

AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTAL STRESS AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN
EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by

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(Under the Direction of Margaret Caughy)

ABSTRACT

The current study examined how interpersonal and structural stressors influence the academic involvement of African American parents with early elementary school aged children. This study also investigated whether school characteristics buffered the relation between higher levels of stress and lower levels of parental involvement. Both traditional and nontraditional forms of parental involvement practices were assessed in a sample of 186 African American parents with early elementary school aged children. The relation between parental stressors, school factors, and academic involvement were examined using a latent variable framework. Findings indicated several direct effects of school characteristics on the different forms of parental involvement. The present study highlights the importance of acknowledging the structural and interpersonal stressors African Americans experience and how they employ various forms of school involvement practices to enhance their child's learning. Implications for future research on African American school involvement practices are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: school involvement, stressors, African American parents

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CHAPTER 1
AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTAL STRESS AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN
EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
INTRODUCTION

African American parents in underfunded schools are often scapegoated for their children's poor academic outcomes, with structural and racial inequities in academic success attributed to lack of parental involvement (Fan & Chen 2001; Wang et al., 2014). When educators interact with African American parents, parents' behaviors are frequently misinterpreted as confrontational, apathetic, or uninformed (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Allen & White-Smith, 2018). In contrast to educators' beliefs, empirical evidence documents similar levels of parental involvement across race-ethnic groups after adjusting for socioeconomic differences (Hill & Wang, 2015). Furthermore, parenting scholars have documented distinct involvement practices that are excluded due to oft-used measures focused on White, middle-class families (Cooper, 2009; Pattillo & Lareau, 2013; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Wilson, 2019). As such, extant studies of parent involvement tend to center the norms of White, middle-class educational settings and amplify class-based differences without any consideration for the socio-historical context influencing diverse families, especially African American families. As a result, traditional paradigms for understanding parental academic involvement have neglected how involvement may manifest across other racial groups due to differences in socio-historical contexts (Huguley et al., 2021; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2019; Bower & Griffin, 2011). Additionally, a major macro-level stressor that affects all African American families, regardless

of social class, is racism. Experiences of racial discrimination create substantial structural challenges characterized as primary sources of stress for African American families (Murry, Block, & Liu, 2016). Structural racism describes the macrosystem-level social forces and institutions that generate and reinforce inequities through racist laws, social norms, and policies (Bailey & Bassett, 2021). Together, both structural and interpersonal racism contribute to stress among African American caregivers and magnify poor psychological, physical, and social outcomes (Condon et al., 2021; Murry et al., 2018). For example, African American parents of preschool-aged children that reported experiencing racial discrimination also reported increased parenting stress, and this relationship was mediated by stress overload and depressive symptoms (Condon et al., 2021). However, characteristics of schools appear to buffer the race-related stress African American parents experience. Specifically, African American parents often seek out African American teachers knowing that they will be more empathetic to them and their children (Gist, White, & Bianco, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Nevertheless, very little research has examined how structural and interpersonal stressors influence parental involvement for African American parents with children in early elementary school. Most studies regarding parental involvement have focused on urban schools with middle school or high school aged children. Even fewer studies have examined how mundane interpersonal and structural stressors impact parental involvement for African American parents with early elementary aged children. The transition to formal schooling may be a particularly important time in shaping the relationship between African American parents and the school system. Thus, the first aim of this study was to examine how interpersonal and structural stressors impact the academic involvement of African American parents with children in early elementary school. We anticipate that African American parents who report higher levels of

interpersonal and structural stressors will be less involved in their child's academic experiences. The second aim of this paper is to investigate whether characteristics of a school may buffer the relation between higher levels of stress and lower parental involvement for African American parents.

Parental Academic Involvement

Parental academic involvement is a multidimensional construct that includes direct involvement with children's academic activities as well as indirect involvement that fosters attitudes and behaviors suitable for academic success (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005). Parental involvement behaviors and activities are important for supporting positive child-youth development, learning, adjustment, and achievement (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019). In addition, parental involvement is associated with improved educational outcomes from the early elementary years through college (Jeynes, 2016; Wang et al., 2014; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Fan & Chen 2001).

Tyson and Hill (2009) characterized parental involvement into three distinct categories: a) school-based involvement which refers to parents' interactions with their children's school settings such as attendance at parent-teacher conferences or school sanctioned events (Fan & Chen, 2001), b) home-based involvement that involves the parents' direct participation in educational activities at home such as assisting with homework (Patall et al., 2008), and c) academic socialization, which includes parents' developmental strategies designed to strengthen psychological traits linked to academic achievement such as academic resilience (Wang et al., 2014).

A large-scale study examining the relation of home and school-based involvement discovered positive associations with academic achievement in elementary school with academic

socialization becoming a more effective involvement practice as children enter adolescence (Wang et. al, 2014). Meta-analytic studies that investigated the relationship between parental involvement, academic adjustment, and academic achievement also revealed positive associations related to social-emotional adjustment and academic success (Jeynes, 2016; Barger, 2019). Despite these positive associations, parental involvement was still defined within the conventional framework of parental involvement that only recognizes physical school presence. Therefore, further limiting the knowledge on other involvement strategies families, particularly African American families use to enhance their children's schooling.

