

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Black Parents of Preschoolers Educational Attainment: Implications for Parenting Practices

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Within the Black community exists great variability in parenting practices; however very little research has examined the parenting heterogeneity within this group. Moreover studies of Black parents often contain samples with minimal variation in educational attainment. The purpose of this study was to identify the potential role of educational attainment in predicting parenting differences within the Black community. This study focused on home literacy promotion and parent involvement in school, two parenting practices often associated with children's academic achievement. The sample consisted of 103 Black parents with a wide range of educational attainment and preschool-aged children enrolled in urban child care centers. The results suggest that attainment of at least a Bachelor's degree is associated with a richer home literacy environment but the same pattern was not evident for parent involvement in school. Implications for parent engagement are discussed.

Over the last few decades, there have been significant increases in educational attainment for Black Americans. In 1970 the percentage of Black Americans with at least a Bachelor's degree was 6.1%, but in 2013 that percentage had increased to 22% (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Moreover, there has been a rise in educational attainment particularly for Black women. The percentage of Black woman in 1970 with at least a Bachelor's degree was 5.6% but in 2013 23.4% of Black women have attained at least a Bachelor's degree. These increases in educational attainment in the Black community are significant and maybe positively associated with changes in parenting practices that are related to academic achievement.

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Within the home there are multiple parenting practices that support and enhance development in children (Baumrind, 1991; Brody & Flor, 1998; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Clark, 1983; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). Specifically, home enrichment practices (e.g., rich language exposure) and parent involvement in school are two that have been identified in the research literature as supportive of academic skills (Morrison, Bachman, & Connor, 2005; Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, 2004). Home enrichment practices are often positively associated with cognitive performance in preschool (Leventhal, Martin, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004) and early elementary grades (Smith, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1997). Additionally, an extensive review found positive associations between parent involvement and cognitive performance in both preschool and kindergarten (Fan & Chen, 2001).

The family investment model (Conger & Donnellan, 2007) suggests that socioeconomic factors (e.g., parent education, family income) are connected indirectly to academic achievement through parenting practices, such that achievement-supporting parenting practices may differ as a result of socioeconomic factors. Thus, the increase in educational attainment for Black adults, particularly Black women who are often the primary caregiver, is expected to promote a more cognitively stimulating and an academically enriching home environment (Bingham, 2007; Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Foster, 2002; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005; Taylor et al., 2008; Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2006).

This study focuses on Black parents with varying levels of educational attainment. In the Black community, increases in education are not necessarily met with immediate increases in financial resources (KewalRamani, Kewal Ramani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007; McAdoo, 1981). As a result, it is important to examine educational attainment and not just income in studies of Black families. This paper will focus on the influence of parent educational attainment on two parenting practices associated with preschoolers' school readiness skills: the home literacy environment and parent involvement (Clark, 1983; McWayne et al, 2004; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002).

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH METHODS

Parents were recruited over a two year period, from 28 urban community-based child care centers, located in primarily areas with high poverty rates within a mid-Atlantic city. Parents were recruited during afternoon and evening hours at the child care center. The original sample includes 289 participants from 3 cohorts of parents with children 4 to 5 years of age, including 133 Black parents. Approximately 16% of Black families ($n = 22$) left the child care center prior to completion of the study; a few of the reasons provided include loss of child care funding, a family move to a new area, and maternity leave. This attrition rate is comparable to other studies of low-income, urban families of young children, such as the Three-City study (Bachman, Coley, & Carrano, 2011). As a result, the final analysis sample includes 103 Black parents. The educational attainment of parents included 33% high school diploma or less, 45% some college but less than a Bachelor's degree, 23% Bachelor's degree or more; the average years of education was 14.5 years. The partnership status includes 23% married, 10% cohabitating, 19% in a romantic relationship, 48% single. The average income-to-needs ratio was 1.52, indicating a relatively low-income sample (Boushey, Brocht, Gundersen, & Bernstein, 2001), but the range was of 0 to 4.60. The median age was 30, with a range of 20 to 50 years of age.

Eligibility to participate was based on the age of the child enrolled in the preschool classroom; all children were required to be four by November 1st. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire by telephone with a trained interviewer for approximately 45-60 minutes. If multiple attempts to conduct a phone interview were unsuccessful, a small group of parents completed the questionnaire at home and returned it to the preschool teacher. Overall, the parent interview completion rate was 91%, with 84% of parents completing the telephone interview, and 16% of parents completing the questionnaires at home. Teachers reported on parents' involvement in the spring.

The parent questionnaire included a series of measures: (1) parents' psychological functioning using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D, Radloff, 1977), (2) parents' perceived relationship with their child using items from the Conflict/Anger scale (Pianta, 1994), and (3) the home literacy environment using items from the Griffin and Morrison (1997) home literacy environment scale. Teachers completed a parent involvement measure using items from the Parent-Teacher Involvement Questionnaire (Miller-Johnson, Maumary-Gremaud, & The Conduct Disorders Research Group, 1995).

