods. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggested, “The openness of qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to approach the inherent complexity of social interaction” (p. 7). Qualitative research facilitates the documentation of the dynamic and complex nature of teachers’ efforts to engage parents in their children’s schooling. Specifically, this study focused on the various teaching practices and parental involvement strategies of two teachers who have interacted successfully with inner-city African American parents to encourage their involvement.

2.1. Site selection

This study was conducted at West Elementary School (the name of the school has been changed) in a major city in the Northeastern United States. At the time of the study, West served 536 African American children in pre-Kindergarten (ages 4 and 5) through Grade 5 (ages 10 and 11) with a predominantly African American staff. There may have been distinctions within the ethnic category of African American, but information on the specifics was not available. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, African Americans are treated as a single ethnic group. Even though West Elementary School is located in a poor inner-city neighborhood and is confronted daily with issues of poverty, drugs, and violence, the school has implemented a parental involvement program, employed
a parent liaison, hosted several community advocacy groups at the school, and collaborated with three local universities and colleges. Because of these efforts, West is known for welcoming parents, encouraging parental participation, and treating parents as partners in their children’s education. West’s efforts to involve parents have received extensive attention from local media, and it was also recognized by a national major cable news station for its parental involvement practices.

2.2. Selection of teacher participants

During the first week of school, the research focus of this study was introduced to the teachers at the first staff meeting of the school year. At the next staff meeting during the following week, the study details were shared with the teachers. Teachers who had taught at West for at least two years, had practiced parent outreach, and had been regular classroom teachers were recruited. In the subsequent week, five teachers volunteered to participate in the study.

During the same period, six parent volunteers, a parent liaison, and a supervising teacher were asked to suggest possible teacher candidates for participation in the study. The same teachers who volunteered were listed in their recommendations. Grade 1 teacher Ms. Hall and Grade 4 teacher Mr. Jake were selected as the participants. Both teachers were recommended by teachers and parents as conscientious and successful in their parental involvement practices. Hall has 24 years of teaching experiences, and Jake has 4 years of teaching experiences. By selecting these two teachers, one teaching a lower grade and the other teaching an upper elementary grade, with different genders and amounts of teaching experiences, this study sought to capture a wide range of classroom practices employed to involve parents in their children’s schooling.

2.3. Teacher background information

Betty Hall: “A parent knows her child.” Hall was born and received her education in the same city where West Elementary School is located. Hall is a tall, stately African American woman in her 40s who is a self-described “joker” and “down-to-earth person.” Hall is proud of her successful record with the parents at West and also at the elementary school where she taught previously. She has taught at West for 19 years. At the time of this study, for the first time in her teaching career, she was working with children in Grade 1. Hall lives in the city with her three children, two grandchildren, and a 73-year-old aunt. She has experienced challenges in fulfilling her role as a parent because her two children have had difficulties in school. Hall was therefore able to relate to the interests, difficulties, and hesitations that many parents demonstrate as they interact with the educational system on behalf of their children. Hall explained how her experience as a parent has helped her to respond to the demands and understand the behavior and interactions of parents:

That helps me to know exactly what to say to the parents. Because when I go to the school I expect certain things. If a parent comes in and says, “I see that on the homework she is doing such and such a thing, but she didn’t know what to do.” I know exactly what to answer to that, “Did she listen that day?” Because I [asked] my own children that at home when they were younger. I say, “Did you listen. You did not pay attention.” So it helps me to know how to deal with parents—put myself in their place. I put myself in people’s places anyway, you know (Interview #2, Nov. 14, p. 18).

She understood what the parents are experiencing, including their expectations of teachers, yet she conceded that:

I am from the old school. I believe that a child should do as [she] is told. An adult in the classroom tells [her] to do something, that’s what [she] should do (Interview #3, Feb. 11, p. 8).

William Jake: “Parents don’t realize what power they have.” Jake, a 45-year-old African American, was born in a nearby county and educated in its public school system until high school. Jake attended a college in a different state, where he majored in sociology. Jake began his second career as a teacher at West four years ago. Although Jake does not have children of his own, he acknowledged the following:

I feel like I am a parent. In fact just before this interview, I was talking with my pastor, and I was expressing a concern, and I was telling him I was dealing with it from a parental aspect... It is [the] parent in me (Interview #1, Oct. 8, p. 11).

Jake stated that his interest in parent involvement was grounded in his parents’ participation in his own education. He also substantiated his experiences and beliefs about the value of parental involvement with his knowledge of the literature on the subject. He referred to James Comer’s work:

I started taking some courses at a college, and I found out I had to do a research paper and I remembered some of the readings I had done. I had read a book by James Comer, and I think that, for some reason, Mr. Comer’s book has just been in the back of my mind, because every time I read literature, or our principal comes in with a new initiative, and I’ll stop and say, “That sounds like James Comer in his New Haven Project.”... I learn[ed] about Mr. Comer about two and a half years ago, maybe three years ago. So, it’s like everything that I read in Comer I see it going on here at West. And then when you came in talking about parent involvement, of course, then I had to go back to Comer again, because he talks about how parental involvement helps student achievement, and that’s our goal here—it’s for student achievement (Interview #1, Oct. 8, p. 10).

2.4. Data collection

Data were collected for 8 months, spanning the entire school year, to document the teachers’ consistent and diverse efforts to involve parents. Multiple methods were used to gather the data, including interviews with the teachers and the school principal, observations of the teachers’ and school’s practices, and an analysis of existing documents. The variety of data collection methods allowed this study not only to verify but also to enrich the stories of the teachers regarding their parental involvement practices.

2.4.1. Interviews

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted. “Interviewing can be a valuable way of gaining a description of actions and events” (Maxwell, 1994, p. 61). Open-ended interviews allowed the participants to reconstruct their experiences with parent outreach. The use of open-ended interviews also allowed researchers to understand how the participants interpreted their experiences (Seidman, 1991) and to ask follow-up questions to expand on or clarify responses.

Three 1-hour interviews were conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. Preliminary interview guides for the teachers were developed before each interview based on events and actions noted during classroom and school observations. The purpose of the first teacher interview was to collect information on each teacher’s background, teaching philosophy, beliefs about parental involvement, and some descriptions of parental involvement practices. The information from the first interview guided the second interview.
In the second interview, each teacher was asked to share details of his or her parent–teacher interactions. In the third interview, this study investigated how each teacher dealt with barriers, clarified uncertainties, and explored incomplete information. Each teacher was also asked to supply details about practices deemed relevant but not covered during the previous interviews.

