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The Call for Parent Involvement in Rural Communities: Mantra and Mystification

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Taking a critical perspective on the literature that calls for greater parent involvement in rural schools, this study analyzes the relationship between place of residence (rural, urban, suburban) and levels of parent involvement in schools. Invoking a series of relevant individual and contextual control variables, we find that parent involvement in schools varies little in relationship to place of residence. Moreover, the negligible effects of the control variables suggest that parent involvement in schools is an elusive phenomenon, perhaps summoned up prematurely as a remedy for low achievement levels in impoverished rural schools. As a consequence, the call for increased parent involvement ought to be treated with circumspection. This caution is particularly germane in light of the strong ties that already exist—or once existed—between residents in many rural communities and their small, local schools. Efforts, both recent and historical, to remove small schools from their local communities seem to run counter to the rhetoric calling for increased levels of parent involvement.

Background

We situate the discussion of parent involvement in rural schools within a context that accounts for competing interpretations of what constitutes parent involvement, on the one hand, and what results from it, on the other. Centering on a multiple regression analysis using the NELS88 data set, our discussion confronts the conventional logic that (a) defines parent involvement as activity in support of a consensually determined vision of school improvement, (b) links levels of parent involvement to levels of student achievement, and (c) identifies rural areas as locations where there are lower than desirable levels of parent involvement in schools.

On conventional interpretations of the research, parent involvement in education significantly improves student motivation and achievement (e.g., Epstein, 1995). These interpretations tend to credit types of parent involvement that support efforts undertaken by the schools rather than those arising from parents' interactions with either their children or their communities (see Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). For example, Epstein's (1992) typology of parent involvement activities includes four types of activities in which schools' interests intervene in the relationship between parents and children and only one type of activity in which parents' interests are reflected through their involvement in school decision-making. Many programs to improve parent involvement are premised on a view of parents as deficient caregivers who require such services as adult education, parenting education, assistance in providing learning experiences in the home, and summer enrichment programs (see, e.g., Bauch, 1994; Davies, 1991; Hinson, 1990; Patterson, 1994; Swick, 1991; cf. Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992). Moreover, many of these same programs are concerned with having parents function as agents of the school by supporting school decisions, volunteering as classroom aides, and providing direct assistance with homework.

Parent involvement of the type examined above is considered to be weakest in urban inner-city neighborhoods and rural communities that are economically and culturally disadvantaged in comparison to the rest of the nation (Johnson, 1990). As this story goes, such disadvantage causes (and also results from) the low value that local residents in such communities place on education (see, e.g., Broomhall & Johnson, 1992; Motsinger, 1990). The particulars of the story differ with respect to urban and rural communities, and here we consider particularly the version that applies to the rural circumstance.

According to this view, rural life is impoverished because of the lack of "cultural resources" (e.g., Capper, 1993), the marginal economy (e.g., Broomhall & Johnson, 1992), and the low educational level of most residents (e.g., Bramlett, 1993; Capper, 1993). This analysis, like other deficiency models, tends to "blame the victim" (Ryan, 1971), presenting rural residents as primitive and backward-looking (Haas, 1990). Faulting rural residents and their way of life, supporters of this interpretation hold that the impetus for and substance of reform efforts need to come from outside rural communities. Educators who hold these views tend to believe that schools are well positioned to bring

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improvements to rural places through the processes of enrichment and attitude adjustment. As a technology deployed toward this end, parent involvement programs seek to bring parents' and families' interests into alignment with reform agendas, often formulated in places quite distant from the communities marked for reform (Seal & Harmon, 1995).

Interestingly, these efforts usually take place after schools have been deprived of their traditional sources of community support. The centralizing, industrializing, and homogenizing approach to education, therefore, imposes special burdens on rural communities and their schools (Lutz, Lutz, & Tweeddale, 1992). First expected to acquiesce to school and district consolidations, which physically remove schools from communities (see, e.g., DeYoung, 1993), parents and other citizens are then asked to become more involved in the schooling enterprise. That rural residents distrust this "go away-come hither" approach seems like a rational reaction, especially considering the fact that this two-faced approach[1] follows in time and resembles in pattern the long history of economic exploitation of rural places (see e.g., Gaventa, 1980; Whisnant, 1980). Those who live in rural areas understand how this pattern of exploitation has worked to their detriment, and they may wisely keep a distance from schools whose globalizing agenda fits the same, exploitative mold (Lutz et al., 1992).

Historically, however, schools were central to rural communities; and rural residents were noted for their personalized, even "clannish," concern for family members and neighbors. Various commentators have lately been drawing on this interpretation, reminding educators of the legacy of parent involvement in rural schools. Herzog and Pittman (1995, p. 118), in fact, conclude that the strong community and family ties that characterize rural life are "precisely the qualities for which the critics of American schools are now looking." This view of school-community relations in rural areas challenges the stereotypical images promoted by the "deficiency" model. But it is based more on historical and theoretical argument than on empirical evidence.

