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# Low-Income Parents' Attitudes toward Parent Involvement in Education\*

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*Using data from 978 parents who indicated their family income level on a descriptive survey about attitudes toward parent involvement in education, this article reports on comparisons among low-income, middle-income, and high-income parents. Despite some differences among the groups, the results clearly dispute any idea that low-income parents lack interest in their children's education. The authors provide recommendations of key strategies that social workers can use to facilitate effective involvement of low-income parents in their children's education.*

Recent research has made an overwhelming case for parent involvement in children's education. The evidence that parent involvement improves student achievement is now incontrovertible; numerous studies point to parent involvement as a key determinant of children's success in school (Bloom, 1985; Clark, 1983; Dornbusch and Ritter, 1988; Henderson, 1987; Kagan, 1984).

In fact, in an overview of 29 controlled studies, Walbert (1984) found "the 'alterable curriculum of the home' is twice as predictive of academic learning as is family socioeconomic status." Although the average effect was twice as predictive as socioeconomic status, some parent involvement programs had effects 10 times as large.

Organized efforts to involve low-income parents in their

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children's education are not very old. The earliest efforts date back to the 1960s and the passage of the Elementary Secondary Education Act. Typically, parent involvement programs and strategies are designed by schools for middle- and upper-income parents. Middle- and upper-income parents usually have had easy access to teachers through informal networks and through formal organizations such as parent-teacher associations. Low-income parents have been either unwilling or unable to participate in these traditional parent involvement modes (McLaughlin and Shields, 1987).

The major question this article seeks to answer is: What are the attitudes of low-income parents toward parent involvement in education? This question focuses on an issue that is critical to our nation's future. Social workers are acutely aware that lack of education coupled with poverty has brought tragedy to individuals, but it is imperative to realize that the personal tragedy of individuals is now becoming a collective tragedy that will have dire consequences for the country unless action is taken. If we can not educate our children effectively, eventually we will create a poorly educated nation that can not be competitive with other countries, and the standard of living will decline for the nation.

This article is based on part of a larger six-year study (1980-86) funded by the former National Institute of Education. The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) surveyed more than 3,000 parents and 4,000 educators at the elementary-school level in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. This article reports on the written survey results from 978 parents who provided information on their family income. The focus of the article is the report from low-income parents about their attitudes toward parent involvement in education.

### Research Method

The questionnaire used is called the Parent Involvement Questionnaire (PIQ) and is a variation of instruments previously used with educators in the larger study. The PIQ is a self-report instrument consisting of 100 closed-response items with a sixth-grade readability level. The PIQ is divided into seven parts:

(a) general ideas about parent involvement; (b) interest in school decisions; (c) interest in parent involvement roles; (d) parent participation in involvement activities; (e) suggestions for improving parent involvement; (f) reasons for less parent involvement at the high school level; and (g) demographic information.

The survey was distributed at large open-house meetings sponsored by Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) across the six-state region. Translators were available for non-English speaking parents. The survey identified the following: 348 (35.6%) parents with family income less than \$15,000; 259 (26.5%) parents with family income between \$15,000 and \$25,000; and 371 (37.9%) parents with family income above \$25,000. The major focus of this article is the 348 parents with family income less than \$15,000. For this study, the term low-income parents is used to designate those parents who reported their family incomes to be less than \$15,000. Middle-income parents is used for parents who reported their family incomes between \$15,000 and \$25,000, and high-income parents is used for parents who reported their family incomes above \$25,000.

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequencies, adjusted frequencies, rank orders, means, and standard deviations were obtained. To help interpret the comparisons among income groups, the eta-squared statistic (with a significance level of  $p \leq .001$ ) was used as an estimate of the amount of variance that could be accounted for by the difference in income.

### General Ideas About Parent Involvement

The low-income parents in this study were strongly supportive of the idea of parent involvement in education. More than 97% of the parents agreed with these statements: "I want to spend time helping my children get the best education"; "Teachers should give me ideas about helping my children with homework"; "I want teachers to send more information home about classroom learning activities"; "I should make sure that my children do their homework"; and "I cooperate with my children's teachers."