The interviews were audio taped. The participants were encouraged to tell their own stories and provide explanations and details. Immediately after each interview, reflective memos on the researcher’s reactions, the participants’ behavior and actions, and parental involvement strategies were generated.

2.4.2. Observations
Observations of the participants’ interactions with the parents and children complemented the interviews by generating data that the participants may have forgotten to talk about (Patton, 1987) and by capturing actions and activities that might not have been discovered from interviews alone (Maxwell, 1994). After two months of daily and continuous school-wide observations during participant selection, seven classroom observations of each of the teacher participants were done over the next six months. The observations in each classroom consisted of either an entire morning session, from the beginning of school until lunch; an entire afternoon session, from lunch until dismissal; or an entire day.

This study describes the observed actions as much detail as possible, and then, if applicable, any analysis or first reaction to the possible meaning of the observation is noted in brackets. Sometimes, these initial conclusions were correct; at other times, they became better understood after having interacted with members of the school community over an extended period of time.

2.4.3. Documents
This study collected documents related to parental involvement activities at West as a secondary data source. The collected printed materials were as follows: (a) a survey conducted by the state Department of Education that investigated parents’ reactions to and opinions about the school climate at West; (b) reports by other researchers who studied the school’s reform efforts, including the parental involvement component; and (c) the official state policy handbook of elementary schools. These documents were not directly related to the teachers’ parental involvement practices, but they provided another glimpse into the contextual framework of the school.

2.4.4. Triangulation of the data
By gathering and cross-checking the data from the three sources, this study tried to limit possible bias within any one data source and any inconsistencies across sources. When inconsistencies were observed, they were discussed with the participants for clarification.

2.5. Data analysis
Two modes of data analysis were adopted to analyze the data from each teacher’s perspective within the school context. Categorical and contextual analysis limited the bias inherent in any one method of analysis and ensured a well-rounded account of the data (Maxwell, 1994) that were collected through observations, interviews, and examination of school documents. Reflective memos provided insight when analyzing the data.

2.5.1. Contextual analysis
Contextual data analysis (Maxwell, 1994) was done to better understand and effectively document the parental involvement practices of the two participating teachers. Through the contextual analysis, the school context, showing relationships to the classrooms, was analyzed, and teachers’ parent outreach practices within their classrooms were connected to the school context. The strategy used to code the information on the school context was similar to the strategy used to code the practices of each teacher which is explained in the next section. Four overarching categories emerged from the data set: school background, principal, the Parent Academy, and community connection.

2.5.2. Categorical analysis
During categorical analysis, this study developed coding schemes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify differences and connections between the two participants within the data. Preliminary codes that described how these teachers practiced parental involvement were identified using Epstein’s (1995) six types of parental involvement. This study kept the following concepts in mind when initiating the detailed data analysis: types of parent involvement activities, teaching practices promoting parental involvement, and strategies for developing parent–teacher relationships. Five categories of common patterns emerged from the data: teacher background information, teaching practices and parental involvement, community connections, recommendations for establishing involvement, and the Parent Academy. Each category was further defined to yield the final thematic framework. Within the category of teaching practices and parent involvement, which is the focus of this study, the following themes were identified: parent outreach, relationships with parents and children, positive classroom climate, teaching to involve parents, and the community–school connection. Within each theme, another layer of themes was identified. For example, parent outreach had the subthemes of notes, phone calls, conferences, home visits, and classroom events.

2.5.3. Reliability
An independent reviewer who is expert in the field was asked to review and code an interview transcript, a section of the observation notes, and one school document. The reviewer was provided with a guide of preliminary themes and was encouraged to identify other themes that the reviewer believed might be applicable to the study. Copies of transcripts from the researcher and the independent reviewer were compared for consistencies and inconsistencies in the identification of themes. Although the reviewer identified no additional themes, discussions of consistencies and inconsistencies until agreement was reached proved to be valuable for data analysis, reliability checks, and narrative development.

3. Results
3.1. School context
The data from the categories under contextual analysis — school background, principal, Parent Academy, and community connection — were not independent of one another. Therefore, the results are reported here as an integrated body. West Elementary School is located in an inner city. Many of the parents were West alumni. Few parents were new to the community. Principal Janet attested that the school is:

Surrounded by crime and drugs and families without fathers and poverty and welfare dependency… These children are in high crime zone, a high crack, cocaine zone (Interview #1, Nov. 16, p. 7).

Janet has been the principal at West for six years and makes concerted efforts to connect with the parents. During the
observation period, she talked individually with many parents and knew most by their first names. She has provided parents with support ranging from employment opportunities to financial assistance. The parents were working as custodial and cafeteria staff as well as teacher assistants. Janet commented:

A parent came in the other day. We have been having trouble with her two boys all of a sudden. Well, the reason why we have been having trouble with them all of a sudden, and these are excellent young men, or one is shaky, but the point is that she had started working...at the airport, and so the time that she works is the time that she really needs to be with them. And the social worker was saying, you know, you have to change your job, job hours, like that. So my solution to that is, “Let me hire her here, so she’ll have hands-on around this building with her children.” ... I visited her home a couple of times, and I noticed that she had some strengths... She’ll be here. She’ll see her children in action (Interview #1, Nov. 16, pp. 5–6).

West has established a climate that was welcoming to parents and children through posters and banners, and school—community connections invited parents into the building. Janet introduced a parental involvement program at West that she believes has proven beneficial. The Parent Academy, a program developed by an educator, Joseph Jones, originated in the same city where the school is located. West was the first site of the Parent Academy. Janet, her staff, and the students went on a door-to-door campaign to encourage parental involvement in the school and the Parent Academy.

Having successfully recruited and trained parents, Janet became a spokesperson for the Parent Academy. Recruits were expected to complete requirements in 18 categories: monitoring pupil attendance; monitoring safety; engaging in small-group instruction; tutoring one-on-one; telling stories; supervising classes; preparing art materials, bulletin boards, and exhibits; being cafeteria helpers; assuming chaperone duties; grading papers; constructing learning stations; filing instructional materials; listening to pupils read; supervising media center use; operating audiovisual equipment; sharing personal knowledge and expertise; and recruiting new volunteers. Volunteer parents were trained to perform each category of tasks. The parent liaison was in charge of recruiting and training parent volunteers for the Parent Academy.

