



African American Parents' Educational Involvement in Urban Schools: Contextualized Strategies for Student Success in Adolescence

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Research on parental educational involvement has been organized into three overarching domains—home-based involvement, school-based involvement, and academic socialization. Conventional empirical work in these domains typically centers involvement strategies around White, middle-class experiences rather than examining how optimal parenting approaches vary by race and context. Even fewer studies have explored the manifestations of involvement across these categories in underresourced urban educational settings. In response, the current study draws on the voices of African American parents and their children attending urban public schools to describe the distinct approaches to home-based involvement, school-based involvement, and academic socialization that parents use to ensure a quality education for their children. Findings demonstrate how African American parents engage in racially infused and contextually tailored navigational involvement approaches as they seek to offset the effects of inhibiting educational contexts. Results add ecological nuance and new typologies to how parental involvement in education is conceptualized across the settings.

Keywords: Black education; focus group interviews; identity; in-depth interviewing; parents and families; qualitative research; race; social context; urban education

Politicians and media pundits often blame African American parents in underresourced settings for their children's educational challenges, frequently associating racial disparities in academic outcomes with a lack of parental educational involvement (Hentoff, 2011; Norman, 2014). Yet empirical research offers a different narrative: studies have found comparable levels of involvement across races after accounting for socioeconomic advantages (Hill et al., 2004; Hill & Wang, 2015), and researchers who specifically study African American families have documented distinct involvement strategies that are overlooked by metrics centered on White, middle-class settings (Cooper, 2009; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Fields-Smith, 2006; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Pattillo, 2013). Racial socialization scholarship has also corroborated the role of context in understanding involvement given that African American parents use racialized parenting strategies to promote positive development and resilience in the face of interpersonal and structural racism (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Hughes et al., 2006; Huguley et al., 2019; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

The current study aims to add similar precision to extant typologies of parental educational involvement by attending to the context-specific motivations and actions of African American parents in underresourced urban schools, which here can be understood as schools in large, densely populated metropolitan areas serving economically disadvantaged students despite limited institutional resources (Milner, 2012a). Building on parental involvement and racial socialization literatures, we provide synthesized descriptions of multidimensional involvement approaches within educational settings where parents perceive both institutional strengths and substantial structural limitations. We first theoretically frame ecological dynamics that have informed African American parents' socio-historical involvement niche. We then describe three traditional conceptualizations of educational involvement domains, followed by ways that racialized parenting practices can inform a contextually

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tailored involvement typology. Finally, we present our methods and findings and conclude with implications for research and practice.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks scaffold our understanding of parental involvement in the context of urban schools serving predominantly low-income African American families. First, García Coll and colleagues' (1996) integrative developmental model accounted for families of color's ecologically distinct experiences with racialized social factors, such as economic subordination, social exclusion, and interpersonal racism. These converging forces cause African American students to be over-represented in *inhibiting* educational contexts, including under-resourced schools with concentrated economic disadvantage and special learning needs, higher rates of exclusionary discipline, and limited access to rigorous coursework (Diamond & Huguley, 2011; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2009; McKown, 2013; Milner, 2012b). The integrative model and related scholarship suggest that in response to these environments, African American parental involvement actions and/or motivations may differ substantially from those in majority White, middle-class settings, where many extant involvement frameworks have been operationalized (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2003; Sanders, 1997).

A second informing framework is *racial socialization*, which posits that families of color in the United States engage in racially explicit socialization techniques designed to counter the developmental consequences of racially subordinated social and economic statuses (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Hughes et al., 2006; Stevenson, 1994). Over 80% of African American parents use racial socialization, with two modes being especially prominent: *cultural socialization*—promoting knowledge of positive racial histories and feelings of racial pride—and *bias socialization*—teaching awareness and coping strategies related to racial discrimination experiences (Hughes et al., 2006; Huguley et al., 2019). Studies in educational contexts specifically have noted that discrimination experiences are common in schools (Allen, 2012; Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2017; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Wang & Huguley, 2012) and that in response, African American parents use racialized educational messages to promote resistance, resilience, and overall achievement in the face of these encounters (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Carter Andrews, 2012; Scott et al., 2019; Yosso, 2005). Considered in tandem, racial socialization and the integrative developmental model elucidate both how and why families of color in inhibiting environments work to mitigate the psychological and material costs of racial subordination on their children's educational prospects.