When compared to parents in the other two income groups, low-income parents differed on several statements. For the state-

ment "I have little to do with my children's success in school," 44.7% of the low-income parents agreed, while only 11.7% of the parents in the middle-income range and only 4.4% of the parents in the high-income range agreed. The eta-squared statistic was .151, or 15.1% of the difference can be explained by income. Many low-income parents seemed to be expressing a fear or concern that they were not in control of their child's success in school.

For the statement, "Working parents do not have time to be involved in school activities," 50.6% of the low-income parents agreed, while only 26.1% of the middle-income parents and only 11.9% of the high-income parents agreed. The eta-squared statistic was .127, or 12.7% of the difference can be explained by income. The nature of employment for low-income parents may give them less flexibility to work with schools.

For the statement, "I do not have enough training to help make school decisions," 52.4% of the low-income parents agreed, while only 29.2% of the middle-income parents and 17.3% of the high-income parents agreed. The eta-squared statistic was .114, or 11.4% of the difference can be explained by income. Low-income parents did not report as much confidence in their ability to make school decisions without further training as did the higher-income parents.

#### Parent Involvement Decisions

Low-income parents in this survey were most interested in "evaluating my child's progress," "amount of homework assigned," and "choosing classroom discipline methods." They were least interested in "firing principal and teachers," "hiring principal and teachers," and "helping the school decide what to teach and how."

Low-income parents were as interested in being involved in school decisions as parents from the higher income categories. On each of the 14 decisions, the percentage of low-income parents who indicated they were interested in the decision was higher than or as high as the percentage of interest expressed by middle-income and higher-income parents.

In general, the pattern of interest was similar for all three income groups. The only decision where low-income parents'

responses differed from middle and high-income parents' responses was "having more multicultural/bilingual education in the school." More than 77% of the low-income parents were interested in this decision, while only 61% of the middle-income and 55% of the high-income parents expressed interest. This finding might be explained by the over-representation of minority cultures and languages in the low-income parent group.

### Parent Involvement Roles

Low-income parents were interested in all seven parent involvement roles. The four roles with the most interest were: home tutor, defined as helping your children at home with school work, 92% interested; audience, defined as supporting your child by going to performances, 90% interested; colearner, defined as going to classes or workshops with teachers and principals where everyone learns more about children and education, 89% interested; and school-program supporter, defined as coming to school to assist in events such as field trips or fundraisers, 88% interested.

The three remaining roles were: advocate, defined as meeting with school board or other officials to ask for changes in school rules or practices, 78% interested; paid school staff, defined as working in the school as an aide or assistant, 77% interested; and decision maker, defined as being on an advisory board or school committee, 75% interested.

Three of the first four roles are usually considered traditional parent involvement roles. Home tutor, audience, and school program supporter are typical parent involvement roles. The role of colearner is considered to be a nontraditional role, and it is significant that so many low-income parents were interested in learning more about education. Middle-income and high-income parents ranked colearner fourth, and expressed less interest in this role than low-income parents did. Only 78% of the high-income parents were interested in the role of colearner, and only 81% of the middle-income parents were interested in the role of colearner.

High-income parents were also more interested in the role of audience than low-income or middle-income parents. More than 98% of the high-income parents expressed interest in the

role of audience, while only 93% of the middle-income parents and 90% of the low-income parents expressed interest.

### Parent Involvement Activities

The top five-ranked parent involvement activities that low-income parents report are: "going to 'openhouse' or special programs at school"; "going to parent-teacher conferences about your child's progress"; "helping children with homework"; "visiting the school to see what is happening"; and "helping children learn with materials at home."

The activities that low-income parents report participating in least often are: "helping to hire or fire teachers and principals"; "giving ideas to the school board"; "planning the school budget"; "working as part-time staff;" and "helping in the school, for example, the library or reading center."

The top-ranked activities are similar among the income groups. These are the traditional parent involvement activities that most schools offer. Interestingly, low-income parents did participate more in some of the less traditional activities such as "going to school board meetings," "helping decide how well school programs work," "helping to hire or fire teachers and principals," "helping to decide how well teachers and principals do their jobs," "working as part-time paid staff," and "helping to plan what will be taught in school." This higher percentage of participation in these nontraditional activities might be attributable to some very active Chapter 1/Title 1 Programs that were based in some of the schools surveyed.