The community connection that has become the center of life at West intended the following outcomes:

Continuing a strong rapport with parents; providing a school that is open to ideas and suggestions; [and] especially visualizing the school for the twenty-first century. The idea is that we are going to have the One-Stop-Shop—the health services, the social services, the dental [services] available on site here, so that we see the whole child. And I think another strength of the school is that we envision this not just as our school, but as the school belongs to the community. So we are the resource, they are the customers and we are here to satisfy the customers (Interview #1, Nov. 16, p. 12).

Several community groups used West as a facility. Children were always a part of these activities. On Saturday mornings, the Rights of Passage Group met at the school. Janet explained its purpose:

We are starting the Rights of Passage here for families—to bring families in on Saturday—in actuality they can go through this process of boys and girls learning how to become men and women. I guess you can make that analogy between that and when the Jewish population goes through Bar Mitzvah. We also have our Rights of Passage where we actually learn the traditions—the idea of respect for your elders, respect for yourself, responsibility. It is a series of activities that you go through. —I have seen several children go through the Rights of Passage and when they come out of it, it seems like they come out as men and women. They are more sure of themselves, so you wouldn’t expect them to go into like drugs or anything, because they realize they don’t need that to be whoever they want to be (Interview #1, Nov. 16, p. 12).

West Association, a community group, also met at the school to help with drug use prevention and to devise ways to protect the community, which invariably includes the school. This association was established in 1981, met every Thursday at 7:00 p.m., and was dedicated to encouraging young learners and their parents to become involved in the community and influence its future. Proceeds raised by the association went toward purchasing materials for West’s students. This group of community representatives was central to the effort to get community businesses to support the school’s activities. Businesses at a local mall provided incentives and support for West’s students.

Three local universities and colleges also worked with West to assist children academically. The school provided practicum or teaching experiences to pre-service teachers from a nearby college. West was also involved in a Big Sister/Big Brother program with another college. The parents were eager for their children to continue in this program because they believed that these early exposures would give their children firsthand experience of college and help to prepare them for their own college education. Some high school students have completed the Community Service component of their high school graduation requirements at West. They accompanied children to class, transferred audiovisual equipment from classroom to classroom, and took teachers’ requests for parents to complete teaching materials to be placed in the parent room.

3.2. Teachers’ teaching practices and parental involvement

In the course of the interviews and observations, the teachers described and demonstrated the roles they adopt and strategies they employ in educating children and encouraging parental involvement. The teachers have implemented various strategies to involve parents through the efforts of themselves, school administrators, and the parents. The five main strategies used to engage parents are practicing parent outreach, establishing a relationship with parents, creating a positive classroom climate, teaching to involve parents, and making the community—school connection.

3.2.1. Practicing outreach to parents

At the beginning of the school year, Hall invited parents to visit her classroom so that they could get to know her and understand her expectations as a teacher. She shared that for children in Grade 1, their parents are motivated to come to school to see who is teaching their “babies.” She also mentioned that meeting the teacher early in the school year can help the teacher and the parents to develop an understanding that might benefit the children.

The teachers often sent notes home to parents regarding their children. Hall wrote notes, bearing both positive and negative information, on the child’s notebook, which would be seen when the parent assisted with homework. In some of these notes, she asked the parents to visit the school. She commented:

It might be a note—‘I need to see you immediately,’ or ‘Your child’s behavior has been unsatisfactory. Please see me,’ put a little smiley face, thank you, and that’s it (Interview #1, Sep. 30, p. 15).
Jake, the Grade 4 teacher, also sent notes to parents to recognize children’s successes. Examples include, “All children in this class have been present for four straight days,” or “I am the student of the week.” He also asked the parents to send notes to him when they wanted to discuss aspects of their children’s schooling. Jake used telephone calls as well as notes for two-way communication. He shared that even though it is often is not easy for him and the parents to communicate with each other on the telephone, it is important for the parents to hear about their children’s academic efforts. Therefore, he tried to be conscientious in sharing such information with the parents and frequently left information for parents on their answering machines. The parents generally responded to the information about their children, even if they did not speak directly with Jake. Jake provided an example of a situation that he described as "phone tag":

We have [a] parent, we have been playing phone tag all of this quarter, but yet he sends notes. He explained why his child might be late, why his child was absent. I have never spoken to him, but he’s returned my calls. Just to let you know there may be parental involvement even though there may not be contact between the parent and the teacher (Interview #2, Nov. 14, p. 19).

Hall also used telephone calls, though not as often as she used notes. She explained:

I have called one student’s parent three times in one week, because his behavior had gotten terrible. But normally, I don’t call parents for behavior. I send out the mid-report about behavior and about how they’re doing academically, before it is time for report cards. If it is a special case I call them every day if I have to (Interview #3, Feb. 11, p. 3).

Midway through each quarter, the teachers sent home progress reports as a school-wide practice. The parents were then invited to visit the teachers to discuss how they might work together to help their children improve academically. On the progress reports, Jake invited parents to meet with him if their children needed additional academic assistance. The same effort was made when report cards were sent home. Hall related:

When we have a report card conference, a lot of parents do come in. And that’s when...if their child was doing a great job I let them know. If their child has a need for extra help, I let them know. If their child is really behind, like they really act like they really don’t know what’s going on, I mention that so they will be prepared. Cause sometimes you may have one or two [children] in a room who really don’t know what’s happening around them. You keep on working and working with them, you say “Something is not clicking here.” And I’ll suggest to [parents], “Talk to... someone, maybe the counselor, or maybe the social worker, because something is not clicking.” (Interview #1, Sep. 30, p. 10)

An additional outreach method that Hall used is a newsletter for children’s parents. Periodically, Hall sent home two pages of information that she identified as her class newsletter. In this newsletter, for example, she described the work that the children were completing in class, along with requests for the parents to assist their children with word recognition. She also explained how the children were behaving and then wrote specific information pertaining to each child in that child’s newsletter. The newsletter also listed children with upcoming birthdays; acknowledged children with perfect attendance; and outlined upcoming events, including class outings.

