

Towards Educational Equity: On the Relationship Between Schools and Disadvantaged Families

Kexin Zhang^{1,*}

¹ School of Liberal Arts and Science, Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York(10708), United States of America.

*Corresponding author. Email: kzhang@gm.slc.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to reimagine parental involvement for underprivileged families by analyzing the problems that are being perpetuated by the current system, whilst looking for potential future solutions. This paper believes that bridging the gap between disadvantaged families and their schools can greatly increase equality. This paper seeks to target a simple and seemingly trivial issue from a multidimensional way. It dissects the difficulties which prevent underprivileged families to build connections with the school through investigating the issues they face financially, physically, and conceptually. Then, it discusses the misunderstandings on the side of the school that prevents teachers from trying harder to reach out. After building a deep understanding of why both parents and teachers are unwilling or unable to initiate and maintain effective communications, it develops a cohesive set of methods, through combining existing research, that will bridge the gap between underprivileged parents and the school.

Keywords: Education Equity, Parent-Teacher Relationship, Disadvantaged Parents.

1. INTRODUCTION

From the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 to the Every Student Success Act (ESSA) of 2015, increasing effort has been given to reimagining education and advancing equity. In other regions around the globe, more resources are being directed towards education, such as Project Hope Primary Schools in rural China and NGO lunch providers. While educational equity has been perceived and confronted, the work is far from finished. Despite the good intentions, the status quo in most underperforming areas remains unchanged. As increasingly many researchers give their attention to revolutionizing education by constructing new educational models, not enough attention has been given to advancing equity in education from the standpoint of building connections between parents and teachers. While it has been commonly acknowledged that parent involvement is crucial to the academic success and overall achievement of the student, the issue of working with disadvantaged students is not usually tackled from this aspect. It is an urgent issue related to future social development to analyze and find solutions to this common and prominent social problem for educational equity.

2. DEFINING DISADVANTAGED FAMILIES

This paper attempts to review the barriers that disadvantaged families face achieving parent involvement in education. This paper utilizes equity theory to guide the discussion of educational equity through the specific lens of parental involvement. The theory that parental involvement will greatly improve students' academic achievement has been proven by numerous studies.

Oliver C. Moles defines the term disadvantaged family very broadly, which includes all kinds of disadvantages that can directly or indirectly affect the ability of parents to engage in their children's schooling experience and children's education outcome [1]. In this paper, "disadvantaged families" are defined as families of low income. Of course, low income may or may not also affect the parents' ability to invest in their children's education financially, physically, and spiritually. This section investigates the various problems faced by disadvantaged parents that prevent them from being involved in school.

It is also important to acknowledge before diving into this paper that parent involvement is not all voluntary.

Parents are involved in a variety of ways, starting from the very decision to or not to let their child go to school, ensuring that the child has enough sleep and nutrition and go to class on time, choosing school and curriculums, to helping them with homework, attending school events, and connecting closely with teachers to make long term educational plans [2].

2.1. Disadvantaged parents have poor abilities to invest in education financially

Financial investment in education echoes far beyond tuition, transportation, and textbook fees. That is, inequality is still prevalent in countries where primary and secondary education is free. The socio-economic reality is far more perplexing than the fees that are written down on the bill. In third world countries and undeveloped regions, free education is, in fact, not free at all. Even when there is no explicit cost for going to school, there are still countless implicit costs, such as the cost of traveling to school, additional clothing that might not be necessary had the child stayed home, the labor that is forgone by letting the child spend time in the classroom instead of at work. In African countries, the nearest primary school could be four hours away. Under such circumstances, it is important to pursue equity as opposed to equality, because some students, such as those in Africa, undergo extremely disadvantaged conditions.

