# Obstacles to Parental Involvement in Children's Education:

# New Teachers' Perceptions and Strategies

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## Abstract

*This study explored new teachers' perceptions of, and strategies for overcoming the obstacles to parental involvement in children's education. 30 elementary school teachers with 1 to 5 years' teaching experience were interviewed. Data were first coded through the grounded theory approach and then analyzed by case and cross case. As found out, obstacles to parental involvement were related to parents' lack of cognitive readiness, affective preparedness, and physical resources. Strategies new teachers employed to overcome their perceived obstacles included cognitively informing, persistently outreaching, psychologically disarming or comforting, and consciously attending to parents' individual differences, needs, or personal preferences. Lessons learned from this study will inform both in-service teachers' efforts to engage parents for optimal student learning outcomes and teacher educators' endeavors to prepare prospective teachers for more effective teacher-parent communication.*

## 1. Introduction

Parental involvement in children's education benefits students and educators. However, parental involvement in today's society has been complicated by factors such as family socio-economic status, cultural differences, and racial-ethnic backgrounds, especially among low-income, non-traditional groups (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). Lack of parental support and involvement is considered one of five major concerns that cause almost half of new US teachers to quit within the first five years of their career (Lambert, 2006). While there exists a large body of literature on parental involvement, few efforts have particularly looked into new teachers' experiences of involving parents in their child's education. To better prepare new teachers and increase their retention, it is important that we understand factors that prevent parents from participating in their child's education and uncover effective strategies that encourage and enhance parental involvement. With this thought in mind, we conducted the present study with a focus on exploring new teachers' perceptions of, and strategies for overcoming obstacles to parental involvement in children's education.

### 1.1 Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in children's education overall consists of two major dimensions. One dimension is generally focused on parents' efforts to participate in their child's education. In this sense, parental

involvement basically refers to parents' and family members' use and investment of resources in their children's schooling (Education Encyclopedia, 2021). These investments can be in the form of observable activity and participation at home and school, with the intention of improving student achievement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). At home, parents can have conversations about school, listen to children read or read with children, and supervise homework. At school, parents can volunteer in the classroom, attend parent education workshops, attend school plays and sporting events, or attend parent-teacher conferences. In addition to these conventional activities and participation, these investments can also be demonstrated in parents' and family members' commitment to emotional support, including "such things as encouraging the student, being sympathetic, reassuring, and understanding" (Vandergrift & Greene, 1992, p.57).

The other dimension of parental involvement has to do with the endeavor of schools and teachers (hereafter referred to as educators). In this sense, parental involvement refers to the types of efforts educators devote to reach out and involve parents in their student's education. This dimension of parental involvement is very well conceptualized in the work of Epstein (1995, 2001). In her nominal framework of parental involvement, Epstein listed sample practices or activities that educators can implement to foster six types of involvement, including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. By parenting, Epstein suggests that to support children as students, educators can help all families establish home environments through parent education courses or training for parents, family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services, and home visits at transition points to pre-school, elementary, middle, and high school. For communicating, Epstein posits that educators can design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress. In the area of volunteering, Epstein believes that educators can recruit parents and organize them in school and classroom volunteer programs to help and support teachers, administrators, students, and other parents. For learning at home, educators can provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. By decision making, educators can include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives. Finally, in the field of collaborating with community, educators can identity and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. Ultimately, all the shareholders of education – the students, the educators, the parents themselves, the community, and other children in the family as well – are expected to benefit from parental involvement (LaBahn, 1995).

## 1.2 Benefits of Parental Involvement

While there are authors who suggest that the effects of parental involvement on student achievement are overrated (Robinson & Harris, 2014), most researchers have agreed that parental involvement is of critical importance for the academic and social success of all students regardless of age (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). On one hand, parental involvement can have a positive impact on student's academic work at all grade levels. According to Epstein (2001), parents who are informed of and involved in their children's school activities can positively impact their children's attitude toward and performance for academic learning. Dixon (1992) revealed that "parental involvement, in almost any form, produces measurable gains in student achievement" (p. 16). When schools encourage children to practice reading at

home with parents, the children make significant gains in reading achievement compared to those who only practice at school (Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982). On the other hand, parental involvement contributed to students' social success. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) found that parents' active involvement in their child's education contributes to "improved parent-teacher relationships, teacher morale and school climate; improved school attendance, attitudes, behavior, and mental health of children; and, increased parental confidence, satisfaction and interest in their own education" (p.37). Epstein (2001) also suggested that parents' awareness of and interest in their children's learning and school activities model for their children the importance of school, which may lead to positive behaviors. The earlier in a child's educational process parent involvement begins, the more powerful the effects (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989/2019).