To Jake, home visits have helped his efforts to connect with parents and to show the children in his class that his interest in their education extends outside of the school. When parents were unwilling or unable to visit the school, he visited them in their homes. Jake noted that although he had not completed as many home visits as he would have liked, he had no qualms about having conferences with parents in their homes. He expressed that, generally, when he promises to visit a child’s home, the child expresses discomfort. However, he went to the home anyway to meet with the parents as planned. Jake used home visits primarily as:

A technique of management in the classroom. That has been my main objective, the reason why I would go to the home. That's only because I have a child in here sometimes that just is not able to conform to what's going on in the classroom, as far as behavior. And the amazing thing about it is that most of these children that have behavior problems can, are scholastic achievers. It is just trying to address their needs. So sometimes like going to the home, it may give me an idea of just why this child is acting out the way he is in the classroom (Interview #1, Oct. 8, p. 20). When you do a home visit, you probably find out more about a child than you can really imagine. I'm not really strong about home visiting but I think the reason for that is that sometimes we only tend to go visit the home when there is a problem with the child. I need to get in the habit of going to visit when the child has had a good day (Interview #2, Dec. 6, p. 12).

Jake stated that he had visited children’s homes on and off for four years. He commented that one thing that he had observed was how his visits to specific homes inadvertently affected other children:

You know when you go into the neighborhood the kids see you. And, you know, you'll be surprised at who lives next door to whom or who lives right across the street. So, you know, words get around—Mr. Jake visits the neighborhood. So, you know it's going to spark an interest. And I think not only sparking an interest...within the children, but even the parents saying that if this teacher is willing to come out to my home, then maybe, you know, maybe that parent is willing to share a little bit more information about what's going on, maybe about why there's a problem or maybe why their child is excelling, you know (Interview #3, Feb. 12, p. 11).

During the observations in Jake’s classroom, Jake met with many parents. When the parents came in, he told them about activities that were occurring within the classroom, and he discussed their children’s progress. Jake also spoke with parents whom he encountered in hallways at the school. These parents did not have children in his room, but he stated that such contact was important because if he did become their children’s teacher, he would already have developed a rapport with the parents. Jake also indicated that this early contact with parents and children showed the parents that he is:

Concerned about their child. So maybe sometimes when those children get here, [the parents] say, “Well, I’ve seen him in the hallway before, and I’ve seen how he treats children.” And I want them to come in and believe that their child is in a child-centered environment (Interview #2, Dec. 6, p. 12).

Jake asked for the children’s help to reach out their parents. As a result, the children usually told their parents about coming events or incidents that occurred in Jake’s classroom. He also encouraged the children to share good news with their parents. The parents sometimes visited the classroom because they did not understand their children’s explanations of what had occurred. Some parents felt obligated to attend school activities because of their children’s insistence. They would tell Jake, “My child told me to be sure to come.” Jake related that:
When the parents respond to those kinds of requests from their child[rren], it lets [children] know that something is going on at home in a positive manner to help [them] succeed” (Interview #1, Oct. 8, p. 12).

In addition, the teachers enlisted social workers in the school and fellow teachers to reach out to the parents. When Hall was unable to deliver a message to a parent because his or her phone had been disconnected, the social worker was able to reach him or her. Hall also worked with other teachers to connect with parents. Hall explained that the teachers collaborated on a Back-to-School Night activity to reach out to parents:

If [there is] a child in Ms. H’s room and a sister or brother is in my room, then when I see them go over there, I’ll say, “Ms. H, will you ask Ms. So and So to come over here when she comes to pick up such and such one, because I need to see her.” So that’s one way that I keep my eyes open (Interview #2, Nov. 14, p. 24).

In summary, the parents in the participants’ classrooms became involved in their children’s academic experiences by virtue of the teachers’ initiation of contact with the parents via classroom warming, conferences, notes, newsletters, telephone calls, and home visits and by employing the children, a social worker, and other teachers as messengers.

3.2.2. Establishing relationships with parents

Because of the outreach involving two-way communication, the teachers built positive relationships with the parents that fostered parental involvement. The two teacher participants also used other strategies to develop and maintain their relationships with parents. For Hall, the way to establish relationships with the parents was to understand, respect, and assist each other. Hall encouraged the parents to help in their children’s learning. For parents expressing help, Hall invited them into the classroom to see the exact process that she was using to teach a particular concept or skill. One occasion, a father brought his son to the classroom and stayed to listen to the Direct Instruction techniques. She explained:

He came in to observe. … And I had to stop and explain to him cause they don’t know what this program is so I stopped and explained to him what this lesson was doing. And he said, “I understand. I see you’re teaching them how to speak well.” He knew exactly what I was doing, picked it up (Interview #2, Nov. 14, p. 9).

Whereas Hall established relationships with parents by respecting parents’ teaching skills and training them, Jake established relationships by providing opportunities for the parents to be motivated to participate in their children’s education. Sometimes, when the parents visited the classroom, Jake asked them to interact with their child only. Jake provided the following example:

I had one parent come in one day, and he came in, he said, “How is my son doing?” I said, “His behavior…leaves a little to be desired. However, in our reading program he’s progressing very well.” I said, “In fact I would like for you to listen to him read.” And he did. And the parent said, “I had no idea he knew those words.” So his child is learning. And then I talked to the parent later, and he was telling me how he had taken his son to different outings, and how his son doesn’t come back and verbalize too much about the outings. But when you ask him about it he’s willing to verbalize, so sometimes it is just gaining that child’s interest-letting that child know that I am interested in what you are doing (Interview #1, Oct. 8, p. 6).

According to Jake, the father’s presence in the classroom may have had a positive effect on his son. The son, in turn, potentially had a powerful impact on this father, who now tries to develop his son’s academic capacity from home. Jake stated that it is necessary to provide parents with opportunities to see their children perform academically. This was one way for Jake to establish partnerships with parents in their children’s education.

To Hall, providing additional assistance to children was another way to establish cooperative relationships with their parents. Hall typically remained at the school until 5:00 p.m. to tutor children who needed additional academic support, and she asked parents to allow their children to stay. To Jake, providing occasional financial assistance to families was another way to establish relationships with parents by showing his concern for their children. Jake shared that for a particular field trip, some parents had sent notes to explain that although they wanted their children to go on the outing, they did not have the money to pay for the expenses. Occasionally, Jake and the school provided financial assistance so that the entire class could participate in outings.