Furthermore, the slim empirical data that do exist support contradictory conclusions. A study of 296 schools in Missouri (Sun, Hobbs, & Elder, 1994), for example, found that, controlling for parents' individual characteristics, parent involvement was higher in rural than in urban communities. In contrast, a fact sheet listing frequency data on items from the NELS88 survey of eighth grade students suggests that parent involvement tends to be higher in urban and suburban communities than in rural communities (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994). Johnson (1990), by contrast found that suburban parents from middle and upper middle-class communities were the most involved.

A recently published study using the NELS88 data set and structural equation modeling provides a comprehensive analysis of the effect of place of residence and other related variables on parent involvement and, ultimately, student achievement (Keith, Keith, Quirk, Cohen-Rosenthal, & Franzese, 1996). The study found that place of residence had no effect on parent involvement. Moreover, despite the authors' claims to the contrary[2], it showed that the relationship between parent involvement and achievement was negligible in urban, suburban, and rural schools.

Sophisticated technically, the study by Keith et al. (1996) makes use of a construct of parent involvement that renders interpretation troublesome. Of concern is the use of an operational definition of parent involvement that differs from the definition conventionally invoked by educators (including these authors in their discussion of recommendations). Encompassing parents' expectations for their children's educational attainment and parent-child communication and excluding parents' interaction with the schools, the construct used in the Keith et al. analysis seems to be a measure of parental support for education rather than a measure of parent involvement in schools.[3] However, their findings are important in helping to dispel the persistent myth that rural parents are less supportive of education than their urban and suburban counterparts.

Like Keith et al. (1996), the goal of our empirical analysis was to distinguish levels of parent involvement in rural, urban, and suburban communities by using a large data set and accounting for an appropriate selection of controls. We did, however, use a more conventional operational definition of parent involvement so that our results would be interpretable within the literature—largely prescriptive—on the topic.[4] In doing so, we hoped to provide a basis for contrasting the conventional construct "parent

[1]Christopher Lasch (1979) makes a similar point in his discussion of the way that professionals take power away from parents while at the same time blaming them for failing to take responsibility for their children.

[2]The authors recommended initiatives to increase parent involvement in rural schools, even though the reported effect of parent involvement on achievement was substantively negligible considering the size of the sample used in the analysis.

[3]See Muller and Kerbow (1993) for a discussion of the distinctions among the constructs "parent involvement in the home," "parent involvement in the school," and "parent involvement in the community." The Keith et al. (1996) construct is much like Muller and Kerbow's definition of "parent involvement in the home." Our construct most closely resembles their definition of "parent involvement in the school." Also see Christenson et al. (1992) for a similar distinction.

[4]We are not implying that the literature on parent involvement is merely exhortatory. However, our review of the literature on parent involvement in rural schools uncovered many more prescriptive articles than empirical ones.

Table 1
Descriptions of All Variables

Dependent Variable	
PINVOLVE	Parental involvement scale score (seven items)
Independent Variables: Individual and Family Factors	
SEX	Gender, coded 1 if male and 0 if female.
FED	Father's level of education.
MED	Mother's level of education.
INC	Family income.
WHITE	Ethnicity, coded 1 if white and 0 otherwise.
BLACK	Ethnicity, coded 1 if black and 0 otherwise.
HISP	Ethnicity, coded 1 if Hispanic and 0 otherwise.
URBAN	Family's place of residence, coded 1 if urban and 0 otherwise.
RURAL	Family's place of residence, coded 1 if rural and 0 otherwise.
PARS	Both parents in the home, coded 1 if yes and 0 otherwise.
Independent Variables: Contextual Factors	
MINOR	Percentage of students in respondent's school who are members of ethnic minority groups.
DISAD	Percentage of students in respondent's school who are disadvantaged, receiving free or reduced cost lunch.

involvement" with the construct "community involvement in schools" that seems to be emerging from recent descriptive studies of school and community relations in rural areas (DeYoung, 1993, 1995; Herzog & Pittman, 1995).

Methods

Using items from the NELS88 data set, we performed a multiple regression analysis to determine the effect of place of residence (rural, urban, suburban) on levels of parent involvement as reported by high school students. We invoked a variety of controls that have been shown in previous research to mediate the relationship between parent involvement and student achievement (see, e.g., Muller, 1993). All variables used in the analysis are described in Table 1.

Sample

The NELS88 data set for the base year (n = 24,990) was reduced to 4,977 rural students, 4,855 urban students, and 7,071 suburban students after listwise deletion of missing cases. In other words, complete information was available for 67% of the respondents. This percentage was approximately uniform across all three categories of residence. That is, residence was not confounded with the incidence of missing data.

Dependent Variable: PINVOLVE

Initially selecting from the NELS88 base-year survey of students all items that related to parents' involvement in schools, we constructed a scale by including those items that increased overall reliability of the scale and excluding those that detracted from the overall reliability. We then computed a principal components analysis on the seven items that combined to produce the most reliable scale, and used the first factor that emerged as our dependent variable.