Parental involvement in children's education also benefits educators in general. According to Rose, Gallup, and Elam (1997), 86% of the general public believes that support from parents is the most important way to improve the school. LaBahn (1995) maintained that parental involvement can benefit the teachers, the school, the parents themselves, and the community, as well as other children in the family. National Education Association (cited in Lambert, 2006) reported that almost half of new U.S. teachers, namely, those who have 1 to 5 years of teaching experiences (WEAC, n.d.), are likely to quit within the first five years because of overwhelming difficulties in involving parents in children's activities at home and school. While new teachers do all they can to inform and involve parents in their student's education, their efforts do not always translate into the much-needed parental involvement they expect for effective teacher-parent partnerships. Teachers are frustrated with a lack of parental involvement in learning activities at home and school (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). In their endeavors of reaching all parents in positive ways, implementing strategies that will result in improved student achievement, and balancing the needs of parents vis-à-vis educators' professional autonomy, educators in general face tremendous obstacles.

### 1.3 Obstacles to Parental Involvement

Overall, educators often face the lack of parental involvement. Public belief in the importance of parental involvement does not necessarily translate into observable parental participation in their child's education. Parental involvement is not adequate and declines as students grow older (Stouffer, 1992). School activities to develop and maintain partnerships with families decline with each grade level, and drop dramatically at the transition to middle grades (Epstein & Connor, 1992).

Most obstacles to parental involvement have to do with the diverse backgrounds and socio-economic status in low-income and non-traditional families. For instance, the parents do not involve in their child's education because they do not have resources or know-how to help up (Wanat, 1992); because they do not have a great deal of education (Dixon, 1992); because they do not speak English (Vandergrift & Greene, 1992); or because they themselves failed in school and thus would not have much desire to return to a place that only served to remind them of their own failures (Brink & Chandler, 1993). Teachers often think that low-income parents and single parents will not or cannot spend as much time helping their children at home as do middle-class parents with more education and leisure time (Epstein, 1984). This is particularly so among nontraditional families where there may be a divorce or death, a change in the financial standing, or simply a short of time in the day to accomplish everything (LaBahn, 1995). According to McDermott

and Rothenberg (2000), parents expressed distrust toward the local elementary school because they felt the faculty had been biased against African American and Latino children and their families.

Obstacles to parental involvement are many. To better conceptualize the various obstacles to parental involvement in education, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) developed an elegant, exploratory model. In which, Hornby and Lafaele systematically placed various obstacles to parental involvement into four categories of factors. The first category is the individual parent and family factors, which are related to parents' beliefs about parental involvement, parents' current life contexts, parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement, and class, ethnicity and gender. The second category is the child factors, which have to do with child age, learning difficulties and disabilities, gifts and talents, and behavioral problems. The third category is the parent-teacher factors, including differing goals and agendas, different attitudes, and differing language used. Finally, the fourth category is the societal factors, including historical, demographic, political, and economic issues.

As Hornby and Lafaele (2011) suggested, "the issue of parental involvement in education is a complex matter which requires educators to move beyond simplistic notions about the underlying factors which affect the effectiveness of parental involvement" (p. 50). According to LaBahn (1995), many things can be done to overcome obstacles to parental involvement. First of all, the success of any school-family partnership program will be tied directly to the support and encouragement of professional authority such as school principals (Lewis, 1992), because "principals are key contributors to helping parents and other educators understand each other" (Duncan, 1992, p. 13). Another solution lies in more and specific communication between the school and home; unlike one-way communication from the teachers, two-way informal exchanges between teacher and parent are much more effective (Wanat, 1992). Also, educators can establish friendly contact with parents early in the year before they have to contact the parents for students' problems (Wherry, 1992). In addition, it also helps make the parents feel comfortable if a personal rapport can be established between educators and parents, and a broad range of activities can be offered to encourage parental support and participation (Vandergrift & Greene, 1992).