In developing and developed countries and regions where basic needs can be met, education has its cost as well. School qualities can greatly vary based on districts, which means that in the same city, education resources, fundings, and facilities can be very different depending on the specific location of residence. This is very similar in the United States and China, where the education system is entirely opposite. In China, there is the concept called “Xue Qu Fang”, which means a house in a good school district. Some parents are willing to move at a high cost in order to obtain such resources for their children; however, this resource is limited and not available to most people. If you do not live in a good school district, which is unbelievably expensive, you have very little to no chance of getting into a good school, which translates to worse chances of getting into a university. In the US, the situation for public schools is not very different. Since schools are funded by taxpayers money in the districts, the quality of education can greatly vary depending on the income level of the district. Due to the varying quality of education resources, traveling time can be great as well; one example is that many students live in Shenzhen, China, but their parents want to give them better opportunities, so they send them to school in Hongkong. Their total traveling time plus waiting time at the border can add up to five hours every day, whereas local students may only spend less than an hour traveling.

2.2. Disadvantaged parents are unable to invest in education physically

The National PTA stated that the most important factor which determines a student’s academic outcome is, in fact, not the status or the wealth of the family. Instead, it is “the extent to which the family creates a home environment that encourages learning, communicates high yet reasonable expectations for the child’s achievement, and becomes involved in the child’s education at school” [3]. While income, like aforementioned, is of crucial importance, definitely not the only factor, nor the most important. To a certain extent, the status and wealth of the parents do determine how much they are able to be involved in their child’s education because apart from education, they also have to provide for the basic need of the family. Therefore, income can be an important limitation, but families without financial burdens can equally be disengaged with their child’s education [4].

Studies have shown that parent involvement has a significant positive correlation with student-teacher relationships and students’ classroom academic performance [5]. However, to be short and clear, parents do not have time. In reality, parents do not invest physically in education for several reasons. Preoccupied with other obligations, illiteracy, miscommunication, can all result in a lack of engagement. Even if parents grew aware that their participation in their children’s education is valuable to their children’s overall development, it remains a great challenge for them to make time.

2.3. Disadvantaged parents lack the concept to plan

In areas of extreme poverty, parents do not necessarily understand the long-term benefits of education. It has been widely proven by numerous studies that education level has a direct impact on one’s future lifetime income, and this is true in both developed and developing countries. Globally, each additional year of school increases one’s future hourly pay by 9%. In all cases, education is a good investment, even if one only considers the monetary return. However, parents in poverty may not be able to acknowledge this. Even if they do, they may not be able to think about the future if the issues that they face today are impenetrable. In poor places, children are viewed as financial instruments by their parents. This means that parents have the optimal number of children not because they can support all of them in school, but because they need them to start working for the family as soon as possible. Children are born as a labor force that needs to provide for the family. Thus, even if these parents understood that education has high return rates in the future, they are unable to send all of them to school and still manage to feed all of them.

In developed countries, there are laws for compulsory education, and most parents do recognize the importance of sending their children to school. However, lower-middle-class parents' concept of planning ahead is still weaker than higher-middle-class parents'. For example, in China, higher-middle class families usually have clear plans, usually with backup, for their children's education. They would plan to buy houses in good districts even before their child is born. They would hire personal tutors for their children specifically to target their weak subjects. They would also have plans to send their children to study abroad if they failed to get into a prestigious university in China.

3. CURRENT RELATIONSHIP OF DISADVANTAGED FAMILIES AND SCHOOL/TEACHERS:

Teachers tend to pay less attention to disadvantaged students due to the attitude of their parents. Teachers report that these parents do not come to school conferences, cooperate with take-home assignments, or participate in school events. To the teachers, these are signs that parents do not care about their children's education. In their words, if the parents do not care, why should they, as teachers, care about these students? In reality, however, the lack of involvement does not necessarily mean a lack of interest. As shown by several surveys and studies, most disadvantaged parents in the US do care about their children's education, but due to the difficulties mentioned in section one, it is hard for them to build a strong relationship with the school.

At the same time, schools are not prepared to build a strong relationship with disadvantaged parents as well. When teachers receive their training, understanding and developing sustainable connections with disadvantaged parents are not included. This section discusses the mutual misunderstanding and lack of efficient communication between disadvantaged parents and teachers [6]. Teachers should treat every student equally, and resolve every issue fairly, because such actions can create a sense of justice in students' cognition. If teachers cannot play the role of a fair judge, it will cause confusion in the mind of children if they are at the developmental stage.