Parental Educational Involvement and African American Families

Parenting researchers have conceptualized educational involvement as a multidimensional construct that includes direct involvement with children's academic activities as well as indirect efforts to cultivate attitudes and behaviors conducive to

academic success (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jaynes, 2005; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Wang et al., 2014). Hill and Tyson (2009) synthesized the parental involvement literature into three categories that account for both direct and indirect approaches: (a) *Home-based involvement* captures parents' direct participation in educational activities at home, such as homework help and providing academic enrichment (Patall et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2004); (b) *school-based involvement* relates to parents' interactions with their children's school settings, such as attending parent-teacher conferences and volunteering in schools (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997); and (c) *academic socialization* refers to parents' developmental strategies designed to cultivate psychosocial traits related to educational performance, such as high aspirations and academic resilience (Choi et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014). Unlike other psychosocial parental tasks that may influence academic achievement (e.g., caregiver-youth closeness, social monitoring, religious involvement; for a review, see American Psychological Association, 2008), academic socialization refers to tasks that deal explicitly with education- and achievement-related themes. Large-scale studies of home- and school-based involvement have found associations with higher achievement in elementary school, but these strategies wane in both usage and effect starting in the middle school years (Wang et al., 2014). At this point (i.e., the start of adolescence), academic socialization generally begins to be more effective in supporting achievement outcomes (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jaynes, 2007; Wang et al., 2014).

Despite the utility of these involvement categories, studies within them are limited by two key factors: (a) a tendency to centralize the norms and motivations of White, middle-class educational contexts and (b) an overemphasis on class-based differences without in-depth discussions of socio-historical antecedents to race-class confluences (Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2003). As a result, conventional frameworks have failed to account for how involvement might look different across socio-historical contexts (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Cooper, 2007; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2019; McKenna & Millen, 2013; Reynolds, 2010). For example, studies of school-based involvement often assume that parental actions and motives are expected to be in support of the school (e.g., joining the PTO, attending parent-teacher conferences), a notion that ultimately holds families accountable to the demands of the school rather than conceptualizing them as change agents within school spaces (Barton et al., 2004; Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Yet, studies of African American families' educational experiences have documented how these parents often must engage in adversarial, reform-based involvement in order to address issues of racial inequities or school quality (Auerbach, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; McKenna & Millen, 2013).

Research on home-based involvement and academic socialization suffers from an analogous lack of contextual nuance despite documentation of both (a) racial differences in the effects of home-based involvement and academic socialization activities (Cheng & Starks, 2002; Davis-Kean, 2005; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Wang et al., 2014) and (b) ecological variation in the nature of these activities, such as the teaching of coping strategies in

African American families specifically in response to school-based discrimination (Allen, 2012; Reynolds, 2010; Scott et al., 2019). Considered together, these compelling yet wide-ranging findings on race and parental involvement suggest the need for involvement conceptualizations that are more attentive to contextual specificity, and especially for formulations developed outside of White, middle-class settings.

The Current Study

Participants and Data Collection

The current study examines educational involvement approaches that African American families use in underresourced urban schools. Parents and their children were recruited from six Title 1 public middle schools serving Grades 6 through 8 in a mid-sized urban district in the northeastern United States. These schools were on average majority African American (64%) and economically disadvantaged (78%), with high proportions of students eligible for special education (22%). The district itself faces significant economic challenges, including one of the nation's largest state-level education spending gaps between more and less affluent communities (Brenchley, 2015).

Given our aim of capturing best practices in parental involvement, principals at participating schools helped to purposively recruit parents based on a combination of both visible school-based engagements (e.g., attending school events, communication with school personnel) and/or staff's knowledge of parental involvement at home (e.g., performance accountability, homework and activity support; Patton, 1990). Youth participants were recruited from enrolled parents, and the final sample included 28 parents and 26 of their middle school children. Parents in the sample were predominantly women and represented wide ranges of educational levels and family structures (Table 1). Youth participants were balanced by gender and grade level. Specific income and net worth data were not collected because of known skepticism of academic research in the local African American community. Data were primarily collected using focus groups, which can be uniquely advantageous when studying the institutional experiences of people of color, and have an advantage over individual interviews in producing deeper insights into consensus (Hughes & DuMont, 1993; Hyde, 2000; Kvale, 1996). Focus groups were scheduled at times and locations according to the availability of participants. We conducted six student and six parent groups at the corresponding school sites and one additional parent group at a neighborhood library. Another five parents and two students could not attend the focus groups and were interviewed individually.