Parental Involvement in African American Families

There is a robust history of African American parents' educational involvement with their children. Since the 19th and 20th century, there is documented evidence that illustrates how African American parents invested in their child's education as a means of racial uplift and political or economic advancement (Anderson, 1988; Fairclough, 2007). Those practices are similar to the strategies African American parents engage in today such as traditional engagement practices like reading to their children, helping with homework, volunteering, and attending school events (Huguley et al., 2021; Marchand et. al, 2019). Other activities include African American parents using culturally anchored strategies to teach their children how to navigate predominantly White educational systems and be resilient in the face of educational racism while encouraging their children to succeed (Allen, 2012; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2019; Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Reynolds, 2010). These strategies have been conceptualized as reform-based involvement in that they represent activities created in response to what African American parents deem to be systemic racism in schools that negatively impact their children (Latunde, 2018; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Diamond & Gomez, 2004). For example, African

American parents have engaged in protesting school boards, participating in school councils, and publicly challenging city officials to improve educational standards and resources (Delale-O'Connor et al., 2019; Latunde, 2018; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

African American parents have other culturally distinct involvement strategies such as providing race-focused movies and documentaries (Huguley et al., 2021), taking children to places reflecting racial histories of positivity and resilience (cultural events, African American history museums, etc.; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2019), and leveraging other parental involvement for close monitoring of children (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). Yet, these active forms of parental involvement have been minimized by school personnel who regularly mislabel behaviors of African American parents as angry or aggressive and often dismiss critiques made by African American parents (Love et al., 2019; Patillo & Lareau, 2013). Furthermore, due to school personnel suggesting a parent's school presence and homework supervision are the best indicators of "good" parental involvement, many African American working-class parents who cannot engage in school-based activities are assumed to be uncaring or absent (Marchand et al., 2019; Allen & White-Smith, 2018). Thus, parental involvement in school activities, such as attending parent-teacher conferences, becomes the only "legitimate" form of parental involvement while other forms of educational support provided by African American parents are disregarded (Reynolds, 2010; Patillo & Lareau, 2013; Cooper, 2009; Patillo, 2008).

Furthermore, when African American parents can gain access to their child's school, they are often met with exclusion. When African American parents begin asking questions and attempting to hold school administration accountable, many schools ignore their requests for information and purposefully exclude them from decision making processes (Love et. al, 2021; Beard & Brown, 2008). Teachers, who are predominantly White, middle-class and female, tend

to prioritize the parental involvement practices of middle-class parents and dismiss the parental involvement practices of African American parents (Delale-O'Connor et al., 2019). African American parents can also be excluded from White-dominated parent groups (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). As a result, African American parents often describe their child's schools as uninviting or unwelcoming due to marginalization by school staff and other parents (Allen & White-Smith, 2018).

Financial Stress and Parental Involvement

Scholars have argued that lack of money, time, and resources hinder economically disadvantaged parents from being actively involved with their children's academic success compared to their middle-class counterparts (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007; Cooper, 2009).

Involvement may be extremely difficult for low-income parents due to less flexible work schedules or limited accessibility to quality childcare preventing parents from participating in school activities (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Cooper, 2009). Coupled with economic disadvantage, single parents can also have challenging experiences with being involved. Single and teen parents are more likely to have difficult relationships with the school and are less likely to be involved because of other family and work obligations (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018).

African American families experience the brunt of disadvantaged resources such as time and money at exponentially higher rates compared to their White counterparts. According to the Pew Research Center (2014), White Americans' net worth is 13 times greater than African Americans, with the gap expanding since 2007. African American working parents are also significantly more likely to be in a job paying below the basic economic security wage (Bureau Labor of Statistics, 2014). In 2020, while the proportion of families with an unemployed person in the U.S. approximately doubled to 9.8% compared to the previous year, unemployment among

African American families increased to 13.4% (Bureau Labor of Statistics, 2021). Collectively, these findings indicate African American families are substantially lagging economically not only compared to their White American counterparts, but to the U.S. population as a whole.

Additionally, even though they live in a variety of family structures, African American children live in single-parent households at higher rates compared to their peers. Approximately 64% of African American children live in single-parent households, with 34% of their parents working a combination of standard and nonstandard working hours (Child Trends, 2021). These family structures and work schedules further constrain African American parents' school involvement with their children. Despite the acknowledgement of the financial barriers prevalent for African American parents, more studies are necessary to examine how these economic barriers are also additional stressors that can impact parental involvement.

MEES: Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress

According to Peters and Massey (1983), African Americans and their families are encumbered by the constant threat and actual periodic occurrences of intimidation, discrimination, or oppression due to their race. These stressors are unique to African American families and have been described as “mundane extreme environmental stress” or MEES for short (Peters & Massey, 1983) because they are pervasive, continuous, and debilitating. The MEES model of stress is an expansion of the double ABC-X stress model (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), modified to capture ways in which both subtle and overt forms of discrimination amplify other contextual stressors for African American families. Family researcher Grace Carroll (1998) described MEES as “mundane, because this stress is so common, a part of the day-to-day experience of all Blacks that it is almost for granted; extreme, because it has harsh impact on the psyche and world view of Blacks (behavior, self-perception, and interactions); environmental,

because it is environmentally induced and fostered; and stressful, because the ultimate impact on African Americans and their families is indeed stressful, detracting, and energy-consuming” (p. 271).

Peters and Massey (1983) argue that racial discrimination not only increases the negative effects of everyday, acute, and chronic stressors in African American families’ lives; it also greatly affects perceptions of life circumstances, capacities, and resources to manage stress-related demands. Although prior studies have demonstrated the power of MEES in forecasting parenting stress (Condon et al., 2021; Murry et al., 2018), there is a need to expand the dialogue to racial disparities in achievement by examining how the stress associated with social and structural constraints affects the involvement of African American parents in their children’s educational experiences.