In summary, these two teachers developed positive relationships with parents by respecting the parents’ knowledge and skills in helping their children’s learning, providing teaching demonstrations to show parents how to teach their children, creating opportunities for parents to be motivated to become active in their children’s education, and assisting parents beyond their duties by offering tutorial help after school and helping to finance educational outings.

3.2.3. Creating a positive classroom climate with child-centered approaches

The teachers commented that the parents responded to a welcoming school and classroom climate not only for them, but also for their children. Hall stated that her classroom is child centered. As a Grade 1 teacher and a mother of three children, Hall showed concern for children through her interactions with them. She noted:

[I am] mommy, teacher, lawyer, [and] doctor. Lawyer when they have a problem and we sit down and say, “Okay now what happened? Whose is this?” … Somebody gets a cut on [his] hand, “Ms. Hall?” So I’ll put some water on it, look at it, say, “Can you move your finger around? Yes, you’re all right, you’ll live.” [I am a]… teacher, doctor, nurse, problem-solver, that kind of thing (Interview #2, Nov. 14, p. 18).

Hall suggested that it is necessary for her to perform all of these roles to benefit the children because these functions are important to the children’s academic success and also because the parents expect her, as their children’s teacher, to provide all of the help that the children in her class need. She added:

If I had a little kindergartner or first grader, I would expect the teacher to make sure that [he is] safe, you know. And you make them safe by teaching them rules: Stay in your seats, sit the safe way (Interview #2, Nov. 14, p. 18).
Another way of establishing a positive classroom environment for Hall was to implement a child-centered instructional model that has consistency and hands-on learning. She provided experiences for the Grade 1 students to discover unknowns using their senses. She employed role play and role modeling to help the children attain academic success. She noted that her teaching is based on consistency:

I give them a consistent program each day. Everything that they learn is consistent. We recall every day. We review what we did the day before, and then we go on to the new skill. And this is consistent—every day. And this is what I have been doing for the past 24 years (Interview #1, Sep. 30, p. 4).

Jake also created a child-centered and safe learning environment that is democratically operational and nurturing to meet the needs of the learners by adopting a free speech policy and voting. The children elected class representatives who performed various roles, including recording the names of successful and disruptive children, distributing activity sheets, and monitoring children’s visits to the bathroom. He suggested that a safe learning environment is important for him to establish trust between himself and the children. He stated that this trust, which is essential in practicing effective parental involvement, will eventually develop between the teacher and the parents. Trust is gained by encouraging the children to feel ownership in the classroom. He explained:

One thing that works for teaching children that’s effective for them is just having a good classroom climate. When the children come in...it should be a classroom where [they] feel comfortable. And when I say comfortable, I mean they’re able to talk to the teacher, talk without fear...have freedom of speech. Freedom of speech means freedom of thoughts, where they can express their thoughts and be able to feel that their ideas or their thoughts are being acknowledged [and] respected. And let [the children] know that they are of value to you (Interview #1, Oct. 8, p. 3).

Along with a free speech and free thought policy for the children, Jake created a positive classroom environment by displaying materials reflective of the learners and their families. For example, one wall in his classroom was covered with pictures of what he termed Important African Americans. These were photographs of the children, their parents, and other family members. Jake’s care and concern for the children and their families conveyed an open-door policy to the families. As many as three parents were observed in his classroom at one time. He said:

We have an open door policy...you know my classroom door is open, the school door is open. And I can only speak in terms of West because that’s my only experience as a teacher in the education field, but parents can come up anytime. They are welcome to come and sit. They are welcome to come and participate. Even the principal lets us know that there is a lock on the door, but you don’t lock the parents out (Interview #1, Oct. 8, p. 13).

In summary, a positive and safe classroom environment that builds a relationship with the children and eventually with the parents was established because of the teachers’ care and concern for the children, the implementation of child-centered teaching methods that adopt consistent and democratic classroom policies, the use of teaching materials reflective of the learners and their families, and the creation of an open-door policy.

3.2.4. Teaching to involve parents

In reaching out to parents, the teachers tried to accommodate busy parents by providing guidance regarding how they could best assist their children at home. At the beginning of the first quarter, Jake gave the parents and the children:

an opportunity to take home [an assignment that received a low grade], work on it again, and bring it back until [the child earns] an E. Everybody starts out with an E...because he expects excellence of everyone (Interview #1, Oct. 8, p. 12).

Whether the child maintained that grade of E (Excellent) was dependent on the child and his or her parents. The parents were encouraged to work with the teacher and their children and to help the children to reach their highest academic potential. Hall, the Grade 1 teacher, asked the children to take their completed work papers home to ensure parental involvement. The parents were asked to sign the papers and return them to the teacher, who placed them in the children’s academic folders.

Jake assigned homework by asking the children to have conversations with their parents about specific work completed in the classroom, trips they had taken, or books they had read. He suggested that such discussions could help the children to express their ideas in writing, which is a component of the State School Performance Assessment Program. He commented that assigning work related to the material appearing on a test helps the parents to know what is going to be tested. One observed example was a homework assignment that required the children to discuss with an adult some techniques that the adult uses to remember multiplication facts. The children were eager to share the findings from their discussions with their parents. Jake believed that the parents could help their children to extend the skills that he was developing in the classroom. He explained:

With the homework assignments, I sometimes let parents know that their child might need to work a little bit harder in this subject. Maybe there are some things that you do at home where you could give them a real life [experience]. For instance, in mathematics, maybe adding up a few items off the grocery bill ticket, or trying to figure out a math problem, you know. You asked about the homework...You bought three cans of soup for a dollar, you know, how much would they cost for a can, you know something like that (Interview #1, Oct. 8, p. 17).

As another way of involving parents in their children’s learning, the two teacher participants stated that they encouraged the parents to teach not only at home but also in the classroom. Hall asked all parents to help in her classroom if they were comfortable performing any proposed activity. She encouraged the parents to assist in classroom teaching because she believes that each parent has a talent from which children can benefit. Hall shared:

I had one parent who went on a trip, and she knew all about the aquarium! And this parent is a parent who everybody used to say, “oh, You have Ms. So and So.” It was like she was nervous. But honey when we got her down to the aquarium, she knew all that stuff about the aquarium... You never, never know what a parent knows, you know. You never know what they come in with. So you know, you just have to give them a chance.... They do a lot of things on trips, in the classrooms with flash cards, games. One lady made up a game, just a board game that she had made up, and they played that game... You never know till you ask (Interview #1, Sep. 30, p. 14).