3.1. Teacher's perception/lack of understanding of disadvantaged families

In the United States, public school teachers are overwhelmingly white. Nationally, in the 2017-2018 school year, 79% of all public school teachers were white and non-Hispanic, whereas only 7% is black and non-Hispanic. In startling contrast, in the 2018-2019 school year, only 47% of all public school students are white [7]. The government reports show that "in schools where the majority of students were non-white, the majority of

teachers tended to be white" [8]. While white educators outnumber all other races and ethnicities, the same is not true for the demographic composition of students. This composition has proven to be problematic, as white teachers in US public schools lack the necessary capacity to understand their students and the cultural background they come from. The same is true for all minorities and almost all countries because the teacher is a white-collar job that is mainly pursued by middle-class women.

Such an argument is backed up by strong evidence. Hart claims "[b]lack students who were exposed to Black teachers by third grade were 13% more likely to enroll in college. If kids had two Black teachers by third grade, the likelihood of college enrollment jumped to 32%" [9]. This is not a controversial argument as it is repeatedly mirrored by many studies. Such an argument then indirectly points to the fact that white teachers are unable to resonate with the students of color and give them adequate support. This adds to the difficulty of communication between teachers and parents, since teachers are alienated from the cultural and social backgrounds of these parents. Backed up by the role model effect, there are few ways to tackle this issue apart from introducing minorities teachers into the classroom [10].

3.2. Difficulties faced by disadvantaged families in adjustment to the educational environment

In a very similar light, disadvantaged families find it hard to understand where the counselors of the school come from. When they are exposed to a new environment and unfamiliar culture, there is no guidance for them during the adaptation process. As much as white teachers do not understand disadvantaged students' culture, disadvantaged families do not understand the unspoken rules in school. For example, many migrant parents do not understand that parents are obligated to talk to teachers and attend school conferences. Otherwise, the teachers will perceive them negatively. In cases where teachers fail to reach out to these parents, it becomes the obligation of the children to inform their parents about meetings with teachers. However, students may equally fear that the teacher will have bad news for their parents, and choose to stop their parents from going to school via hiding such information. Therefore, if such differences are not communicated thoroughly and carefully, misunderstandings will naturally arise.

Additionally, some low-income parents saw the school as an independent educational sphere that is unrelated to their home. In their understanding, the school and the home serve different and unrelated purposes, one is for education and the latter is for accommodation. The concept that the two spheres are separate instead of closely integrated is false and unproductive. To change this view, school counsellors and teachers need to help these parents see how the

learning environment at home can and will significantly influence their children's academic outcomes. They need to help parents see that parent-school collaboration is greatly beneficial.

3.3. Policies regarding educational outcome deteriorates the relationship between teachers and disadvantaged student

In many educational systems, teachers are evaluated unfairly. Policies like "No Child Left Behind" is not really about children and do not put students at the center at all. It holds teachers up to unrealistic expectations that serve no good apart from deteriorating relationships between teachers and low-achieving students. Because teachers are held accountable for students' standardized test scores, they might be unnecessarily hostile when it is hard to work with certain students. This pressure on teachers will directly translate to pressure on students whose academic outcomes are unsatisfactory.

Educators and educational institutions are unavoidably evaluated through their students' achievement, for example, universities have always been ranked against the students' academic outcomes, such as graduation rate, starting salary, and distinguishment. It is obvious that such criteria are not productive from the standpoint of disadvantaged and low-achieving students, because they are the ones who are "holding back" the outcome of the educator or the institution. Under such a policy, it is naturally easier for teachers to abandon these students instead of trying to help them.

Again, when enacting new policies, it is important to consider if such policies promote equality or equity. It is clear that a standardized test that holds every student up to the same standard regardless of their former abilities is equality, not equity.

4. STRATEGIES FOR REALIZING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY OF DISADVANTAGED FAMILIES:

New educational models, some revolutionary, have been put on the table. New concepts, such as balanced curriculum, integrated learning, interdisciplinary studies, are emerging rapidly. New technologies, such as distance learning and computer software, facilitate learning in innovative ways. In the real world where problems are complicated and never-alike, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to education.