### Suggestions to Improve Parent Involvement

Ten suggestions for improving parent involvement were listed in the survey. More than 90% of the low-income parents agreed with all ten suggestions. The highest ranked suggestions were: "giving parents more information about children's success in school"; "helping students understand that having their parents involved is important"; "helping parents to better understand the subjects being taught"; "making parents feel more welcome in the school"; and "having informal meetings or activities where parents and school staff can get to know each other better."

The rankings of low-income parents' agreement with the suggestions were very similar to the rankings of middle-income

and high-income parents. Slight differences were noted in the rank order of "having informal meetings or activities where parents and school staff can get to know each other better." Low-income parents ranked this suggestion fifth and high-income parents ranked it ninth. Perhaps high-income parents already had informal opportunities to meet with teachers.

#### Reasons Why Parents Become Less Involved at High School

Low-income parents ranked the reason "Parents may not understand some of the courses taken in high school" as their first reason for less participation at the high school level. More than 88% of the low-income parents agreed with this reason. Middle-income and high-income parents also ranked this reason as number one.

Other highly ranked reasons reported by low-income parents were: "Parents can't leave smaller children alone at home"; "There are not as many PTA activities for high school parents"; "There are not as many parent/teacher conferences"; and "Teachers don't ask parents to be involved in school as much."

The differences between low-income parents and the parents in the higher income groups emerge on two of the reasons listed: "There are too many teachers with whom to talk" and "Parents do not have time to be involved in school activities and work at the same time." More than 53% of the low-income parents agreed there were too many teachers with whom to talk, while only 27% of the middle-income parents and 28% of the high-income parents concurred. The eta-squared statistic was .070 or 7% of the difference among the groups can be explained by income for this item on the survey.

For the item on parental time to be involved, 63% of the low-income parents said they didn't have time to be involved and work at the same time, while only 42% of the middle-income parents and 33% of the high-income parents agreed. The eta-squared statistic for this item was .055, or 5.55% of the difference can be explained by income.

#### Discussion

There is strong evidence from this survey that low-income parents are interested in the idea of parent involvement in education. Low-income parents want to be involved in a variety



of school decisions, and they want to play active roles in their children's education. They were interested in both the traditional parent involvement roles of home tutor, audience, and school supporter, and the nontraditional roles of colearner, advocate, and decision-maker. The results clearly dispute any idea that low-income parents lack interest in their children's education.

There were, of course, some differences between the low-income and the higher-income parents. These differences were first apparent in the section on general ideas about parent involvement. Many more low-income parents than higher income parents felt a sense of helplessness about their ability to influence their children's success in school. Low-income parents also had more concerns than higher-income parents about time to be involved because of their work schedules. In addition, low-income parents expressed more need for training in how to make school decisions than higher-income parents did.

In the section on activities, low-income parents participated most often in the same types of activities as higher-income parents did. This finding, however, may have more to do with what schools offer than it does with the interests of the parents. When school did offer active parent advocacy and training groups such as those found in the Chapter 1/Title 1 programs, low-income parents did report participation. More information is needed in this area.

The rankings of high-income, middle-income and low-income parents were similar for suggestions to improve parent involvement. Only slight differences were noted in the rank order. In particular, low-income parents were more interested in informal meetings with teachers than the higher-income groups were, perhaps because low-income parents do not see teachers informally as often as higher-income parents do in their regular community life.

Low-income parents differed with higher-income parents on only a few of the reasons they gave for less participation at the high school level. Most important is the item on "time to be involved." More low-income parents than higher-income parents reported that they did not have the time to be involved and work at the same time.

In sum, the results have made it clear that low-income parents care about their children's education and that they want to

be involved. In order to be involved in their children's education, low-income parents must have some of their concerns met. These concerns often involve work schedules and training on how to be involved. In addition, there need to be support systems that not only allow low-income parents to meet with teachers and school officials but also provide low-income parents with the skills and the confidence to make a difference in their children's success at school.