Based on the current state of knowledge about parental involvement, we believe that it is much needed to closely look into how new teachers perceive the obstacles that prevent parents from being actively involved in their child's education, and how they try to overcome perceived obstacles as well. It will not only help teacher educators better prepare teacher candidates to face upcoming challenges but also increase the chance of new teachers' surviving and retention in the early stage of their career. The present study was such an attempt guided by the following major research questions:

1) What are the obstacles, if any, that new teachers perceive prevent parents from involving in their child's education?

2) What are the solutions or strategies, if any, that new teachers employ to encourage parents to be involved in their child's education?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

A sample of 30 teachers with 1 to 5 years of teaching experience (Mean = 3.27, SD = 1.34) participated in this study. In terms of race, the participant teachers happened to be 15 Caucasian and 15 African Americans. By educational level, 18 of them earned bachelor degrees, and 12 received master degrees. By grade level of teaching, 25 participants were elementary school teachers, and the other 5 were middle school teachers.

## *2.2 Procedure*

Emails along with Invitation and Informed Consent Forms were first sent to school administrations located in Northeast Arkansas, one of the most impoverished areas in the Mississippi Delta region known for its rich, diverse cultural traditions. 30 teachers returned their signed Informed Consent Forms and thus were recruited as participants. Afterwards, an open-ended, two-scenario survey was sent to the participants. Scenario I aimed to solicit participants' demographic information, and Scenario II invited all the participants to respond to a series of open-ended questions. Sample questions include: (1) While communicating with student parents (or guardians), what obstacles or challenges or difficulties have you ever encountered? (2) What do you think made it difficult to effectively involve and communicate with parents? (3) What are the strategies you have employed to overcome the obstacles or difficulties? Completed surveys were sent back to the researchers through email.

## *2.3 Data Coding and Analysis*

To code and analyze the data, an original start list of codes was developed by taking a grounded theory approach. Generated codes were tried out on randomly selected surveys, and revisions on the codes were made wherever necessary. Next, the researchers coded all the surveys independently. Disagreements were discussed and resolved. Inter-rater reliability was high (r = .91). Then, content analysis was performed on coded narrative segments to identify salient themes of obstacles and strategies. Content analysis is defined as any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1969). Finally, case and cross-case analyses identified three themes of obstacles or factors that hinder parental involvement and four themes of strategies for overcoming the perceived obstacles to parental involvement.

# 3. Results

## *3.1 Obstacles to Parental Involvement*

As shown in Table 1 below, there are a total of nine obstacles or factor that hinder parents from involving and participating in their child's education. These nine obstacles fall into three categories or themes of inadequacy.

The first theme is Parent's Cognitive Inadequacy. New teachers tended to account for parent's lack of involvement in their child's education by suggesting that parents are cognitively or intellectually not prepared or ready for having and raising up children. Specifically, six (20%) new teachers believe that parents fail to involve in their student's education mostly due to their lack of general education or English proficiency, while ten (33%) new teachers believe that parents' lack of knowledge about education or schooling results in their being unable to participate in their child's education or school activities.

The second theme of obstacles is related to Parent's Attitudinal Inadequacy. New teachers associate the lack of parental involvement and participation in school-based activities with parents' negative attitude toward school and teachers. Particularly, as shown in Table 1, fourteen (47%) new teachers suggest that parents do not respond to teachers' invitation to participate in school activities or child education events, while thirteen (43%) new teachers feel that parents lack interest in communicating with teachers or involving with school or classroom activities. What's more, fifteen (50%) new teachers suggest that teacher-parent communication is hard because parents do not want to hear any problem or negative information about their child's behavior at school, and because they do not want to share with teachers their child's background information due to their stereotypes or bias toward schools. In addition, six (20%) new teachers suggest that parents overall lack trust for teachers and as a result do not want to involve in their child's school activities.