Recently, there is more work filling in the gap on advancing education equity through building strong parent-teacher relationships with disadvantaged parents. Education does not only happen at school; children spend a fair share of their time at home, which is equally important as an educational sphere. Unfortunately, this fact is not commonly acknowledged by parents,

especially disadvantaged parents. Therefore, educators should take the initiative to get parents involved through scientific methods. This section talks about what policies and resources can help teachers initiate and maintain a reliable relationship with disadvantaged parents. It will analyze a few specific situations can give specific recommendations that are realistic and practical.

4.1. Preparing Teachers with the necessary tools to understand disadvantaged families

Shumow and Harris conducted a study in 2000, where they asked teachers to try to identify issues faced by disadvantaged parents. Only half of them were able to identify some potential barriers, such as long working hours, multiple shifts, and low literacy levels. More importantly, almost all of them report that they feel unable to "alleviate these difficulties" [11]. However, it is precisely the teachers who are at the forefront of education and at the closest proximity to the disadvantaged parents and students. In their study, they also found that 83% of the teachers that they surveyed did not receive "formal preparation for working with parents" during their teacher education program. This resulted in the fact that most teachers have a deficit ability to understand and help disadvantaged parents.

Building a strong network between teachers and disadvantaged parents cannot be a one-way effort, even though school counselors should take the initiative. In many cases, as Dauber and Epstein's study suggests, "teachers were more sure about what they want from parents than what they can do for parents" [12]. For elite families, this may not be a big problem, because parents are sure of what they need to do for their children. However, this has been and will continue to be a problem when working with underprivileged families. Educators need to receive such training in order to better assist the parents who really need assistance..

4.2. Policy support towards specific obstacles faced by disadvantaged families

The most important policy that should be implemented is to incorporate working with parents as crucial coursework in teacher's training. Teachers should not be unaware or unfamiliar with the difficulties faced by disadvantaged parents, and they should be trained to deal with all kinds of issues. To realize this goal, there should be a top-down policy that controls the number of kids each teacher is responsible for, which will make this task manageable and that teachers have sufficient time for every student.

Policymakers and administrators should also implement institutional support to encourage parent involvement, such as allocating time, agenda, and resources.

Grand scale policies play a crucial role in determining the overall direction of its implementation on other levels. In the United States' legislative history, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2003 and its predecessor Every Children Success Act of 1965 both intended to provide additional resources in order to support low-income students; however, both fell short due to their execution. In the future, policymakers may have to forgo standardized tests as an evaluative measurement in education, especially towards disadvantaged students. Shifting the focus from achievement to improvement might be the first step; other potential changes can include matching the ratio of white teachers and minority teachers against the ratio of white students and minority students.

In China, an increasingly popular policy is to require those who want to be teachers and government officials to teach at poor rural villages (Zhi Jiao) for at least one year. This is a practical way to prepare teachers who come from elite family backgrounds and wealthy urban life to understand the hardships faced by disadvantaged families.

4.3. Constructing social infrastructures to allow disadvantaged parents to engage in their children's education

Making social infrastructures that aid disadvantaged parents available is a great way to challenge inequity. By utilizing extra resources to help them, it makes up, at least in part, for the pre-existing inequalities. Some social infrastructures that can help these parents engage in their children's education include free transportation, free childcare, and free translation services for parent-teacher conferences. To go a step further, reallocating social workers to support these families in their community life will also indirectly give parents more opportunities to participate in school activities.

Other projects, such as TIPS (Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork), can create at-home learning and bonding opportunities for families without requiring the parents to have any relative knowledge or skills. Prototypes have already been produced based on elementary school science and math homework [1]. Research in producing such take-home tool kits can be very useful to those parents who have enough time but not enough education level to interact with their children. TIPS was developed in 1989 and initially practiced in Baltimore middle school. Over three decades later, in 2020, it continued to show promising results and has extended to subjects beyond math and science [13]. A sample of TIPS-Transition shows how it helps grade 8 students conceptualize the transition from middle to high school together with one of their family members. It guides both the student and parent to understand how to succeed in high school and eventually go to college by

requiring the family member to have any knowledge about high school.