Characteristics of the School and African American Parent Involvement

Despite the exclusion African American parents’ face, certain characteristics of the school can serve as a buffer against the stress of navigating educational spaces with little resources. African American parents often view African American educators as resources to assist in providing advocacy and support in navigating the school system (Delale-O’Connor et al., 2019; Allen & White-Smith, 2018). African American parents likely gravitate to African American educators because of the shared sense such teachers would consciously protect their children from the systemic racial practices within the school and reinforce cultural protective mechanisms children engage in (McKinney de Royston et al., 2021). Indeed, African American teachers and staff intentionally fostering supportive, race-conscious teacher-student relationships with African American children (McKinney de Royston et al., 2017; Ginwright, 2010). Likewise, African American educators exhibit behaviors that serve African American students

and their parents in ways that go beyond the ‘traditional’ acts of a teacher such as offering clothing, transportation, and food and by challenging detrimental perceptions of Blackness (Milner & Tenore, 2010). African American parents can take comfort in knowing that their child is cared for by teachers who socialize them as their own and hold them to high expectations (McKinney de Royston et al., 2021; McKinney de Royston et al., 2017). It can also be a protective factor for African American parents because it alleviates the stress of advocating for their children without any allies.

School racial equity can also serve as a protective factor for African American parents and promote higher engagement (Latunde, 2018). Latunde (2018) found that schools who acknowledged the cultural values, beliefs, and social networks African American parents lean on to educationally support their children, those spaces were viewed as more welcoming with higher levels of involvement. In a study examining the efforts of one school district encouraging the involvement of African American parents, school leaders shifted some of their power in the decision-making process related to discipline and curriculum to the parents (Latunde, 2018). Previous research suggest parent participation in pedagogy, achievement, and discipline can have positive outcomes for African American youth and the school climate (Harris & Robinson, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

The present study draws from the Sociocultural Integrative Model, a comprehensive framework that emphasizes how the stressors affecting African American families can be linked to sociohistorical forces that continue to have an impact on their lives over time (Murry et al., 2018). The components of the model propose that the process of navigating these challenging circumstances requires responding to “racially and economically problematic life circumstances”

(Boykin & Toms, 1985, p. 44) and applying culturally specific strength-based coping assets (Murry et al., 2018). This model draws upon and expands tenets from original family stress theories (Hill, 1963; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), the MEES model (Peters & Massey, 1983), and aspects of Garcia Coll et al.'s (1996) integrative model of the developmental competencies of minority children and families. The present study focuses specifically on how stress, including that related to structural and social constraints such as racism, affect African American parents' involvement in elementary school. To better understand the barriers to parental involvement African American families encounter within school settings, the sociocultural integrative model can be used to emphasize the historical, political, and social context that has undoubtedly influenced African Americans parents' experience with stress, crisis, and adaptation (Murry et al., 2018). It can also be used to identify cultural strength-based assets that foster protection for African American parents.

Limitations of Extant Research on African American Parental School Involvement

Prior studies have operationalized parent academic involvement based on parents' physical presence at school-led events such as open houses and school fundraisers (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Lai & Vadeboncouer, 2013). As such, these traditional forms of educational support are used to assess parental involvement in schools that are primarily based on White middle class family norms (Ishimaru et. al, 2015; Cooper, 2009). The limited scope of how parental involvement is conceptualized situates African American parental involvement as deficient and reinforces the stereotype that they are apathetic, confrontational, and aggressive (Love et al., 2019; Cooper, 2009; Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006). Moreover, the use of a narrow definition of parent academic involvement systematically marginalizes African American parents because any deviation from these behaviors becomes a justification to diminish their

contributions (Love et. al, 2019; Goss, 2019; Reynolds, 2015). This definition of involvement also fails to consider how oppressive and structural inequalities influence African American parents' school involvement experiences.

Qualitative researchers have been working to dismantle the dominant narrative of African American parental involvement by asking African American parents how they perceive involvement in their child's education and what strategies they employ while navigating predominantly White school spaces (Howard & Reynold, 2008; Reynolds, Howard, & Jones, 2015; Allen & White-Smith, 2018, Huguley et al., 2021; Love et. al, 2019). The findings from these studies suggest that African American parents are engaging in culturally distinct involvement strategies as described earlier such as participating in school-district boards designed for parents of color, instilling cultural pride through race-focused documentaries, and challenging the school administration on racial inequities in addition to traditional engagement with the schools. Furthermore, this research has highlighted how school faculty devalued African American parents' involvement strategies through racial discriminatory behaviors (Reynolds, Howard, & Jones, 2015; Reynolds, 2010). These findings have sparked recommendations that parental involvement researchers create more appropriate measures to capture African American involvement behaviors, although existing examples of such measures are few.

Using a mixed methods approach, McWayne et al., (2017) utilized the input of low-income U.S. born African American and Caribbean parents with preschool aged children to create a parent-derived measure on positive parent involvement, and the resulting measure incorporated such constructs as "Black Cultural Pride" (efforts to teach their children about culture and heritage), and "Involvement at School" (items reflecting family representation at school meetings and activities). While the work of McWayne et al. (2017) represents a step in

the right direction, more work is needed to develop parent involvement measures that capture the range of involvement behaviors for African American parents. It is critically important that we expand how we conceptualize as well as measure parental academic involvement so that we can more accurately capture the culturally distinct involvement strategies African American parents' utilize to maximize their children's learning.

Current Study

No culturally appropriate measure exists that reflects the culturally distinct involvement strategies African American parents' utilize to enhance the academic success of their children. Moreover, little research has examined how interpersonal and structural stressors influence parental involvement for African American parents with children in elementary school. The purpose of the present study was to examine how stress impacts academic involvement for African American parents and to examine whether characteristics of a school moderate the relation between stress and parental involvement. Using both traditional measures of parent academic involvement as well as culturally-relevant involvement practices, I address the following research questions regarding African American parental stress and parental involvement in elementary school:

1. How does stress impact parental involvement for African American parents in early elementary school? I anticipate that parents who report higher levels of life stress as well as higher levels of perceived discrimination will report lower levels of both traditional as well as culturally-relevant academic involvement. Furthermore, I predict that there will be a synergistic negative impact of the dual presence of high levels of life stress and perceived discrimination.