The third theme of obstacles to parental involvement in children's education is associated with Parent's Physical Inadequacy. New teachers attribute parents' material, financial, and/or experiential inadequacy to their being unable to involve in their child's schooling and learning activities. As presented in Table 1, seven (23%) new teachers revealed that many parents have difficulty in participating in school activities because they do not have contact ways (such as phones) to receive message or because they do not have vehicles to enable them to participate in school activities. Furthermore, twelve (40%) new teachers said that many parents do not have time to participate in their child's school activities or events because they have to work overtime or have two or more jobs. Last but not the least, three (10%) new teachers revealed that some parents are very young and do not have much experience in parenting their child.

**Table 1. Themes of Obstacles to Parental Involvement Perceived by New Teachers (n = 30)**

| Theme | Obstacles | New Teachers | (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Parent's Cognitive Inadequacy | 1) Parent's lack of education or English Proficiency | 6 | 20 |
| | 2) Parent's lack of knowledge about education or schooling | 10 | 33 |
| | | | |
| Parent's Attitudinal Inadequacy | 1) Parent's lack responsiveness to school activities or child education | 14 | 47 |
| | 2) Parent's Lack interest in communicating with teachers or involving with school or classroom activities | 13 | 43 |
| | 3) Parent's resistance to negatives or unwillingness of sharing background information, parent stereotypes or bias | 15 | 50 |
| | 4) Parent's lack of trust for teachers | 6 | 20 |
| | | | |
| Parent's Physical Inadequacy | 1) Parent's lack of contact ways or transportation | 7 | 23 |
| | 2) Parent's lack of time due to schedule or work | 12 | 40 |
| | 3) Parent's lack of parenting experience | 3 | 10 |

### 3.2 Strategies for Overcoming Obstacles

Table 2 below presents new teachers' strategies for overcoming perceived obstacles to parental involvement. Overall, in order to enhance parental involvement, new teachers applied a total of eight strategies to overcome obstacles to parental involvement. These eight strategies fall into four themes.

The first theme of strategies is Cognitively Engaging Parents. As shown in Table 2, seven (23%) new teachers said that, in order to engage parents in school- and classroom-based activities, they always make sure parents understand the nature, importance, and expectations of school activities and materials. Also, seven (23%) new teachers said that they consciously avoid using technical terms or language while communicating with parents such as sending parents newsletters. In addition, six (20%) new teachers said that they would seek professional assistance and advice from school authority or educational experts to help parents understand how to involve in their child's education in and out of school.

The second theme of strategies is the Attitude of Persistent Reaching-out. In order to involve parents in their child's education, new teachers believe that maintaining the attitude of persistently reaching out to parents is critical. Specifically, twenty-five (83%) new teachers suggested that they are committed to reaching out to parents through emails, phone calls, home visits, newsletters, weekly notes, and contacting students' friends and grandparents. Six (20%) new teachers said that while communicating with student parents, they are always prepared and ready to help parents understand their student's school performance by demonstrating adequate, appropriate documentations and proof such as students' homework, tests, and other artifacts. In addition, four (12%) new teachers said that they try to build rapport and mutual trust with parents by perspective-taking, or putting themselves in the shoes of student parents.

The third theme of strategies is Sandwiching Negatives with Positives. In order to effectively communicate with parents, thirteen (43%) new teachers said that they always maintain positive mindset, start off with conveying positive information, insert student learning and disciplinary problems or behaviors which they want parents to be aware of, and end the conversations with positive hope of academic growth and behavioral improvement.

The fourth theme of strategies is Attending to Parent Diversity. Eleven (39%) new teachers suggested that they always pay close attention to parents' cultural backgrounds such as race, ethnicity, and religion; and that they care parents' financial difficulty, different lifestyles, and individual preference for communication.