### Recommendations

There are several key strategies that social workers can use to effectively involve low-income parents in their children's education. These recommendations are based on both the research evidence that low-income parents do care about their children's education and the practical experience of parent involvement leaders across the nation.

(a) Social workers must help educators envision ways of working with parents that go beyond those of the traditional order. Educators must be aware that low-income parents are interested in many forms and levels of parent involvement (see e.g. Arizona Department of Education, 1987; Chavkin & Garza-Lubeck, 1987; National School Volunteer Program, 1980).

(b) Parent involvement in education is a developmental process for both parents and educators. Social workers need to help educators understand that many low-income parents will start with the more traditional kinds of parent involvement and grow into increasingly more sophisticated types of involvement. On the other hand, these parents may elect to remain at this level of involvement because they are more comfortable here, given their skills, experiences, and attitudes. School personnel first must be comfortable with traditional forms of involvement, and then they will be more receptive to broader levels of involvement by low-income parents (Chavkin & Williams, 1985; Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986).

(c) Social workers need to facilitate collaboration between parents and educators in developing a clear statement about the goals of parent involvement in their school. The statement should clearly indicate that parents are as impor-

tant to children's academic success as educators. This statement should be clearly articulated in all parent involvement activities (Chrispeels, 1987).

(d) Social workers should advocate for and help develop formal, written school district policies encouraging parent involvement. Written policies will help ensure that parents at all income levels are involved in the school, not just parents who have easy access to teachers (Rich, 1985).

(3) Social workers can provide training opportunities for educators to be trained in how to work with low-income families who have the interest but whose involvement is lower than that of higher-income parents. Learning how to work with diverse income level parents should be a priority in preservice as well as inservice education (Chavkin & Garza-Lubeck, 1987; Chavkin & Williams, 1988).

(f) Social workers should assist educators in asking low-income parents as well as higher-income parents how they want to be involved in their children's education. The written questionnaire may not be an appropriate method to find out this information, and thus social workers may want to consider community meetings, liaisons, or personal contacts as alternatives to the questionnaire (Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986).

(g) Social workers should help educators be sensitive to the skill levels, time of availability, work schedules, and individual preferences as they plan and develop with low-income parents meaningful parent involvement activities. Most important, social workers need to make certain that a variety of home and school parent involvement opportunities are available and that they are based on these parents' interests (see e.g., Arizona Department of Education, 1987; Chavkin & Garza-Lubeck, 1987; National School Volunteer Program, 1980).

(h) More information needs to be given to parents. Low-income parents often do not understand how the school system operates. They do not know whom to contact or where to go for assistance. Sharing positive information about individual children is also a good practice for enhancing the relationships between parents and educators (McAfee, 1984; Sattes, 1985).

(i) With the assistance of social workers, schools need to make available the appropriate kinds of resources for parent involvement efforts. In particular, there should be staff, space, and monetary resources identified and allocated for the implementation of effective parent involvement efforts. Social workers can often use their skills in community organization to locate resources and materials for the programs (Rich, 1985).

(j) Social workers should encourage educators to give low-income parents suggestions for home learning activities. Parents want ideas about the best ways to help their children learn (see e.g., Rich & Mattox, 1983).

(k) Social workers and educators need to make it clear to parents and children that parents are important in schooling. Social workers can help educators encourage and welcome parents to visit the school (Clark, 1988).

(l) Social workers can help parents and educators work together closely to reduce communication barriers. Social workers can increase the opportunities that educators and parents have to work together in both formal and informal settings. Partnership activities with low income parents as well as parents at other income levels need to be expanded (Chrispeels, 1988; Sattes, 1985).

In sum, social workers can assist educators and parents in working together for the benefit of children. The income level of parents may affect the kinds of strategies that are needed to effectively enhance parent involvement, but the income level of parents is not related to the high level of parents' interest in being involved in their children's education. Low-income parents are just as concerned and interested in their children's success at school as higher-income parents. Social workers can help educators recognize this finding, accept the challenge to provide a variety of parent involvement opportunities, and develop the best strategies for involving low-income parents in their children's education.

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