5. CONCLUSION

Due to the limited time and length of this paper, it is only able to investigate one very specific aspect of education inequity, which is the inability of disadvantaged parents to involve in school. It is limited in the diversity of geographical locations and mainly used the United States, while sometimes bringing up third world countries as examples. It also provided limited solutions which are based on existing studies. Alas, lack of parent involvement is only one phenomenon, among many others, that demonstrates education inequity, though it reflects quite thoroughly on the problems faced by these students.

The current school system in most places in the world is designed in a way that perpetuates social reproduction instead of enabling social mobility. Disadvantaged families face issues both at home and at school which will disengage them from the system. Such disengagement can result in poor academic performances, low-graduation/college enrollment rates, and ultimately decrease their chance at moving up the social ladder. This paper finds that the most effective way of encouraging disadvantaged parental involvement is, in fact, to train teachers. Other methods, such as more effective policies and tools like TIPS, are also vital to the process.

This research provides insights on how school teachers and policymakers can potentially play a more efficient role in helping disadvantaged students succeed via effectively engaging the parents.

More research should be directed towards discovering the potential of fertilizing the connection between disadvantaged parents and the school, which can be a rich resource for disadvantaged students. At the end of the day, engaging parents is a means more than an end. While parent participation is indeed important and fruitful, future studies should also consider situations where parent involvement is impossible, such as serious illness, divorce and abandonment, incarceration, and even death. In these extreme but not singular cases, other measurements should be sought to ensure every students' learning and equity.

REFERENCES

- [1] O.C. Moles, Collaboration Between Schools and Disadvantaged Parents: Obstacles and Openings. Google Scholar, pp. 21-49.
- [2] A. Li, M. J. Fischer, Advantaged/Disadvantaged School Neighborhoods, Parental Networks, and Parental Involvement at Elementary School, *Jstor, Sociology of Education*, Vol. 90, No. 4 2017, pp.

355-377. DOI:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26383024>

- [3] National PTA, *Building Successful Partnerships: A Guide For Developing Parent And Family Involvement Programs*. 2000.
- [4] D.L. Stevenson, D.P. Baker Baier, “The Family-School Relation and the Child’s School Performance.” *Child Development*, vol. 58, no. 5, [Wiley, Society for Research in Child Development], 1987, pp. 1348–57. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1130626>
- [5] D.R. Topor, S.P. Keane, T.L. Shelton, S.D. Calkins, Parent involvement and student academic performance: A multiple mediational analysis. *J Prev Interv Community*. 2010; pp. 183–197. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2010.486297>
- [6] C.H. Beady, H. Stephen, *Teacher Race and Expectations for Student Achievement*. *American Educational Research Journal* 18, no. 2 (1981), pp. 191–206. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1162381>
- [7] K. Schaeffer, *America’s public school teachers are far less racially and ethnically diverse than their students*. Pew Research Center, 2021.
- [8] National Center for Education Statistics at Institute of Educational Sciences, *Race and Ethnicity of Public School Teachers and Their Students*. 2020. DOI: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020103.pdf>
- [9] S. Ahébé, ‘They see me as a role model’: Black teachers improve education outcomes for Black students. *Phillytrib*, 2021.
- [10] S. Assari, C.H. Caldwell, *Teacher Discrimination Reduces School Performance of African American Youth: Role of Gender*. *Brain Sci* 8, 183, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci8100183>
- [11] S. Lee, W. Harris, *Teacher's Thinking About Home-School Relations In Low-Income Urban Communities*. *Adi.Org*, 2000. DOI: <https://www.adi.org/journal/ss00/ShumowHarrisSpring2000.pdf>
- [12] S.L. Dauber, J.L. Epstein, *Parent’s Attitude and Practices of Involvement in Inner-City Elementary and Middle Schools*. *Google Scholar*, pp. 53-72, 1993.
- [13] J.L. Epstein, D.J. Mac Iver, M.A. Mac Iver, S.B. Sheldon, *Interactive homework to engage parents with students on the transition from middle to high school*. *Middle School Journal*, 52:1, pp. 4-13, 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2020.1840959>