The research team was racially diverse. The three leading researchers identified as Black, multiracial, and Asian, respectively, and the larger team also contained White, Black, Latinx, and Asian members. The age of the team ranged from mid-20s to late 30s. We matched the race of the interviewer and participants whenever possible; 15 out of 20 interviews were conducted by Black team members, with another five conducted by a multiracial interviewer. The semistructured interview protocols were designed

to broadly capture participants' experiences with parenting around issues of race and involvement with their children's education. Protocols were sequenced to ask first about the less sensitive topics of general parenting styles and parent-child shared activities. Parent focus groups and interviews lasted between 48 minutes and 2 hours. Youth focus groups were slightly shorter—from 27 minutes to 1 hour in length—because they tended to be more succinct in their responses than their parents.

Data Analysis

We started the analytic process using a set of broad-ranging themes derived from our review of racial socialization and educational involvement literatures (e.g., racial socialization, educational involvement, parenting styles). These themes were used to examine relevant segments of transcripts for the presence of nuanced, inductively derived subthemes (e.g., parents' specific school-based activities, parental monitoring, household rules and structures, spirituality) that emerged from our respondents in patterns (Boeije, 2010; Boyatzis, 1998). This initial process yielded two overlapping but nonidentical lists of nine descriptive codes for parents and students. From there, an iterative coding process generated lower-level subcodes that were inductively drawn from respondents' narratives (e.g., home-based compensatory involvement, navigational support). New codes were then compared back with existing conventional involvement theories to examine how these new themes informed current conceptualizations. Throughout the process, the coders met regularly to complete consensus exercises and to allow for progressive focusing as new themes emerged.

Findings were deemed to be reasonably consistent across participants according to the following criteria: (a) for focus-group generated themes, there were indications of agreement both among participants within the group (e.g., documented physical cues, affirming phrases, supportive follow-up comments) as well as corroborating evidence from at least two other focus groups; (b) for individual interviews—where consensus or agreement cannot be readily determined—a theme needed to be represented in at least three additional interviews or focus group sessions. We sought to validate all themes emerging in either parent or student groups with evidence from the other set of respondents. Throughout the analysis, we note whether themes were consistent in one or both respondent groups.

Results

Participants in this study shared specific approaches to engaging their children's education in underresourced urban contexts. In addition to advocating for school- and system-level changes in ways that have been well documented in prior research, these families used nuanced collaborative strategies at school and compensatory academic supports at home in efforts to mitigate the inhibiting educational environments their children faced. In the process, parents also proactively and responsively addressed racialized aspects of their children's schooling experiences.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participating Parents and Youths

Characteristic	Parents		Youths	
	(N = 28)	%	(N = 26)	%
Gender				
Male	3	10.7	13	50
Female	25	89.3	13	50
Grade level of focal youth				
6th	5	17.9	5	19.2
7th	11	39.3	10	38.4
8th	7	25.0	11	42.3
(missing)	5	17.9	0	0
Caretaker(s)' relation to youth				
Biological parent(s)	27	96.4	18	69.2
Biological grandparent	1	3.6	2	7.7
Biological parent + stepparent	n/a	n/a	3	11.5
Biological parent + biological grandparent	n/a	n/a	3	11.5
Race				
Black or African American	25	89.3	19	73.1
Multiracial	3	10.7	6	23.1
(missing)	0	0	1	3.8
Education level				
High school diploma/GED or less	3	10.7		
Some college but no bachelor's	11	21.4		
Bachelor's degree	7	25.0		
Postsecondary degree	6	17.9		
(missing)	1	3.6		
Marital status				
Never married	5	17.9		
Married or domestic partnership	12	42.9		
Divorced	3	10.7		
Separated	4	14.3		
(missing)	4	14.3		
Employment status				
Employed full-time	17	60.7		
Employed part-time	3	10.7		
Self-employed	1	3.6		
Out of work/looking	1	3.6		
Retired	1	3.6		
Unable to work	1	3.6		
(missing)	4	14.3		

School-Based Navigational Support

In speaking with parents and students, we heard many examples of strategies that validated existing conceptualizations related to reform-based involvement—activities in response to what parents perceived to be systemic school quality and/or racial equity issues (Allen, 2012; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Reynolds, 2010). In these data, reform-based activities (Table 2) included confronting school officials on issues of rigor and curricular representation, challenging disciplinary actions that were perceived to be racist, and in one case even petitioning the federal department of education regarding district-level racial inequalities that were believed to be intentionally “set up that way.”