2. Do characteristics of the school moderate the relation between stress and parental involvement for African American parents in early elementary school? Specifically, I predicted that higher proportions of African American teachers in a school as well as higher levels of racial equity would attenuate the negative association between parental stress, perceived discrimination, and lower levels of parent academic involvement.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

The proposed study was a secondary data analysis of the Dallas Project on Educational Pathways, formally known as the Dallas Preschool Readiness Project (DPRReP). This study examines cultural and familial factors that impact the development of self-regulation and academic achievement among African American and Latinx children from low-income families. Families participating in this project were recruited in Dallas County, Texas and had a target child between 29 and 31 months of age at the first time point, at least one parent who self-identified as Latino or African American, and a family income below 200% of the federal poverty level. A total of 407 families were enrolled in the study, of which 190 (47%) included a primary caregiver who self-identified as African American. Families participated in home-based data collection at four time points: when children were 2.5 years old (Wave 1, 2009-2011), when children were 3.5 years old (Wave 2, 2010-2012), when most children were in kindergarten (Wave 3, 2013-2014), and when most children were in first grade (Wave 4, 2014-2015).

Parent reports of academic involvement were collected at Wave 3 and Wave 4. Three children were excluded from the analysis due to diagnosis of a significant developmental disability, and one child died after Wave 2. Of the remaining 186 African American families enrolled in the original study, 138 (74%) completed data collection at Wave 3 or Wave 4. Families and children who completed data collection at Waves 3 or 4 did not differ from those

who did not in terms of child gender, family income, or caregiver education. Characteristics of the study sample are displayed in Table 1.

Measures

Parent Academic Involvement

Parent-Teacher Involvement Questionnaire (PTIQ). The Parent-Teacher Involvement Questionnaire (PTIQ) was used to measure traditional forms of parent academic involvement (Kohl et al., 2000). The parent report version of the PTIQ includes 26 items assessing the contact frequency and quality of parent-teacher interaction, the parent's involvement in the child's school, academic stimulation at home, and parents' satisfaction with their child's school. Parents responded to these questions on a 5-point scale of 0 (*Not At All*) to 4 (*A Great Deal*). The internal reliability of the scale was .84 at Wave 4.

Home Literacy Environment Inventory. This scale for assessing the home literacy environment has three subscales: parents' literacy involvement, parents' literacy habits, and children's literacy interest totaling 13 items. Respondents are also asked to indicate how old the child was (in months) when they started reading to their child. The 13 items are measured on a 7-point scale, from (1) *Never* to (7) *Daily*. Subscale scores are calculated by taking the mean with the higher scores on the scales indicating greater literacy involvement and literacy habits of the parent and literacy interest of the child. The internal reliability of the parents' literacy habits subscale was .68. The reliability of the parents' literacy involvement subscale was .59. The children's literacy interest subscale had an internal reliability of .64 at Wave 4.

Culturally-Relevant Involvement Practices. Due to the limitations of traditional measures of parental academic involvement, a measure was derived from the Africentric Home Environment Inventory and the Cultural Socialization subscale of the Parents' Experience of

Racial Socialization scale. The Africentric Home Environment Inventory (AHEI, Caughy, Randolph, & O'Campo, 2002) is an observational measure of racial socialization features within the home environment. This 10 item measure assessed whether African American toys, African American artwork, Black religious or other figurines, African American books (adult and children's total 10 or more), music, toys to learn about African American history, pictures of family members, family subscriptions to African American periodicals, and African fabric/print clothing were present in the home. The 10 items were scored as either (0) *Not Observed and Not Reported* or (1) *Observed or Reported*. Previous research has indicated that higher scores on the AHEI are associated with higher levels of cognitive competence among African American preschoolers over and above the effects of family income and general level of parent involvement (Caughy et al., 2002).

The five item Cultural Socialization subscale of the Parents' Experience of Racial Socialization scale (PERS-CS, Hughes, 2006) describes parents' teaching about their groups' culture, history, and heritage to their children. Two example items from the PERS-CS are "Encouraged child to learn about the history of their ethnic group," and "Encouraged child to read books about the history of their ethnic group." For each item, parents are asked if they have ever engaged in the described before. Parents who respond yes are then asked how frequently they engaged in the behavior in the last year. These two questions were combined into a single item ranging from 0 (*Never Ever*) to 6 (*Eight Times or More in the Last Year*).

To create a measure of the culturally distinct ways African American parents are involved in their children's learning, four AHEI items were included: "Child has access to toys to learn African American history," "Child has at least 3 African American books," "Child has at least 10 African American books," and "Child has culturally appropriate toys." These four items

from the AHEI were combined with the five items from the PERS-CS. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine the fit of a single factor for these nine items. Initial model fit was adequate, $\chi^2 (27) = 78.12, p = .00, CFI = .83, TLI = .78, RMSEA = .10, SRMR = .07$. Two AHEI items (“Child has culturally appropriate toys” and “Child has at least 10 African American books”) were dropped because they did not load significantly on the factor ($\lambda = .35, \lambda = .32$). In addition, two items from the Cultural Socialization subscale (“Encouraged child to read books about history of ethnic group” and “Encouraged child to learn about history of ethnic group”) and one additional item from the Cultural Socialization subscale (“Talked to child about people/history of ethnic group”) and the AHEI item (“Child has at least 3 African American books”) were covaried due to similar constructs. After dropping these items and adding the covariance, the model fit was good, $\chi^2 (12) = 21.01, p = .05, CFI = .97, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .05$.

Parent Stressors

Schedule of Racist Events (SRE). This scale was administered at Wave 3 and includes 17 items that required the respondent to report whether they have had specific racist experiences (1) in the past year, (2) during their life, and (3) the stressfulness of any experiences encountered. The past year and lifetime scales utilize a 6-point Likert scale from (1) *Never* to (6) *Almost All of the Time (>70% of the time)*, and the appraisal subscale utilizes a 6-point scale from 1 (*Not at All*) to 6 (*Extremely Stressful*). The final item of the measure appraises how different life would be if the respondent had not been treated in an unfair/racist way on a 6-point scale from 1 (*Same as Now*) to 6 (*Totally Different*). Higher scores on the subscales indicated more frequent experiences of racism and greater perceived stress. The internal reliability of the SRE past year scale is .91. The reliability of the SRE lifetime and appraisal subscales are both .95.

