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## The impact of family involvement on the academic success of African American students in the intermediate grades

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# The impact of family involvement on the academic success of African American students in the intermediate grades

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THE IMPACT OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT ON THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN THE INTERMEDIATE GRADES

By

Rebecca Lynn Hodge

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THE IMPACT OF FAMILY  
INVOLVEMENT ON THE  
ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF  
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IN THE INTERMEDIATE GRADES

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Rebecca Hodge

Eastern Michigan University  
College of Education  
Department of Teacher Education  
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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice

everywhere." Inequality in education in some communities is a threat to education in our entire country. For Americans of all backgrounds, the allocation of opportunity in a society that is becoming more dependent on knowledge and education is a source of great anxiety and concern. Although this is a fact, much can be done to emend and eradicate this disparity in achievement. In my quest to advocate and implement change, my belief is that education and knowledge are unalienable rights that cannot be denied. Our children deserve the very best education. At present, equitable education is not being provided as evidenced in test scores in the African American community; the largest test score gaps are documented between African American or Hispanic and White (Stiefel, Schwartz, Chellman, 2007). One way to increase academic achievement is to integrate family into the academic and educational process.

Current research suggests that parental involvement fosters a positive attitude toward school, improves homework habits, reduces absenteeism, reduces a student's risk of dropping out of school, and enhances academic achievement which has a direct effect on student academic achievement (O'Bryan, Braddock II, Dawkins, 2006). Research indicates that when parents are involved in education, students are more likely to do their homework (Jeynes, 2005a). Parent involvement is an important contributor to the academic success of all students, including African American students (Yan, 1999). Language skills and musical abilities are increased with greater parental involvement in education (Jeynes, 2005).

Parent involvement in education is a topic of contention in many discussions. Although there are numerous studies that indicate the beneficial impact of parental involvement, these studies do not focus on the African American population (Jeynes, 2005b). Currently, there is persistent and ongoing debate on methods and strategies on how to close and eliminate the achievement gap between White Students and Black or Hispanic students. Family involvement is one strategy that is has well-documented

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benefits that can benefit those affected by the achievement gap (Jeynes, 2005c). Parental participation is one method of bridging the achievement gap. Unfortunately, the lack of research in this area on African American students cannot indicate whether parental involvement will be a major factor in African American achievement (Jeynes, 2005b). State and federal policies have been implemented to increase family involvement in the academic endeavors of students (O'Bryan, Braddock II, Dawkins, 2006), although education budget cuts have threatened the to severe these programs. (Stiefel, Schwartz, Chellman, 2007).

Parent involvement includes not only parent involvement at school, but also an at-home environment conducive to learning. A home environment that is emotionally supportive, engaging in frequent and meaningful discussions with children, and where a child is read to and with increases academic achievement (Yan, 1999). Active parental involvement also includes parents assisting children with homework and communicating clear and consistent behavior limits (Yan, 1999)

Although the benefits of family involvement have been investigated and its importance highlighted, the specific strategies have not been outlined. Research in this area has increased in the past two decades. Various studies indicate that parent involvement is significant determinant in how successful the student will be in school at the elementary and secondary level (Jeynes, 2003). Research by Sigh et. al (1995) suggests that the effects of parental involvement may be greater at the elementary level.

Students in the intermediate grades have been identified for various reasons. Adolescent literacy, the intermediate grades, is the cornerstone of students' academic success (Vacca, Vacca, and Mraz, 2011). According to Vacca, Vacca, and Mraz, "students learn basic skills in the early grades of elementary. Beyond the fourth grade, students develop "skill and sophistication in the use of literacy strategies and practices specific to different disciplines, texts, and situations. During the adolescent period, students develop confidence in literacy and academia. It is essential that teachers and

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parents assist students in development of their academic esteem and confidence (Vacca, Vacca, and Mraz, 2011). This research begins to identify ways parents can increase confidence of students in the intermediate grades by increased family involvement. Family involvement has been identified as a contributing factor in academic success (O'Bryan, Braddock II, Dawkins, 2006).

A 2005 meta-analysis by William H. Jeynes indicated that parental involvement affects the academic achievement of minority students. Using studies covering nearly 12,000 subjects, Jeynes conducted a statistical analysis to determine the overall effects of parental involvement. The specific components in each study included the "extent to which parents communicated with their children about school, whether parents checked their children's homework, parental expectations for the academic success of their children, whether parents encouraged their children to do outside reading, whether parents attended or participated in school functions, the extent to which there were household rules regarding school and/or leisure activities, parenting style and warmth, and other specific measures" (Jeynes, 2003). Academic success was measured by parental involvement on four levels: grades, teacher rating scales, behavior and attitude, and a combined achievement indices. Following the statistical analysis, Jeynes found that parental involvement appears to affect all levels of academic achievement: GPA, standardized tests, and other measures (Jeynes, 2003).