Yet in contrast to these more adversarial methods, other respondents employed more collaborative notions of school-based parental involvement (e.g., attending school events, volunteering) that have typically been attributed to the supportive approaches of parents in middle-class settings (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Noguera, 2001; Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020). In this setting, however, these parents engaged collaboratively with their children's schools for similar reasons as reformers: to address or mitigate the schools' shortcomings. Renee,¹ a single mother and parent volunteer whose daughter attended Maybray Middle School, noted how challenges in previous schools originally motivated her involvement strategies:

Table 2
Comparing Conventional Educational Involvement Operationalizations and Involvement Specific to African American Families in Underresourced Urban Schools

Educational Involvement Type	Traditional Conceptualizations and Activities	Urban School Involvement in African American Families (Inclusive of Traditional Approaches)
School-based involvement	Supportive involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending student performances (athletics, arts) • PTA meetings • Open houses • Volunteering in classrooms • Proactive communications between parents and school personnel • Volunteering in parent-led events (bake sales, donation drives, etc.) 	Navigational support involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactively build relationships with teachers and leaders • Work with principals and school staff on programs and improvement efforts • Take up formal roles in the school • Leverage involvement for close monitoring of children • Leverage relationships to resolve social challenges • Identify and direct youth toward promising opportunities • <i>Embedded navigators</i> • Intensive volunteering and involvement for navigational support purposes Reform-based involvement (Diamond & Gomez, 2004) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reactively advocate in respond to acute problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Unfair discipline incidents ◦ Racialized experiences in the classroom ◦ Poor instruction from individual teachers • Challenge systemic issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Challenging systemic lack of rigor ◦ Challenging perceived system-wide lower expectations ◦ Challenging teachers and schools on racial representation in curriculum ◦ Petitioning larger governing bodies about access and racial justice issues
Home-based involvement	Supplementary and enrichment involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework help and monitoring • Providing structures for school-work completion (time, quiet place) • Providing intellectually stimulating resources and activities (books in the home, educational toys and games, academic resources to get ahead) • Taking children to events and places related to academic learning academic success (i.e., museums, libraries, vacations to historical locations, etc.) 	Compensatory home-based involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online academic curricula for self-teaching and rigor • Workbooks and hard-copy academic resources to assure topical coverage • Steering children toward out-of-school academic programs • <i>Racialized compensatory home-based involvement</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Race-focused intellectually stimulating books, movies, documentaries ◦ Same-race cultural programs with explicit racial content ◦ Same-race spiritual communities ◦ Taking children to events and places related to racial histories of positivity and resilience (Black history museums, cultural events, etc.)
Academic socialization	Socializing involvement around educational values, expectations, and behaviors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultivating high aspirations • Connecting academics to professional work • Linking schoolwork to current news and events • Discussing learning strategies • Strategies for navigating the school system (talking to teachers, selecting classes, etc.) 	Cultural academic socialization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement as a native educational value • Highlighting academic high achievers in history from the same race group • Positive racial history as academic motivation and empowerment Racial bias academic socialization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversations and materials on positive and resilient racial histories in the face of challenges • Strategies for responding to educational discrimination • Encouragement in the face of educational discrimination • Framing high achievement as way to overcome systemic oppression

For me, it was, actually, poor experiences at previous institutions that sort of motivated me...when my kids moved on to elementary school in another school district, there were a few things that happened along the way that, um, sort of left a bad impression of the school system, you know, for my family. But there were also opportunities to sort of be involved.

She went on to note how more robust involvement opportunities at Maybray facilitated her agenda for school changes:

Once we moved out of that district and came here, the [involvement] opportunity presented itself. I had sort of a list of

things that, you know, that I wanted to see changed within the school and... the structure was there to be able to do that.