Stressful Life Events. The Events in My Life self-report questionnaire was administered at Wave 4 and adapted from the Life Experiences Survey (LES; Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978) for the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (NICHD SECCYD, 2000). The 57-item version used in the SECCYD was adapted for the current study by removing items deemed not relevant to the study population and also adding a few items identified by our home visiting team as important issues in the lives of study families. Examples of items deleted from the measure include “Major change in usual type and/or amount of recreation” and “Major change in financial status.” Examples of items added included “Delinquent/late payments on mortgage or rent” and “You or anyone in your family was the victim of a violent crime.” For the resulting 47 item inventory, parents first responded if their family had experienced that event in the last year, and for those experienced, respondents rated the level of stress caused on a three-point Likert scale (*Not at All Stressful, Somewhat Stressful, Very Stressful*).

The questions regarding whether an event had occurred were combined with the questions rating stressfulness of the event to create a single variable ranging from 0 (*Did Not Occur*) to 3 (*Occurred, Very Stressful*). The average SLEs score was 11.51 ($SD = 9.60$, range 0 – 41). The internal reliability of the measure was .74.

School Measures

Two measures were created to capture important characteristics of the school context: ethnic composition of school teachers and racial equity. Both measures were based on data extracted from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) compiled for all public and charter schools in Texas and available for download through the Texas Academic Performance Reports website (<https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting/texas-academic-performance-reports>). The proportion of teachers in the school who

were Black as reported by TEA for each academic year was used to capture the racial composition of the school instructional staff.

In addition, an index of racial equity was adapted from the work of Children at Risk (<https://childrenatrisk.org/>), a research and public policy advocacy organization in Texas, to capture the degree to which schools were effectively addressing the needs of children of color. The racial equity index was comprised of two components: a measure of the performance of children of color at the school relative to children of color in the state as a whole on the state achievement test and a measure of performance of children of color at the school relative to White children at the school. For the first component, the average pass rates in math and reading at each school were regressed on the proportion of children of color at the school, and the results of this regression were used to calculate the difference between the school's predicted and actual pass rates. For the second component of the racial equity index, the average pass rates in math and reading for children of color in the school were subtracted from the average pass rates for White children in the school. These two components were averaged with higher scores indicating that academic outcomes for children of color at the school were more equitable relative to White children and the state as a whole.

Covariates

Two variables were included as covariates: family income-to-needs ratio and caregiver level of education. At each of the four data collection points, parents reported their total family income as well as the members of the household. Household income was divided by the federal poverty level for families of similar size to create an estimate of family income-to-needs ratio, and the four time points were averaged. Caregiver education was categorized as less than high school, high school degree or GED, or more than high school.

Analysis Methods

Missing Data Imputation

Prior to conducting analyses to address the proposed aims, missing data were imputed using a standardized block of study variables from which auxiliary variables were extracted using principal components analysis (PCA; Howard et al., 2015). Particularly, roughly 100 variables that represented all areas of data across all time points of the larger study including interactions between auxiliary variables were used to calculate a reduced set of components. These PCA-extracted variables were used to impute 100 data sets of the study variables. The quality of the imputation was determined by examining density plots comparing distributions of imputed versus observed data.

Following data imputation, bivariate correlations were used to examine the relations between the parental involvement measures (parent-teacher involvement, home-literacy involvement, and culturally-relevant involvement practices), parental stress measures (schedule of racist events, stressful life events), school measures (ethnic composition of teachers and racial equity), and covariate (family income-needs ratio). Structural equations modeling (SEM) was used to examine the relation between parental stressors, school characteristics as well as the interaction between the two and parent involvement while adjusting for household economic characteristics. Model fit was assessed in *Mplus* (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017) and determined using four fit indices: standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; Hu & Bentler, 1999), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI; Byrne, 2010), comparative fit index (CFI; Byrne, 2010), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Browne & Cudeck, 1992).

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Bivariate Relations Between Parent Involvement, Stress, and School Factors

Bivariate correlations between the parental involvement measures, parental stress measures, and school measures are reported in Table 2. Higher levels of stressful life events and racism experiences over the life span were associated with lower levels of school-based involvement as well as lower levels of child literacy interest as well as lower levels of parental involvement with the child around literacy activities in the home. Contrary to my predictions, stressful life events were associated with higher levels of parent involvement in culturally-relevant practices. Magnitudes of correlations were generally small to moderate.

Multivariate Analyses

Using a latent variables framework in *Mplus* (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017), I examined the relation between parental stressors, and school characteristics, as well as the interaction between the two and parent involvement while adjusting for household economic characteristics. Caregiver education was excluded due to insignificant correlations with parental stress and school variables. Before constructing the structural model, CFAs were conducted to evaluate the fit of latent variables for parental stressors, school involvement, and home literacy involvement.

The subscales Appraisal of Racism Stress, Racism Experiences (lifetime), and Racism Experiences (past year) were used as indicators of a latent variable for parental racism experiences. Model fit was good, $\chi^2(1) = 4.36, p = .04, CFI = .99, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .134,$

SRMR = .021. Next, a CFA was conducted for the dependent latent variable of school involvement using the subscales of Frequency of Contact with Teacher, School Endorsement, School-Based Involvement, and Quality of Relationship with Teacher. The model was just-identified, $\chi^2(0) = .000$, $p < .001$, CFI = 1, TLI = 1, RMSEA = .000, SRMR = .000. Lastly, the dependent latent variable home literacy was estimated using as indicators the subscales of Parent Literacy Habits, Child Literacy Interest, and Parent Literacy Involvement. This model was also just-identified, $\chi^2(0) = .000$, $p < .001$, CFI = 1, TLI = 1, RMSEA = .000, SRMR = .000.