**Table 2. Themes of Strategies for Overcoming Obstacles Employed by New Teachers (n = 30)**

| Theme | Strategy | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cognitively Engaging Parents | 1) Educating parents or teaching parents about the information or materials they need to understand | 7 | 23 |
| | 2) Using non-tech language or terms while communicating | 7 | 23 |
| | 3) Seeking advice of expert or authority to educate parents | 6 | 20 |
| Attitude of Persistent Reaching-out | 1) Persistent reach out to parents or guardians | 25 | 83 |
| | 2) Being prepared with documentation or proof | 6 | 20 |
| | 3) Building rapport or mutual trust | 4 | 12 |

| Sandwiching Negatives with Positives | 1) Always being positive; starting off with positive and/or ending with positive | 13 | 43 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Attending to Parent Diversity | 1) Care, embrace, or attend to student/parent individual differences or difficulties | 11 | 39 |

## 4. Discussion

This study started with the purpose of identifying new teachers' perceptions of and strategies for overcoming obstacles that prevent parents from participating in their child's education. Our analysis shows that new teachers faced lack of parental involvement and its negative impact on their career. As we had expected, they attributed it to three major themes of obstacles resulted from parents' inadequacy in general education and English proficiency, in attitude toward school and teachers, and in physical resources. This study provides evidence that new teachers' perceptions of obstacles to parental involvement are consistent with existing literature on the factors such as parents' lack of general education or English proficiency (Dixon, 1992; Vandergrift & Greene, 1992), lack of knowledge about educational administration and school management (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011), lack of interest in participation (Brink & Chandler, 1993), lack of trust or positive attitude toward school and teachers (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000), and lack of physical resources (Wanat, 1992). As far as involving parents in children's education is concerned, teachers, regardless of years of experience or geographical location, face similar challenges resulted from parents' backgrounds, socio-cultural differences, and socio-economic status.

As professionally trained educators, the new teachers did not stop at simplistic identification of characteristic trouble spots for the particular area of parental involvement. Instead, they conducted meaningful causal analysis of why the trouble spots occur toward improved parental involvement in and out of school. For which, they persistently reached out to student parents and created various opportunities to educate and train parents about the nature of schooling and education. They tried out various ways to optimize teacher-parent communication. And they were very thoughtful and cared parents' diverse backgrounds, socio-cultural differences, and socio-economic disadvantages so they could and develop mutual trust and understanding and establish personal rapport with parents. These strategies resonated with previous literature on the effects of reaching out to parents (Wherry, 1992), educating parents (Epstein, 1995, 2001), seeking professional advice from and authorities such as principals and educational experts (Lewis, 1992; Duncan, 1992), creating various ways of communication such as sandwiching negatives between positives (Espstein, 1995, 2001; Wanat, 1992), and developing mutual trust and understanding to establish personal rapport with parents (Vandergrift & Greene, 1992; LaBahn, 1995).

This study has fulfilled our original purpose of exploring new teachers' experience in involving and working with student parents. That being said, it is also limited in several aspects which should be taken into account when interpreting the findings and planning for future efforts. First of all, the present study relied on a cross-sectional, convenient sample of new teachers from Northeastern Arkansas area which does not represent the full picture of the State of Arkansas. Due to the distinctive poverty and socio-cultural diversity in this area, the findings regarding parents' inadequacy in education, attitude, and resources may

not be generalizable and thus should be interpreted with serious caution. Secondly, the data of the present study were solely based on new teachers' responses to an open-ended survey without triangulating them with the experiences of experienced teachers. Considering their relatively limited years in the profession, these new teachers' experiences of working with student parents may not reflect the comprehensive reality of parents' desires, endeavors, and struggle. Future efforts, including our own next step, would certainly benefit from comparing the experiences of new and experienced teachers. Thirdly, this study only looked at teachers' experiences without considering the voices of parents and students. Researchers interested in understanding obstacles to parental involvement and attendant solutions would certainly find it beneficial to take into consideration the lived experiences of multiple shareholders including educators, parents, and maybe students as well. Last but not the least, conducting this study during the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to collect data via email exchange and were not able to ask probing questions. Most of the responses to the survey questions were brief and short of details. This is not what we wished for; our original plan was to conduct in-depth interviews with classroom teachers. While we have taken every measure to ensure the reliability and validity of the study, it is our opinion that in-depth interviews will generate rich information with more details and will shed light on teachers' lived experiences of involving parents in their child's learning and growth.

Based on the above discussed, we have come to the conclusion that this study will inform in-service teachers' efforts to involve parents and family members in education to optimize student academic and social performance. It will also help teacher educators to better prepare prospective teachers to understand and overcome challenges and difficulties in working with parents toward improved parental involvement and teacher-parent partnership.

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