Roxanne, another parent volunteer, concurred and described a similar trajectory in transitioning her son to Maybray, in particular noting initial concerns with school climate: "We were trying adjust to him coming to this school because he had left one school and so, um, just because [Maybray], I thought was a little bit too much," meaning that aspects of the climate at the school did not seem conducive to learning. Roxanne similarly described how her collaborative presence helped mitigate challenges: "I'm here. I get to talk to the teacher. I get to talk to the principal. I

get to talk to the social worker. It works out for me because I'm already on-hand." Roxanne believed that her supportive involvement at the school impacted her daughter's achievement "tremendously" and said her most important advice to other parents was to

stay involved with your school. See what's going on with your child. See what's going on in the school. If you don't like how things are, you can volunteer to change some things. Get a relationship with the principals, and the teachers, and do something.

Renee similarly described how she believed her collaborative involvement was a key to success at Maybray, noting that as a volunteer,

You definitely are going to learn to *navigate* the school system. . . . You're also going to need to find allies—I still have their fourth grade science teacher. I can take them and drop them off in her room after school, and she will reinforce the things that I'm trying to teach them at home.

Renee further suggested that new parents should "get a friend real fast" and saw this ally building within the school as integral to navigating the experience (for an in-depth treatment of how these data support parental cultivation conceptualizations more broadly, see Delale-O'Connor et al., 2019).

The value of proactively building supportive relationships with school staff was echoed by parents in other groups, particularly for the benefit of gaining access to monitoring their own children. Sharonne, a parent at Raymond Middle School, described communication with teachers for the purposes of monitoring her son and his friends: "I communicate here with all the teachers. They have my number; if they're cuttin' up, you call me. I will be right here to make sure that what needs to be done is done." Another parent in her group indicated agreement with her approach, and this relationship building for monitoring purposes was common among families. Alice, a parent at Johnson Middle School, described how her relationship with the principal there helped ease her daughter Nia's "nightmare" of a transition to Johnson—where Nia was teased and saw a fight in school for the first time. Alice noted that because of her relationship with the very responsive principal, she could "just call [the principal] or email her and let her know the situation and she deals with it."

These monitoring motivations were also corroborated by multiple students. Jamie, a student at Rivers Middle School, noted—with a tone of annoyance—how her mother had built such relationships:

Like my mom has this bond with [principal] or [teacher] . . . they just be texting. My mom could be at work and my mom will start randomly texting [teacher] while we're in class. That irks my soul. Why are you texting people, like?

At Diggs Middle School, Marcus commented on how his father came by regularly to check on him and speak with school staff:

They'll come check on you if they ain't got work or nothing. Check in your class. See if you're doing what you're supposed to be doing. . . . I remember I was going to the bathroom at [school], and my dad just showed up and I was like, "What are you doing here?" And he was like, "Coming to check on you and talk to your teacher."

Parents also described getting involved supportively on school- and district-facilitated committees that were specifically designed to address systemic problems facing families of color, such as the district's Inclusive Achievement (IA) committee. A Diggs parent, Lanae, noted, "I'm going to those IA meetings, meeting with the school board . . . to advocate for all the kids in the whole district and tell them about the things that I wanna see, a change in the district." Takitha at Meridian spoke similarly on her commitment to change for the benefit of all students:

It frustrates me with this piece when it comes to our children. So, I was like, well what am I supposed to do? . . . How do I change it? So then, opportunities came up, like joining the Inclusive Achievement committee. You know, change, getting on the public policy, getting more involved into the policy related part of parenting.

Informed by both our participants' own language as well as scholarship that distinguishes between navigational and resistant responses to structural racism (Seider et al., 2016; Yosso, 2005), we came to consider these parents as *navigational supporters*. They were conscious of both the assets and limitations within their children's underresourced school settings and responded with strategic relationship building and institutional support in exchange for monitoring access and influence over school-wide improvements that would benefit all students. In fact, we came to call Renee and Roxanne's more intensive levels of involvement *embedded navigation*, whereby they took formal roles in the school community for as much as 80 hours a month in order to enhance their monitoring and school-improvement capacities. Overall, the school-based involvement described by these African American families in underresourced urban settings demonstrated complexity that has not been well captured in traditional involvement conceptualizations derived from White, middle-class settings.