After confirming the measurement model, the main effects of the stressors and school factors on parent involvement were examined in one structural regression model. The model fit was moderate, $\chi^2(152) = 959.081$, $p < .001$, CFI = .72, TLI = .67, RMSEA = .169, SRMR = .111. There was no indication of modifications needed that would improve the model fit.

Results for the main effects of stressors and school factors are shown in Table 3. With all stressors in a single model, only stressful life events were associated with parent involvement. Specifically, higher levels of stressful life events were associated with lower levels of home literacy involvement. Stressful life events were not associated with culturally-relevant involvement practices or school-based involvement. Likewise, racism experiences were not associated with any form of parent involvement.

School characteristics had several direct effects on the different forms of parental involvement. Specifically, schools with a higher proportion of African American teachers were associated with higher levels of culturally relevant involvement practices, and schools that were more racially equitable were associated with higher levels of school-based involvement practices. However, despite my predictions, higher levels of school racial equity were associated with lower levels of culturally relevant involvement practices.

To examine whether school factors moderated the relation between parental stressors and parental academic involvement, we tested each interaction by adding a product variable to the model one at a time. None of the interactions were significant.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

This study examined how mundane interpersonal and structural stressors influenced the academic involvement of African American parents with their children in early elementary school. To my knowledge, previous research has not fully investigated African American parental school involvement practices with early elementary aged children but, rather, has primarily focused on parental school involvement with middle or high school aged children in urban educational settings (Huguley et al., 2021; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Williams & Sanchez, 2013). In addition, researchers within the parental involvement literature have acknowledged that educators have dismissed and ignored the culturally specific involvement practices African American parents employ to strengthen their children's learning (Love, 2019; Reynolds, Howard, & Jones, 2015; Lai et al., 2013). Scholars have begun to address this gap through qualitative work (Howard & Reynold, 2008; Reynolds, Howard, & Jones, 2015; Allen & White-Smith, 2018, Huguley et al., 2021; Love et. al, 2019) and by creating a parent-derived positive parental involvement measure (McWayne et al., 2017).

While this scholarship represents a positive direction within the field, more work is needed that reflects the range of traditional and nontraditional parental involvement practices for African American parents. Likewise, studies of parent academic involvement have not sufficiently addressed the unique mundane and interpersonal stressors affecting African American parents. In the present study, I used diverse measures to capture the breadth of African American parents' academic involvement to examine how these stressors influence parental

involvement as well as how school characteristics moderate these stressors to support both their involvement behaviors and their children's education.

I hypothesized that parents who report higher levels of perceived discrimination as well as life stress would report lower levels of both traditional and culturally-relevant academic involvement and that the dual presence of high levels of perceived discrimination and life stress would produce a synergistic negative impact on parental academic involvement. My findings only partially supported these hypotheses. Specifically, findings indicated that higher levels of stressful life events were only associated with lower levels of home literacy involvement.

Research has demonstrated that parents experiencing stressful life events can negatively impact home literacy practices (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Sawyer et al., 2018). Significant family life stressors such as moving or working challenging hours can impede the ability for parents to fully engage in the home literacy practices they desire (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Sawyer et al., 2018).

Additionally, contrary to my hypotheses, stressful life events were not associated with school-based or culturally relevant involvement practices. These results are counter to previous work examining family stress and parental involvement practices (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Sawyer et al., 2018). Stressful life events such as economic hardship can cause parents to become less involved in their child's school (Child Trends, 2021; Cooper, 2007). Conversely, it is possible that the parents were potentially reframing experiences that researchers would typically describe as a stressful life event, and thereby reporting less stress than the literature predicted (Wadsworth & Santiago, 2008). In addition, there may be other, unmeasured stressors that were not reflected in the measure of stressful events (Wadsworth & Santiago, 2008). The parents may have also utilized their social networks to buffer against the stress that accumulated

when experiencing hardship (Latunde, 2018); social support was not measured in the present study.

Likewise, contrary to my predictions, perceived discrimination was not associated with any forms of parental involvement strategies. These results are generally inconsistent with prior research findings indicating that experiences of racial discrimination negatively impact African American parental involvement practices (Reynolds, 2010; Huguley et al., 2021; Love, 2021; Allen, 2012). The presence of racial discrimination within the educational system has excluded African American parents from participation in parent groups (Allen & White-Smith, 2018), school decision-making processes (Love, 2021; Beard & Brown, 2008), and has made them feel dissatisfied or unwelcomed (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Reynolds, 2010). However, it is possible African American parents in the present study used their knowledge of discriminatory behaviors as motivation to become more involved in their child's schooling to advocate, protect, and teach their child resiliency when encountering educational racism (Delale-O'Connor et al., 2019; Huguley et al., 2021; Allen & White-Smith, 2018). There is empirical evidence of African American parents using their physical presence at school sanctioned events or their child's classroom to both combat against the deficit lens of being uninvolved and to monitor their child's safety from discriminatory practices (Reynolds, Howard, & Jones, 2015; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Allen, 2012). These findings demonstrate that the relations between perceived discrimination, stressful life events, and African American parental involvement practices are complex, and more research needs to be done to capture a more nuanced understanding of how African American parents use a variety of involvement practices to navigate the institutional and structural factors within the educational system.