In addition, Hall tried to provide brief training sessions for any parents who showed an interest in assisting in the classroom. She believes that training parents to work with the children encourages the parental involvement process. Parents who know what is expected of them and know how to perform assigned activities are
more inclined to assist in the classroom and in children’s academic efforts at home. She explained:

I would make up little packets and [the parents] would take them home [to prepare]. And when [the parent] comes in this would be [his/her] group, and [he/she] just reads from this packet. Just review this—flash the card. They seem to like it. I wouldn’t just say, ‘Here take this group.’ I have seen people do that, ‘Here take this group and would you read them a story.’ I would even make sure they feel comfortable with reading first. Because I know I had a lady who was not comfortable with reading” (Interview #1, Sep. 30, p. 6).

Jake was also willing to involve parents in his classroom to assist the children. When parents visited Jake’s classroom, different from Hall, he preferred assigning roles to the parents that could motivate the children’s learning:

When the parents come in now basically what I’ll have them do, they may follow up on a lesson that I’ve just finished teaching. I may have them go around maybe just to look over a child’s shoulder to see if they are doing it the right way, and constantly remind them as I remind the children, to praise them for what they are doing right. You know let them know, say well, “You’re doing a good job!” or “You are doing an excellent job on that particular item.” I may ask the parent to do maybe something as simple as passing out papers, or maybe, just maybe talking to a child they might just need someone to talk to right then. You’ll be surprised at how comforting a child can be talking to [a] parent. It may not be their parent, but just being able to share sometimes with someone else other than the teacher is helpful (Interview #2, Dec. 6, p. 9).

In summary, two different kinds of teachers’ involvement practices were observed, namely, teaching to involve parents at home and inviting parents to teach in and outside of the classroom. The teachers supported the parents in extending classroom activities at home by asking them to sign completed classroom work, encouraging them to help review and redo their children’s unsatisfactory work, and assigning homework that the parents can contribute to. The teachers invited parent volunteers to contribute to their classroom instruction by doing needs assessments, providing materials prepared in advance, modeling instructional procedures, and assigning specific roles.

3.2.5. Connecting parents and school with the community

The teachers tried to connect the parents with the community directly and indirectly. As a way of gaining access to other parents, Hall used networks that she developed with the parents who visited her classroom. She asked the parents to contact other parents in the community to pass on information or to get permission for classroom activities. She reiterated that what the parents do and whom they know in the neighborhood benefit her outreach efforts.

The teachers stated that the community both within and outside the school has an impact on both their own and parents’ involvement efforts. Within the school community, Hall benefited from the expertise and assistance of parents associated with the Parent Academy, which provides supplies and academic assistance. A parent from the Parent Academy whose son was in Hall’s class at the time of the study chose to volunteer in Hall’s classroom. Hall shared:

You know one time I had a group, a very low group, and I would send about six of them, I would send that little group over there, and [the parent] would work with them with letter sounds, and that was before we did DI [Direct Instruction]. And they were starting to learn words. And it really helped because it broke my class down. So it really gave us a break in the afternoon when the parent would take them (Interview #1, Oct. 30, p. 12).

Help in the classrooms came not only from the community within the school but also from the community outside of the school. Hall spoke of business people and professors who visited her classroom and discussed the possibilities for social and academic advances that such exposure provides children. The parents appreciated the opportunities that provided the children with a glimpse of their future. Jake utilized community volunteers from nearby colleges. He asked a college student assigned to his classroom to listen to the children read and to help them develop confidence and proficiency in their reading skills. Hall also asked for help from local college students during the school year. She commented:

I had like six students from near college one time. And I thought, now what am I going to do with all these students? And I had some little stations that I had made up, and I gave each [student] a station, and I said, ‘Each of you take a child and help [him or her] work on the written part of [the assignment]’ (Interview #2, Nov. 14, p. 22).

Jake noted that the connection between the school and the surrounding community has helped his parental involvement efforts. When the school has a good reputation in the community, the parents are willing to come to the school. Jake shared his belief that West is the center of its community:

If you think about West, it’s a community school. It’s not just West Elementary School at 24 W. Avenue, but it covers, I’ll call it, the West community. And whether they live on B. Street, whether they live on N. Avenue, whether they live on C. Avenue, whatever street they live on, they’ll know they can come to West and they gonna be loved (Interview #1, Oct. 8, p. 13).

In summary, the teacher participants connected the parents with the community directly by asking them to reach out to other parents in the community and indirectly by utilizing an organization in the school, namely the Parent Academy. The teachers believed that bringing the surrounding community into their classrooms also indirectly helps them to reach out to parents.

4. Discussion

This study identifies the parental involvement practices of two teacher participants who have successfully engaged parents in their children’s education. In general, a school—community connection exists at West Elementary School. The school tries to meet the diverse needs of parents, including economic needs, and bring various community activities and organizations into the school. By committing itself to meeting the social, economic, and physical needs of parents, this school has set a foundation for successful parental involvement, which becomes more feasible for parents whose needs have been ameliorated (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

Within this model used by the school to meet the parents’ needs and bring community involvement into the school, the following themes of effective parental involvement practices emerged in each teacher’s story: reaching out to the parents, developing positive teacher—child—parent relationships, creating a positive classroom climate, teaching to involve the parents, and establishing community—school connections. These practices were intertwined throughout the teachers’ teaching and interactions with children and parents.

In terms of practicing outreach to the parents, this study showed that the teachers have tried various ways to establish two-way
communication with the parents, which has encouraged the parents to be participants in the Type 2 component of Epstein’s (1995) parental involvement model: communicating with teachers and schools. Conferences with the parents, notes sent to the parents using the children’s notebooks, monthly newsletters with personalized information, phone calls, and home visits were used by the teachers to communicate with the parents and to encourage their involvement.