Compensatory Home-Based Involvement

Although parents in our study also endorsed traditional home-based involvement activities, such as monitoring homework or providing academic enrichment, a distinguishing quality for parents in this context was a motivation to make up for shortcomings they observed in their children's formal schooling. Lanae, a mother with a son at Diggs Middle School, expressed as much:

At no point can you leave your child's destiny in one individual, in a [school] that is extremely overpopulated. [other parents express agreement] The average class size—there should be two or three more [teachers] in the classroom with them. . . . The little pieces that they do get, cool. . . . I want my son to know more than that, so I got him a workbook for each grade of his life and

he did that workbook on the weekends, and those are the things that we do in our downtime.

Lanae's group nodded and verbally affirmed her comment. Courtney, a parent at Raymond Middle School, similarly described how she and other parents created a method of randomly quizzing their children to motivate their independent learning in response to inadequate rigor in school:

We had a situation where our kids...they was makin' high honor roll. [Courtney's friend] would question them on things they knew and...they didn't know the ending junctions of words, so...She was saying how her child was graduating with high honors, but she asked him, "How you spell 'English,' Alvin?" And he didn't know. So I went home to my kids, and I start doin' it, because mines was making high honor roll, and they didn't know it either....Now it's like I question them often. Just randomly ask them things to see if they know them just because of that. So, I'm that type. Every time they turn around, I'm askin' this and that.

The other participants in Courtney's group agreed with her perspective, and they collectively lamented experiences with poor teaching quality and inadequate rigor.

This compensatory approach to home-based involvement was especially evident in response to a perceived lack of culturally representative teachings within the school curriculum. Takitha at Meridian Middle School noted that she exposed her children to African American books, out-of-school programs, and stories of accomplished people in their history to make up for what she thought was intentionally omitted content:

[African Americans have] done things that [Whites] want to hide, and I don't want you to hide that from my child. I want him or her to be proud that they are an Afro-American, because there are things that we contribute....And, unfortunately, it seems like our school, especially the public schools, they don't, they don't push that.

Others in the group seconded Takitha's sentiments and described their own methods of home-based compensatory provisions around racial history. Carl described his combination of using books and documentaries with his daughter, noting, "I think that's important. I think that more parents need to do that, because the public school system is not going to do it for them."

These approaches were validated by the student group at Meridian, who also affirmed the value they found in their parents' efforts to provide what the school curriculum lacked:

Louise: It actually helps you learn about history a little bit more [at home] because sometimes school doesn't like to teach you about that stuff.

Ramona: No. Sometimes schools are like, "Let's learn about history, let's learn about great leaders: George Washington, da da da." We're like, "What about Martin Luther King?" [The teachers respond with] "We'll wait 'til Black History Month."

Across groups, we came to understand that in contrast to the enrichment-motivated involvement documented in more privileged communities, many parents here engaged in *compensatory*

home-based involvement (Table 2), stirred by urgent needs to mitigate insufficient rigor, instructional quality, or curricular representation.

Academic Racial Socialization

For families in our study, the traditional academic socialization aims of instilling education-related beliefs and values were infused with cultural socialization and racial bias socialization as tools for motivation and resilience. These strategies were utilized, respectively, for their own inherent value and in response to racialized educational experiences.

Cultural academic socialization. Parents commonly described engaging in socializing activities at home that were designed to simultaneously promote positive racial identities and academic motivation. As Geneva, a mother at Raymond Middle School, described:

What I did with mine is I went and bought *Roots*. And we had uhh, a week or two of watchin'...it was just somethin' they should have knowledge of and have a little more understanding. Why it's important to do a lot of things, and why we push you on your reading and your education....Like I explain to them how, we are today and where we once were, our ancestors once were.

Each member of Geneva's group validated and echoed her response, and this use of film was common across the groups. Other parents described engaging in conversations about positive racial history, a standard technique in the cultural socialization literature. Shantel, a mother of two boys at Rivers Middle School, described the importance of both films and conversations in promoting high professional aspirations, which were seen across groups as closely linked with academic success:

We have a lot of conversations, like, I embrace a movie *12 Years a Slave*, *Roots*, all of that....It's empowering to me to see what was done to us and who we still became. You know, that's encouraging to me. And, and to go beyond that to know that our ancestors in Africa were kings and queens, and so, all of that, to me, is a part of what makes me me...you know, look at us. We're doctors, you know, we're lawyers, we're doing wonderful things so that, that just—it inspires me...I tell my children, that's the greatness that's in you.