Jeynes' meta-analysis study noted that teachers were among the first to recognize and appreciate the need for parental involvement in minority populations (Jeynes, 2003). Educational success is also related to (a) positive relationship between the parent and the teacher; (b) a sense of teamwork between the parent and the teacher, due to increased communication between parent and teacher; (c) teacher acknowledgement of parental efforts (Jeynes, 2003). The aforementioned involvement also has a positive correlation to academic success.



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Jeynes' study concluded that the effects of parental involvement were apparent for all racial groups under the study. African American students benefited the most from the affects of parental involvement on academic success (Jeynes, 2003). In *Effects of Parental Involvement* Jeynes states, "Although the results of this study provide many insights into the effects of parental involvements on the academic achievement of minority children, it also raises some interesting questions about parental involvement, which can help guide research in years to come."

In a study conducted by Wenfan Yan, data was used from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) of 1988, a panel study designed and conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The NELS:88 data captured four constructs of social capital (parent-teen interactions, parent-school interactions, interactions, with other parents, and family norms) (Yan, 1999). Yen found that direct parent school involve is not as important as frequent parent-child discussions regarding academic achievement. Also noted, high level of home discussions with students correlate with high level of academic achievement among African American students in the sample (Yan, 1999). Parents' school contact did not affect student achievement significantly (Yan, 1999).

The findings in Yan's study do have important implications for parents, educators, policymakers, and society. African American families must place more emphasis on parental involvement (Yan, 1999). To avoid the shortcomings of the achievement gap, African parents must be very involved. African American must discuss school experiences, futures goals, class topics, and college (Yan, 1999). Furthermore, educators need to challenge stereotypical ideas and attitudes. Teachers should work to actively empower African American parents to become involved (Yan, 1999). Policymakers should work closely with schools and communities to build effective programs that are socially and culturally sensitive to all groups (Yan, 1999).

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Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) have suggested that parents become involved with homework because they believe they should be involved, that their involvement makes a difference, and that it is wanted and expected. Additional research studies also suggest that parents often wish they knew more about teachers' goals for homework and how to be more effective in their help. One promising strategy emerging in the literature for involving parents effectively in homework help seems to be providing training to parents on subject-specific strategies that they can implement at home that support student learning (Faires et al., 2000). A study of literacy practices in Latino families found that when mothers were given explicit guidelines on how to do literacy activities with their children at home, they reported substantially more activities directly related to their children's schooling (Melzi et al., 2000). Future research studies may build a better understanding of how to most effectively train parents in the African American community. This training will ensure that parents have the skills to provide homework help to students.

Promise has been shown in the development of interactive homework assignments (homework that requires parent-child interaction as part of the activity) as a way of supporting parent involvement and student achievement. Interactive homework assignments are designed to encourage interaction between parents and children. This type of homework has shown positive results for increasing achievement in several subject areas, including science and language arts (Epstein et al., 1997; Van Voorhis, 2000). It is suggested by Van Voorhis that well-designed interactive assignments can have a number of positive outcomes: they can help students practice study skills, prepare for class, participate in learning activities, and develop personal responsibility for homework, as well as promote parent-child relations, develop parent-teacher communication, and fulfill policy directives from administrators.

Family connections with schools can facilitate linkages between all of the environments that affect a child's development (Center for Mental Health in Schools,

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1999a; Dryfoos, 1998; 2000; Lawson, 1999), as seen in different research studies. These developmental approaches seek to reduce health, psychological, and other barriers so that children are ready to learn. This also increases a child's academic efficacy. The approaches also seek to better understand the learning and development that take place in contexts other than schools. Identification of linkage the between schools, community organizations, and families that can support a developmental approach to meeting children's needs can be found through further research study.

It is a myth that family involvement is only important in the primary grades. Researchers have begun exploring the effects of school, family, and community connections during transitions to middle and high school. Gutman and Midgley (2000) found that during the transition from elementary to middle school, both school factors and family factors were important to support academic achievement in African American students. Research studies have found that contrary to popular belief, middle and high school students do want their parents to be involved, especially in terms of homework help and other home-based types of support and involvement (Catsambis & Garland, 1997). This study found that parent involvement does not decline, as expected, but rather shifts as students move into middle and high school. Although they continued to be involved, parents reported increasing dissatisfaction with their role in relationship to the school, especially involving school policy (Catsambis & Garland). These results point to the importance of continued exploration of the needs that students have during the transition to middle school and to high school, and roles that families play in supporting these transitions.