The second goal of the present study was to examine how school characteristics may moderate the relations between stressors and African American parent involvement. I predicted that higher proportions of African American teachers in a school as well as higher levels of racial equity would attenuate the negative association between parental life stress, perceived discrimination, and lower levels of parental academic involvement. Although I originally hypothesized a moderating role for school factors, I found that school characteristics had several direct effects on parental involvement practices. Specifically, schools with higher proportions of African American teachers were associated with higher levels of culturally-relevant involvement practices on the part of the parents. Research has documented how African American parents may gravitate toward African American educators due to the shared recognition of protecting their children from the school's systemic racial practices, reinforcing cultural protective mechanisms, and challenging racial stereotypes (McKinney de Royston et al., 2021; Milner & Tenore, 2010). African American parents may feel more empowered to engage in culturally relevant involvement practices due to the shared cultural understanding of opposing the school's systemic racial practices as well as the knowledge of African American educators reinforcing cultural protective strategies for their children (McKinney de Royston et al., 2021; McKinney de Royston et al., 2017; Milner & Tenore, 2010). African American teachers providing race conscious teacher-student relationships may create a foundation for African American parents to engage in more culturally distinct involvement practices knowing that their practices would be welcomed and nurtured further in their child's educational setting (McKinney de Royston et al., 2017; McKinney de Royston et al., 2021).

Results also indicated that higher levels of school racial equity were associated with higher levels of school-based involvement practices. Extant research has shown schools that are

more welcoming to expanding engagement opportunities for African American parents by incorporating their social networks, organizations, and cultural values have higher levels of school-based involvement (Latunde, 2018). Our results of more racially equitable schools being associated with higher levels of school engagement supports the literature emphasizing how African American parents use both traditional and nontraditional forms of school involvement (social networks, organizations, church support, etc.) to enhance their children's academic success (Latunde, 2018; Reynolds, 2010).

On the other hand, contrary to our expectations, schools that were more racially equitable were associated with lower levels of culturally relevant involvement practices from African American parents. Schools that are viewed more racially equitable may provide more parental engagement opportunities (Latunde, 2018), promote implementation of non-discriminatory educational policies (Killen & Rutland, 2022), and encourage intergroup connection to foster mutual respect (Killen & Rutland, 2022). These inclusive strategies may reduce the racial inequities African American parents and their children experience while navigating the school system due to schools enacting policies that challenges prejudicial behaviors (Killen & Rutland, 2022). Such initiatives may result in parents feeling supported in raising children's awareness of cultural differences and racial inequities (Killen & Rutland, 2022; Siegel et al., 2019). As a result, parents might reduce their own culturally relevant strategies.

Limitations & Future Directions

The findings of the present study should be considered within the context of several limitations. First, the study was limited to two measures to conceptualize mundane and interpersonal stressors (experiences of discrimination and stressful life events). Other contextual stressors also influence parental involvement such as neighborhood disorder or street crime (Li

& Fischer, 2017). Future research should explore how contextual and mundane stressors influence parental school involvement practices for African American parents. Furthermore, social support was not measured in this study. Social support through networks, organizations, and community may help African American parents navigate their child's educational system (Latunde, 2018). A future direction should include examining which types of social support are beneficial in mitigating different forms of stressors impacting African American parental school involvement.

In addition, the analyses were limited to two measures to assess school characteristics (school racial equity and the ethnic composition of school teachers) that may moderate the relation between stressors and African American parental academic involvement. Research has demonstrated how a child's school environment can both promote as well as hinder a child's academic success but also the level of parental involvement (Goodall, 2018; Latunde, 2018). To fully capture how a child's school characteristics may influence the relation between parental stressors and parental academic involvement, additional school factors should be included such as school climate (Harris & Robinson, 2016). Evidence has noted schools with a positive school climate can increase the level of parental school engagement due to the implementation of inclusive strategies and making parents feel welcomed and supported (Harris & Robinson, 2016; Killen & Rutland, 2022).

Another limitation in this study is the lack of range in socioeconomic status of study participants. Because most of the participants had an income under the 200% of poverty level, I was unable to assess the intersection of socioeconomic status, parental stressors, and parental school involvement practices. Future research should explore the relation between

socioeconomic status, parental stressors, and parental academic involvement strategies in a more economically diverse sample of African American parents.

Lastly, a noteworthy limitation would be the operationalization of culturally relevant involvement practices. Due to the constraints on the traditional definition of parental academic involvement, this study created a measure derived from an Africentric Home Inventory observational measure (AHEI, Caughy, Randolph, & O'Campo, 2002) and the Cultural Socialization subscale of the Parents' Experience of Racial Socialization scale (PERS-CS, Hughes, 2006). Since this measure was created from one observational measure and one parent-report scale, it is unclear how these items influenced the type of culturally relevant involvement practices African American parents employed for their child. This measure also only reflected a small number of culturally relevant practices African American parents may use to maximize their child's learning. Future research should continue expanding the operationalization of parental school involvement with other measures to reflect the wide scope of involvement practices that are culturally distinct for parents of color, especially African American parents.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the present study adds to the literature on school involvement by demonstrating the importance of examining the mundane and interpersonal stressors African American parents experience that influence their academic involvement practices. Although the extant literature has recognized the racial and economic barriers impacting the parental academic involvement of African American parents (Goss, 2019; Cooper, 2009), there is a need for more studies that incorporate frameworks highlighting the socio-historical contexts African American parents experience that influence their level of involvement (Murry, 2018; Delale O-Conner et al., 2021). Additionally, our study underscores the importance of expanding the definition of

parental school involvement to capture both traditional and culturally relevant involvement practices African American parents employ to enhance their child's educational experience. Scholars have urged for a reconceptualization of parental involvement to reflect the range of involvement practices African American parents utilize that are consistently overlooked by educators (Roberts, 2011; Johnson, 2015). Prior to this study, scholars have centered the voices of African American parents to highlight their culturally distinct involvement strategies through qualitative work (Howard & Reynold, 2008; Reynolds, Howard, & Jones, 2015; Allen & White-Smith, 2018, Huguley et al., 2021; Love et. al, 2019) and creating representative measures (McWayne et al., 2017). Their work has acknowledged the cultural socialization practices African American parents embed within their parental involvement strategies to prepare their children for future racialized educational encounters (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Huguley et al., 2021). This study builds on this work by adding to the few existing measures that reflect African Americans culturally distinct involvement practices. Focusing on creating measures incorporating both traditional and culturally relevant practices African American parents use within a school setting can help school personnel in providing resources for African American parents to feel welcomed and affirmed.