Most student groups also validated the academic cultural socialization activities shared by parents. At Meridian, Louise described her father's taking them to the 20th anniversary of the Million Man March and watching African American history documentaries in order to "show me that being Black means that I can do so many other things instead of just what people think you can do." Ramona concurred, describing how her mother made her watch *Selma* and other movies about "powerful Black people." In nearly all focus groups, parents described using conversations, films, and cultural activities related to Black history as tools to promote academic achievement. It should be noted that activities used for cultural academic socialization sometimes dovetailed with those of racialized compensatory home-based involvement.

Yet their motivations were distinct: In this case, the aim was not to address deficiencies in school curricular content but rather to leverage cultural knowledge and belonging to increase overall valuation of high achievement and academic resilience.

Racial bias academic socialization. We also heard from parents specifically about the need to help their children cope with both overt and implicit racial discrimination that could adversely affect their academic success. These experiences ranged from a father helping his daughter cope with overhearing a teacher say “My bad kids are Black kids” to parents supporting children in managing more insidious forces. One mother described a bias her daughter experienced in this way:

My daughter when she was in elementary school, she was treated so horribly and labeled as a bully and everything because of her personality. Her personality is that—she’s a strong personality...those same traits of her leadership, strong character, sense of confidence would be characterized because she’s a brown child in class as being aggressive, being bossy, lots of negative connotations to those very same traits that could be looked as positive on children who are not brown.

Parents often responded to these types of experiences in ways that can be characterized as *racial bias academic socialization*, where traditional academic socialization around educational values and beliefs were infused with racialized resilience strategies. Nina at Meridian Middle School described how her family passed down beliefs in education as a tool to specifically disrupt racial oppression:

My grandmother always had this saying, what was it, from Ghandi that said you gotta be the change. She was a firm believer in that, you know. They were all in the civil rights movement in the South. My family’s from the South. So, education was always key. It was always education, education, education if you want to change your life or your community.

She went on to include the importance of intergenerational family legacies as important to combat negative stereotypes:

I think along with that too, is also not just...our common African American history, you know, where we came from, how we got here, that sort of thing. But also like your family legacy, your family history...whatever history a child may have needs to be highlighted....You should be proud of that.

The rest of Nina’s group concurred, and Carl followed up regarding intellectual stereotypes:

You have to kind of put that in their head that, they’re not just this. You know, I can be more. I can be an astronaut, I can be a doctor, I can be an engineer. You know, because there’s a history of my people doing these things, not just what I’m seeing on TV.

Students also validated their parents’ bias socialization efforts. Tyreek, a student at Raymond, discussed how his mother uses humor to help him manage behavioral biases he encounters from staff at school:

Yeah, me and my mom, we joke sometimes about it. Like, “No, you Black, you can’t be doing that.”...We talking like how Kevin Hart would do. Just be joking around, laughing how crazy it’d be. Sometimes you just need to laugh just to not be able to be stressed out about how things go.

In this case and others, parents let children know that they might not be given the benefit of the doubt behaviorally and tried to provide coping skills for managing experiences with intellectual and behavioral discrimination. Overall, the African American parents in our interviews frequently invoked traditional aims of academic socialization but infused their efforts with racialized content designed to inspire and to build resilience in the face of discrimination and stereotyping in school and broader society.

Discussion

Traditional conceptualizations of parental educational involvement tend to be normed around White, middle-class settings, a limitation that overlooks and undervalues contextual variation in how parents support their children’s education. In response, the current study explored how involvement at school, at home, and in the academic socialization process manifested distinctly among African American families in underresourced urban middle schools. Results demonstrated that despite having similar academic goals for their children as their counterparts in more privileged settings, these African American parents’ activities and motivations necessarily differed as a function of their children’s structurally and interpersonally inhibiting learning environments. Such variation holds important implications for parental involvement research and practice across contexts.