MAJOR FINDINGS

The results of this study suggest that the attainment of at least a Bachelor's degree is associated with higher home literacy promotion than completing high school or just some college. The findings of this study support previous research examining maternal education and the home environment in more diverse or White samples, such that higher levels of maternal education are often associated with more cognitively stimulating home environments (Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). Past literature has examined the role of education on parenting practices among Black parents; however the samples often lack participants with a post-secondary degree (Brody & Flor, 1998; Roberts, Jurgens, Burchinal, 2005). In contrast, family income was not a significant predictor of these home enrichment practices. Although the income-to-needs ratio initially positively predicted the home literacy environment, it was reduced to non-significance after educational attainment was added to the model. This finding is important because income is dynamic, and may increase or decrease over time, but educational attainment will never decrease. Thus, the investments that Black parents make in the home environment as a result of their own educational attainment may be more stable than income-based investments over time. While educational attainment was associated with home literacy promotion, the same pattern did not emerge for parent involvement; teachers' reports of parent involvement did not significantly differ across parent education levels. The measure of parent involvement used in this study assessed the frequency of interactions which might detect greater involvement because of issues or concerns (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). There may have been differences by educational attainment in the quality or description of these interactions. It is also possible that the value of educational attainment in a preschool setting differs from a K-12 setting. Other factors such as parenting experience or parent age may be a more valued resource in a preschool setting.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

These results suggest that teachers and professionals may need to provide greater support to parents with low levels of educational attainment. To improve the quality of the home environment, parents will need to feel confident in their ability to engage in literacy promoting activities and to support children's development and learning in general (Shumow & Lomax, 2002). Early childhood education (ECE) professionals can support parent efficacy using multiple methods, some of which include informally modeling for parents (vicarious experience), providing simple steps or activities (allowing for mastery experience), and providing feedback that highlights parent strengths (verbal persuasion) (Bandura, 1997). In addition, although the attainment of a Bachelor's degree in this study was not meaningful in detecting differences in parent involvement, ECE teachers did perceive older Black parents as more involved in their child's preschool education than younger Black parents. It is possible that in an ECE setting parenting experience or parental age is more valued and influential in the parent-school partnership than educational attainment. Furthermore, in studies of Black families, older mothers reported higher parental efficacy than younger mothers (Stevens, 1988). Parents with a greater sense of competence or confidence in their parenting ability also tend to be more involved in their child's education (Elder et al, 1995). If this is the case, then ECE providers may need to initiate and actively engage in relationship building with younger parents to encourage their involvement.

TIPS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Data Collection

For ECE professionals, it is important to not to assume that all low-income families lack higher education, especially when working with Black families. Furthermore, administrators in ECE programs may want to consider including educational attainment questions for parents on intake forms and update this information regularly as it may change. Monitoring the educational attainment of parents will provide a more accurate description of families' socioeconomic resources and allow for more informed programmatic decisions.

Relationship Building

Overall, in order for ECE professionals to be successful in their efforts to support rich home literacy environments and parent involvement, we recommend establishing a positive relationship with parents which will strengthen their attempts to support parental efficacy. For effective relationship building, NAEYC (n.d.) has identified best practices, some of which include providing activities for the home and two-way communication. We suggest that efforts are employed using multiple methods (e.g., phone, in-person, paper documents, electronic formats) to accommodate the needs and preferences of parents. Specifically with younger parents and Black parents, electronic options with user friendly mobile sites such as social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Shutterfly Share Site), classroom webpages/blogs, and email apps may prove beneficial, since both young people and members of the Black community tend to access

the Internet with a mobile device (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Mobile sites can be used to share the following: (1) school, classroom, and community events, (2) ideas for home activities, (3) supportive resources, and (4) a more in depth view of classroom activities through work samples, photographs, and student quotes. In addition, when communicating with parents, we recommend that ECE professionals make an effort to listen and empathize. The goal is to partner with parents and work together toward a shared goal of supporting their child's development. By listening and attempting to understand a parents' perspective, ECE professionals will be better able to connect with parents.

Parent Efficacy

Mobile friendly electronic formats may be useful in establishing regular communication as well as supporting parent efficacy. ECE professionals can model high quality developmental interactions and share short video clips of these interactions during a home visit, in a parent-teacher conference, or through email and text messages. Moreover, ECE professionals may also video record the parent engaging in high quality developmental interactions and share those video clips with feedback highlighting the strengths exhibited in the video. These strategies demonstrate modeling, mastery experience, and a persuasive talk from a credible source (i.e., an early childhood professional), all of which have been identified as methods for promoting efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

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