Even though the teachers acknowledged the difficulties faced by two busy adults trying to contact each other, they believed in the efficacy of parental involvement. García (2004) reported that teachers’ family involvement practices of doing home visits, making phone calls, and sending calendars with home activities are indicators of the teachers’ belief in the efficacy of parental involvement. These practices to involve parents are congruent with the parents’ preferred methods of communication, including personal and informal contact with teachers through personal notes, conferences, home visits, and telephone calls rather than through such impersonal, large-scale contact as flyers and print materials (D’Angelo & Adler, 1991; Halsey, 2005; Lindle, 1989).

Teachers deliberately used the children as messengers to deliver their communication efforts to their parents. Even though the study by Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) was done with the parents of secondary school students, when the parents perceived that their children were frequently inviting them to be involved in their academic and social lives, they became more involved in their children’s educational activities at home. The children’s invitation to their parents to become more involved has been considered one of major factors in determining parents’ participation in their children’s education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

The teachers tried not only to reach out to the parents but also to develop relationships with the parents in an effort to encourage their participation in their children’s education. To develop positive relationships with parents, the teachers showed respect for the parents’ knowledge and skills, provided instructional demonstrations for parents who asked for this kind of help, encouraged parents to realize their role in promoting children’s social and academic development, provided after-school tutoring, and offered occasional monetary assistance for classroom outings. In these ways, the parents and the teachers came to respect each other. These teachers consider parents to be educators who can contribute valuable knowledge and skills to their children’s education. They did not view them merely as helpers who follow the teacher’s directions (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Tett, 2001).

They have also heard parents’ comments that teachers need to value the parents’ talent to establish meaningful teacher—parent relationships (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001).

The strategies that Jake used to increase parental involvement are similar to strategies that encourage positive parenting roles. Jake asked the parents of his students to be motivated and responsible entities in the education of their children, which is the Type 1 component of Epstein’s (1995) parental involvement model. Jake asked the parents to show an interest in their children’s schoolwork by having conversations with their children about specific topics and by allowing their children to interview them. In addition, Jake asked the parents who visited his classroom to assist their own children, and he encouraged volunteers to provide emotional support of the children’s efforts. By asking the parents to be supportive of their children’s education, Jake tried to instill good parenting skills in the parents. This approach is particularly desirable because parenting, a type of parental involvement, has been found to be the most predictive factor in reducing children’s disruptive behaviors in elementary and secondary school (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

The teachers in this study employed a developmentally appropriate philosophy (Cottle & Bredekamp, 1997) reflected by their adoption of a role as caring teachers, the display of culturally relevant instructional materials in the classroom, the development of learner-centered approaches indicated by their consistent and democratic teaching procedures, and the adoption of a family-centered open-door policy. Researchers have reported that parents respond positively to teachers’ efforts regarding parental involvement when the teachers adopted a teacher-as-parent role by focusing on a caring attitude (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001); a developmentally appropriate philosophy (Swick & McKnight, 1989); culturally relevant teaching materials (Moosa et al., 2001); and child-centered teaching styles (Corter & Pelletier, 1995). These positive classroom climates may provide parents and children with security, identity, responsibility, dignity, and community (Gareau & Sawatzky, 1995). Thus, parents may respond to a welcoming classroom climate and increase their parental involvement (Checkley, 1998; Davies, 1993; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Erickson, 1987; Rasmussen, 1998). Parents’ input may be maximized when parents feel comfortable communicating with teachers, which may be the result of or be supported by a positive classroom environment that is child and family centered.

The teachers also encouraged parental involvement by implementing teaching strategies designed to encourage parents’ participation in the Type 4 component of Epstein’s (1995) parental involvement model: helping children learn at home. The teachers expected parents to assist their children with instructional activities at home, primarily homework assignments. Domina (2005) questioned whether parents’ checking of and helping with homework can improve children’s academic achievement because these kinds of parental involvement behaviors during children’s elementary school years negatively predicted academic achievement four years later. Lareau (1996) also argued whether parents, especially minority parents, have knowledge and skills to teach their children, even in the early school years.

However, African American parents with less education believe that they can effectively teach their children at home (Watkins, 1997), and all parents, including low-income and less educated parents, assume that monitoring their children’s homework is their responsibility (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Researchers have reported that when teachers frequently invited disadvantaged parents to participate in their children’s homework or the learning of subject matter, the parents believed that they should help (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Epstein, 1986). Epstein (1986) reported that over 85% of parents in predominantly African American classrooms responded to teachers’ invitations to become involved in their children’s education by spending 15 min or more helping their children with their homework. Children whose teachers tried hard to involve parents in learning activities at home showed gains in reading achievement in the spring compared to the previous fall (Epstein, 1991). Other researchers have concluded that parents’ engagement in their children’s homework, as well as parental instruction, are related to children’s positive attitudes toward homework, increased personal competence, and better self-regulation that may improve student achievement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). In addition, parental checking of and helping with homework reduces children’s behavioral problems (Domina, 2005).

The teachers in this study seemed willing to use parents as teachers in their classroom instruction. These teachers knew that volunteers can contribute to classroom learning by helping students to develop such academic skills as paying attention, staying on task, and asking for help. Thus, the teachers encouraged parents to be involved in volunteering at school, which is the Type 3 component of Epstein’s (1995) parental involvement model. They recruited volunteers through needs assessments and for field trips.
into the community. These behaviors are indicative of the teachers' strong belief in the efficacy of involving parents to increase their children's opportunities for educational success (Garcia, 2004). Children whose parents volunteered outside of the classroom during their children's elementary school years had improved academic performance and reduced behavior problems four years later. These positive effects were more substantial for disadvantaged children than for affluent children (Domina, 2005). Therefore, it is good for teachers to have as many parent volunteers as possible both within and outside of their classrooms.

The teachers used various means available to them to reach out to parents. For example, they tried to establish positive relationships with certain parents to assist the children of other parents. In this way, the teachers asked the parents from the Parent Academy to be involved at the highest level of Epstein's (1995) parental involvement model, Type 6, or collaborating with the community. The teachers asked various help from the parent volunteers at the Parent Academy. By utilizing this parent-based organization, the teachers were supporting the Parent Academy and were indirectly encouraging parental involvement in the parent organization, which is part of the Type 5 component: decision making. By using such community resources as visitors from the community as well as college and high school students, teachers recognized that the school is connected to and is a product of the larger community. When schools tried to bring more community volunteers into children's lives, the children engaged in less disruptive behaviors (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

Analyzed by Epstein's (1995) parental involvement model, the teachers in this study, in line with other studies (Scribner et al., 1999), focused extensively on the parents' roles of communicating, volunteering, and learning at home to support their children's education. Different from Scribner et al.'s study, however, was the finding that the teachers in this study acknowledged parenting and connecting to the community as elements of parental involvement.