There is an ongoing concern with issues of parenting style and how it impacts the type and effect of the help parents provide to their children. More than one study of the relationship between parenting style and homework help have found that more supportive but indirect parenting styles are associated with help that promotes student learning (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Shumow, 2001; Shumow & Lomax, 2001). One study found

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that the “autonomy support” style of parenting, applied to homework help, was associated with higher standardized test scores, higher grades, and more completed homework, while the “direct involvement” style was associated with lower student outcomes (Cooper et al., 2000). Further research is needed to fully understand the relationship between parenting style, homework help, and the outcomes that are produced.

Parents often become involved in their children's education through homework. Whether children do homework at home, complete it in after school programs, or work on it during the school day, homework can be a powerful tool for (a) letting parents and other adults know what the child is learning, (b) giving children and parents a reason to talk about what's going on at school, and (c) giving teachers an opportunity to hear from parents about children's learning. Parents are often eager to support their children's learning but do not always know how to help or why their involvement is important (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995). Parents should be encouraged to contact the teacher if they have questions about students' homework. Further research needs to be conducted to ensure the reliability of these results among African American students.

Parents and students often benefit when they have written information (in language that the parent can readily understand) about homework policies and purposes. The educators can also facilitate a workshop that will assist the parent in understanding the policies of the classroom. A workshop will allow ample opportunity for questions and responses from parents and teachers. This information can be tailored to specific educational objectives and repeated throughout the year (objectives may include such goals as practicing skills, developing independence and responsibility, developing higher level thinking skills, organizing material, or simply getting students to read more; (e.g., Corno, 1996; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Such information from teachers can also highlight the skills, attitudes, and behaviors often influenced by parents' homework involvement (e.g., more positive attitudes about school, increased time on homework,

greater persistence in learning tasks, e.g., Cooper, Lindsey, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

To increase two-way communication about homework, teachers may talk with parents about their mutual goals for children's learning, including specific information about the ways in which student homework supports those goals. Teachers may also encourage parents to make comments about assignments (e.g., areas of difficulty for the student, student and parent responses to interactive homework). Parent leaders can work with teachers and parents to develop open-ended surveys seeking parent feedback on homework, and teachers may alter assignments or offer individual adjustments based on survey results.

There is a benefit to the students when parents and other adults offer specific positive responses to student homework performance. The ability of the family to offer appropriate responses often benefits from having information about the concepts addressed in homework, evaluative information about the student's homework performance, and information about the learning goals supported by homework tasks. The more specific and knowledgeable parents can be in offering feedback and reinforcement, the stronger their impact on learning and student self-efficacy is likely to be.

Teachers, parent leaders, and after school staff can also give parents and other adults specific examples of how they can support children's homework performance. Teachers may offer suggestions for short questions parents can ask the student about the day's homework and can include ideas about how to offer helpful and autonomy-supportive responses (e.g., wait for student questions before helping). Suggestions may be most helpful when they support parents in thinking through the amount of independence the child needs and offer specific suggestions for appropriate positive responses (e.g., Ng, Kenney-Benson & Pomerantz, 2004).

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Epstein and colleagues' approach to interactive homework may also be very helpful in guiding parent responses to student homework (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). The Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) program engages the student in sharing homework tasks with a parent. Parents are asked to be interested and responsive but are not asked to teach specific skills (essentially, TIPS makes students responsible for homework even though parents are integrally involved). TIPS activities appear especially helpful in encouraging students to recognize that teachers want their families to know what they are learning, want parents to participate in the process, and want students to own primary responsibility for the learning outcomes.

Parental involvement focused on helping children understand learning tasks often requires considerable knowledge. To assist parents in understanding the tasks, concepts, and knowledge, written materials can be disseminated and a collaborative program can assist the parents. Written materials will help parents understand the basic objectives and components of a learning task as well as specific suggestions for checking on student understanding. Programs that help parents engage in this kind of involvement may also offer demonstrations of developmentally appropriate teaching activities, opportunities for practice of varied strategies, and information about assessing students' progress (e.g., Starkey & Klein, 2000).

Student homework creates opportunities for important interactions among schools, families, students, and other adults who help care for children. Well-designed homework helps students learn; it also offers parents opportunities to see what students are learning, talk with children about their learning, and interact with teachers and other school-community members about ways to support student learning. Teachers play critical roles in helping parents become effectively involved in student homework. In sharing ideas for homework involvement with parents, school-age care professionals, and parent leaders, teachers increase community support for student learning. The strategies suggested in this paper are likely to support effective parental involvement in the academic process. With

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more research and program implementation, integrating the family into the academic and educational process can increase academic achievement of African American students. This is a crucial step in an effort to emend and eradicate the disparity of education as evidenced by the achievement gap.

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