School-Based Involvement

Our findings on school-based involvement illustrated how along with reform-based strategies, African American parents in these underresourced urban schools utilized navigational and supportive approaches that provided them with both monitoring access and opportunities to engage in school- or district-wide improvement. Although some of these activities may appear similar to those of White parent networks in suburban school settings, our respondents tended to lack the competitive and opportunity hoarding interests that have often been observed in those environments (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Tilly, 1999). In contrast, African American parents here sought to maximize their children’s limited opportunities not in competition with other families but in ways that often involved advocating for systemic change that would benefit their broader community. These collaborative approaches echo what scholars have observed regarding the navigational capacities and critical consciousness responses that communities of color have intergenerationally refined in response to systemic oppression (Seider et al., 2016; Yosso, 2005). In the current case, parents benefited from being in schools and a district that, despite being underresourced, provided opportunities for both local school involvement to support their own children and system-level involvement to promote equity across all students. As such, findings here may demonstrate mutually beneficial pathways for parent-educator

collaborations in districts facing material constraints. Future research should aim to capture and assess the potential effectiveness of these navigational support approaches both in tandem with and independent of the reform-based strategies that cooccur in these educational settings.

Home-Based Involvement

Our findings on home-based involvement also suggest that in contrast to competitive advantage motivations that have been observed in more privileged environments (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Tilly, 1999), many African American parents in these underresourced contexts found such activities to be essential to ensuring an even minimally adequate education for their children. Findings here validate extant scholarship on how parents of color use home and family supports and nondominant forms of social and cultural capital to compensate for racialized structural inequities (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2019; Yosso, 2005), and future conceptualizations of home-based involvement must consider these approaches as potentially essential for parents of youth in schools with insufficient rigor or instructional quality. Moreover, these parents' supplemental provisions of cultural heritage content further validate the need for schools to assure the inclusivity of their academic and programmatic curricula.

Academic Socialization

Findings on academic socialization add much needed nuance to conceptualizations of these activities across contexts. While families here endorsed traditional academic socialization aims (e.g., high aspirations and academic confidence), they infused their activities with racialized content to increase aspirations and confidence outright and to build resilience in the face of behavioral and intellectual biases. Given recent meta-analytic results showing that both cultural and bias socialization have overall positive associations with academic outcomes (Wang et al., 2019), findings here validate the role racialized content plays in academic socialization in terms of both supporting cultural and familial knowledge for their inherent value (Hughes et al., 2006; Yosso, 2005) and also for building racial resilience in the face of school-based discrimination (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Scott et al., 2019; Stevenson, 2014). Future research should also aim to delineate the effects of specific racialized academic socialization practices and should do so across urban and suburban contexts given that racialized phenomena are well documented in both settings (Lewis-McCoy, 2014; O'Connor et al., 2011; Reynolds, 2010). Parents and educators may also be well served to explore therapeutic and school-based programs that directly teach effective responses to stress associated with racial discrimination (Anderson et al., 2019; Stevenson, 2014).


Finally, the findings from this qualitative study have several important limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample used here is limited to families within one school district who were purposively identified with the help of school leaders and staff. Although this sampling approach fit the goals of this study, it limited our ability to hear from parents who

may be actively involved in ways that are invisible to school personnel. It is also possible that school leaders were less inclined to recommend more reform-based parents for fear of negative portrayals. Future inquiries should vary sampling approaches to explore these issues among populations that are harder to reach. Furthermore, it was beyond the scope of this study to make any systematic assessment of the effectiveness of the involvement approaches that were surfaced here. Future large-scale analyses should seek to develop instrumentation that can estimate the usage and effectiveness of these techniques across contexts.

Conclusion

Traditional conceptualizations of parental educational involvement have paid only limited attention to contextual variation. The current study reaffirms the call for such work by illustrating how conventional domains of involvement have distinct manifestations among African American parents in underresourced urban schools. The findings here not only present important understandings for this ecology specifically but also point to the potential for new typologies that, if developed in future studies, could help the field more precisely capture best practices across settings. Moreover, the racialized nature of many of these involvement strategies corroborate the long-standing call for schools to vigorously examine racism and exclusion within their settings and curricula. Ultimately, our results further demonstrate how inattention to context can bias our notions of best practices, particularly given that divergent socio-historical legacies may dictate a spectrum of optimal approaches to supporting academic success.

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