The teachers' parental involvement practices described in this small-scale qualitative study were reported in a recent large-scale longitudinal study by Seitsinger et al. (2008). They categorized three-dimensional structures underlying the strategies that the teachers in their study used to involve parents. The teachers contacted the parents to give (a) information about student performance and problems, (b) information and activities to increase parental involvement at home and school, and (c) information and referrals for health and social services needs. Under the second dimension of giving information and activities to increase parent involvement mainly at home were the teachers' practices of (a) giving information on the programs and requirements in the grade levels that they teach, (b) offering suggestions to parents on how to help their children with their schoolwork, (c) providing homework to do with students, (d) giving information on talking to students about the importance of school, and (e) using parents as school resources or volunteers. When the teachers at the elementary school level practiced more of the second-dimension activities than the first- or third-dimension activities, the parents reported that the teachers often requested their participation and frequently sent general information to them (Seitsinger et al., 2008).

The teachers in this study showed all of the behaviors belonging to the second dimension, so one could assume that the teachers' practices to encourage parental involvement in this study are representative of parents' positive endorsement of them. In addition to the description of what the teachers did to involve parents, this study also provided detailed accounts of how teachers have shaped their teaching practices to effectively employ strategies to involve parents. This study showed that in order to effectively involve parents in their children's education, teachers need to develop a positive classroom environment by showing a caring attitude, establishing child-centered teaching methods, and adopting teaching materials reflective of learners and their families.

Even though Epstein's (1995) theoretical framework regarding what teachers can do to facilitate parental involvement is comprehensive, it has a limitation. The model focuses mostly on specific strategies (e.g., sending memos, providing homework, having conferences, etc.) that may or may not be directly related to the quality of teachers' general teaching practices (e.g., creating democratic classroom rules, displaying learner-oriented teaching, including family resources in subject teaching, etc.). It is not clear how the teachers' frequency of or tendency to use family involvement strategies is related to their broad teaching practices in classrooms. Are the parents more involved because the teachers are merely displaying specific strategies for parental involvement? It makes more sense that teachers who advocate child-centered practices try to involve parents in their children's education and implement more parental involvement strategies (Corter & Pelletier, 1995; Garcia, 2004; Moosa et al., 2001). Parents may become more involved not only because of teachers' specific strategies but also because of teachers' communication of their general classroom teaching practices that are delivered by these specific strategies.

A more comprehensive model to understand parental involvement related to teachers' efforts must include teachers' broad teaching practices. This longitudinal qualitative study can offer insights into teachers' wide-ranging teaching practices that are connected to specific strategies to involve parents in their children's education. However, the generalization of the findings may be limited by the small scale of this study. In addition, validation of the teachers' efforts to involve the parents would have been greater if the study had collected responses from the parents about the teachers' practices. In spite of these limitations, the facts that parents recommended the teachers because of their positive reputations and their active parental involvement practices and teachers were interviewed and observed for a long period substantiate the findings.

5. Implications for the field of education

Many teachers are not prepared to plan for and practice parent outreach (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Graue & Brown, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Hopefully teachers, particularly new teachers, who have limited experience regarding ways to encourage parental involvement will refer to the practices described in this study as guiding examples of how teachers may reach out to parents and encourage their involvement. Abdul-Adil and Farmer (2006) suggested three strategies for a parental involvement program to reach inner-city African American parents: outreach, empowerment, and indigenous resources.

This study suggested that to reach out to parents, teachers may consider sending personal notes and classroom newsletters; making telephone calls and doing home visits; and using children and other parents as messengers. To empower parents, teachers need to value the parents' way of teaching the subject matter, invite parents into the school, model their methods of teaching for the parents, utilize the parents as volunteers in the classroom, and create opportunities for the parents to be motivated to participate in their children's education. To utilize indigenous resources, teachers may call upon social workers, parents, other teachers, and community resources. The parental involvement practices offered in this study can be easily transferred to a model parental involvement program; thus, it can be said that the teachers in this study effectively used these practices to encourage parental participation in their children's education.

This study looks forward to not only that new teachers adopt these practices to reach out to parents but also that teacher training...
institutions offering classes on parental involvement refer to these practices and strategies to educate their pre- and in-service teachers. Teacher training institutions have provided limited leadership in expanding teachers’ parental involvement practices and reducing the low levels of success in parental involvement efforts experienced by many schools (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Swap, 1993). These institutions need to provide more training opportunities regarding ways to involve parents in the classroom and the benefits of doing so. The strategies that teacher training institutions can teach include adopting informal and personal means of communication with parents, supporting the teacher-as-parent role, considering parents as educators, implementing learner-oriented teaching practices, applying teaching strategies to involve parents through homework, encouraging parents to show positive parenting roles, involving parent volunteers in classroom activities and events, and using community resources.

The effectiveness of these practices and strategies has been gauged by several teacher training programs that have coached teachers to use them. Pre-service and in-service programs that encourage teachers to view parents as resources and educators (Grinberg & Goldfarb, 1998); that plan opportunities for teachers to be involved in parenting education programs (Bermudez & Padron, 1987); and that enhance teachers’ behaviors encouraging parent involvement, such as offering conferences, asking parents to help their children with their homework, and sharing information on children’s classroom learning with parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002), can bring about a change in teachers’ perceptions of parent efficacy and can result in more frequent parental involvement.

Teachers’ use of various strategies can empower their parental involvement efforts because the more frequently teachers reach out to parents, the greater is the possibility that teachers will perceive parents as capable collaborators (Michael, Arnold, Magliocco, & Miller, 1992). In addition, teachers will gain a more positive attitude toward parental involvement, more frequent parent—teacher conferences and weekly meetings with parents, higher parental attendance at conferences, more parents who are satisfied with the teachers’ practices, and more students who perceive that parents and teachers have high expectations for their academic performance (Seisniger et al., 2008). In these ways, teachers’ strategies to involve parents at home and at school may be related to the parents’ active involvement in their children’s education and in the improvement of their academic performance.

References