Furthermore, this study can offer more insight into the relation between school characteristics and both traditional and nontraditional forms of African American parental school involvement. Although other research indicates that more racially equitable schools can result in higher parental school-based engagement (Latunde, 2018; Reynolds, 2010), my findings contradict these findings, at least with regard to culturally relevant involvement practices. These schools may implement inclusive strategies that challenge racial school inequities (Killen & Rutland, 2022) and provide more opportunities for parental engagement (Killen & Rutland,

2022; Latunde, 2018). I contend that my findings can spark future research exploring the nuances of how school characteristics influence the culturally distinct involvement practices African American parents employ.

Lastly, this study's focus on African American parents with children in early elementary school age, specifically, highlights the importance of the school system's responsibility in developing a positive relationship with the parents early in a child's education. Prior studies have primarily focused on parents with children in middle school or high school due to the importance of these transitional periods (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hill & Wang, 2015; Wang et al., 2014). Focusing on African American parents with children in early elementary school can advance our knowledge of the range of parental involvement practices African American parents utilize prior to their children entering middle or high school.

Conclusion

African American parents experience a combination of mundane, interpersonal, and structural stressors while navigating through the educational system. Utilizing a stress framework can help to identify how African American parents mitigate these stressors from everyday life as well as how these stressors influence parental involvement practices. Future research would benefit from exploring the nuanced relation between stressors and African American parental involvement practices as well as from a broader conceptualization of parental academic involvement that includes practices specific to African American families. Highlighting African American parents school involvement practices can support schools to create an emotional safe space for parents to feel heard, welcomed, and promote advocacy for themselves and their children. Such efforts to engage African American parents will promote more equitable school settings that are beneficial to African American families and their children.

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Table 1*Characteristics of Study Sample (N = 186)*

	N	%
Primary caregiver race/ethnicity		
African American	177	95.2
Hispanic and African American	4	2.2
African American and American Indian	3	1.6
African American and White	1	0.5
Hispanic, African American, American Indian	1	0.5
Primary caregiver's level of education		
8 years or less	2	1.1
9-12 years, no diploma	27	14.5
High school/GED	83	44.6
More than high school	74	39.8
Average family poverty level (Waves 1-4)		
Less than 50% federal poverty level	93	50.0
50-99% federal poverty level	51	27.4
100-149% federal poverty level	19	10.2
150%+ federal poverty level	19	10.2
Missing	4	2.2

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics & Bivariate Correlations Between Bivariate Parental Involvement, Stress, & School Factors*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<u>Parent Academic Involvement</u>															
1. Culturally Relevant Practices	–														
2. Frequency of Contact with Teacher	.01	–													
3. School Endorsement	.16*	-.18*	–												
4. School-Based Involvement	.08	.02	.49**	–											
5. Quality of Relationship with Teacher	.22**	.04	.37**	.54**	–										
<u>Home Literacy Environment</u>															
6. Parent Literacy Habits	.15*	-.01	.05	.27**	.26**	–									
7. Child Literacy Interest	.08	-.03	.23**	.33**	.33**	.34**	–								
8. Parent Literacy Involvement	.08	.11	.07	.21**	.30**	.23**	.62**	–							
<u>Parent Stressors</u>															
9. Appraisal of Racism Stress	.14	.03	.07	-.07	-.04	.03	.05	.18*	–						
10. Racism Experiences (lifetime)	.12	.00	.05	-.19**	-.05	.06	.05	.14	.62**	–					
11. Racism Experiences (past year)	.10	.03	.08	-.11	.03	.03	.02	.06	.46**	.84**	–				
12. Stressful Life Events	.15*	-.14	-.06	-.21**	-.16 [†]	-.09	-.25**	-.33**	-.07	.06	.10	–			
<u>School Characteristics</u>															
13. Racial Equity Index	.02	-.05	.16*	.33**	.08	.16*	.12	.01	-.05	.03	.06	.09	–		
14.% of Black Teachers	.02	-.01	-.06	-.06	.01	-.06	.04	.02	-.02	-.04	-.06	-.07	-.09	–	
<u>Covariates</u>															
15. Family Income	.07	.05	.00	-.15*	-.08	-.01	-.17*	-.18*	.13	-.07	.00	.10	-.14	-.05	–
Mean	.61	2.62	3.17	2.02	2.75	4.36	3.97	5.18	36.00	33.50	28.18	13.05	-6.29	44.31	.80
SD	.23	.66	.90	.66	.64	1.67	1.06	1.08	21.44	15.23	11.96	8.55	6.38	27.31	.40

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3

Structural Equation Model Results for Main Effects on Parental Stressors, School Characteristics, & Adjustment for Household Income

	Culturally Relevant Practices		School Involvement		Home Literacy	
	<i>b</i> (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i> (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i> (se)	<i>t</i>
Racism Experiences	.02 (.06)	.40	-.00 (.00)	-.17	.00 (.01)	-.04
Stressful Life Events	-.04 (.18)	-.30	-.01 (.01)	-1.02	-.04 (.02)	-2.67**
Racial Equity Index	-.34 (.07)	-4.71***	.03 (.01)	4.71***	.02 (.01)	1.86
% Black Teachers	.05 (.02)	3.22***	-.00 (.00)	-.68	.00 (.00)	.26
Income-to-needs ratio	.00 (.00)	.58	.00 (.00)	-.70	.00 (.00)	1.22

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$