The seven items used in constructing our dependent variable, the parental involvement scale (PINVOLVE), are described in Table 2. This table reports factor loadings for the first component that emerged from a principal components factor analysis. Only one principal component is reported, as eigenvalues and percent variance explained dropped sharply, from 2.93 and 41.9% to 1.37 and 19.6%, with the appearance of the second principal component. All other components have eigenvalues less than 1.00. Furthermore, the results reported here suggest that the first principal component captures enough of the variability in the data to represent adequately the entire data set (Kennedy, 1979, pp. 133-134). Finally, we focus on the first component because our sole reason for using principal components analysis was to confirm that PINVOLVE represents an interpretable composite scale for the dependent variable, parent involvement. As we see, all factor loadings for

Table 2
Factor Loadings: PINVOLVE Items

Item	Factor Loading
Discuss programs at school with parents.	.64
Discuss school activities with parents	.63
Discuss things studied in class with parents.	.63
Parents attended a school meeting.	.65
Parents spoke with teacher or counselor.	.64
Parents visited one or more classes.	.69
Parents attended a school event.	.65

Percent variance explained = 41.9.
Cronbach's Alpha = .82.

the first component are above .60, and the computed Cronbach's Alpha for the seven-item scale is .82. On all counts, the utility of PINVOLVE for measuring parent involvement seems well founded.

Independent Variable: RURAL

Our primary interest was in the dummy independent variable RURAL, which was created from three categories of residence: rural (RURAL = 1) and either urban or suburban (RURAL = 0). In this analysis, URBAN also appears as a dummy independent variable, (coded in an analogous fashion).

Control Variables: Individual and Contextual Factors

Using PINVOLVE as our dependent variable, we specified a regression model which, in addition to the RURAL and URBAN dummy variables, used two kinds of independent variables as controls: individual characteristics of students and their families, and aggregated contextual factors.

The full complement of controls consisted, first, of commonly invoked socially ascribed traits which may be confounded with categories of residence. Specifically, we controlled for ethnicity with the dummy variables WHITE, BLACK, and HISP (Hispanic). In addition, there were three socioeconomic status proxies: FED (father's education), MED (mother's education), and INC (family income).

Whereas gender (SEX) is unlikely to be confounded with categories of residence, this variable has frequently been identified as a predictor of achievement and other education outcome measures. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it seemed unwise to presume that it would be unrelated to parent involvement (Kelly, 1993; Gaskell, 1992).

The dummy variable PARS (whether or not both parents live at home) was employed as a gauge of the adequacy

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	*M*	*SD*
PINVOLVE	14.13	4.44
SEX	0.53	0.38
FED	3.34	1.88
MED	3.13	1.71
INC	9.95	2.58
WHITE	0.69	0.46
BLACK	0.11	0.31
HISP	0.11	0.31
URBAN	0.29	0.45
RURAL	0.29	0.46
PARS	0.69	0.46
MINOR	28.40	20.99
DISAD	29.32	20.91

of family structure in providing a basis for parent involvement. As Clark (1983) has persuasively argued, PARS is, at best, a proxy for assessing the effectiveness with which a family actually functions (also see Lareau, 1989).

Whatever its deficiencies, however, PARS had moderately strong correlations with family income and our two contextual variables (see Table 4), and the signs of the correlation coefficients suggest that the presence of two parents in the home is associated with social and economic advantages for student respondents (also see Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

Contextual variables, such as MINOR (percentage of students in the respondent's school who are ethnic minorities) and DISAD (percentage of students who are disadvantaged, receiving free and reduced cost lunch), are less commonly used in research of this kind. However, the importance of contextual factors, as distinct from individual characteristics, is receiving renewed attention in the social sciences and educational research (see, for example, Billy & Moore, 1992; Brewster, Billy, & Grady, 1993).

Contextual factors explicitly and analytically acknowledge that there are not only different kinds of individual students and families, but different kinds of school environments, as well. Construing school environments in terms of ethnic composition and socioeconomic composition, as we have done here, has a long, even if inconsistent history, going back to the first Coleman report, *Equality of Education Opportunity* (Coleman et al., 1966). These and related contextual factors have recently been used in research on dropouts, teen pregnancy, and violence in schools (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Bickel & Lange, 1995; Bickel, Weaver, Lange, & Williams, in press).

Table 4
Correlation Matrix

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
(1)	PIN												
(2)	SEX	-.01											
(3)	FED	-.02	.04										
(4)	MED	-.02	.04	.65									
(5)	INC	.05	.04	.49	.44								
(6)	WHITE	-.03	.02	.15	.12	.28							
(7)	BLACK	.03	-.01	-.10	-.05	-.25	-.51						
(8)	HISP	.01	-.03	-.18	-.17	-.18	-.52	-.12					
(9)	URBAN	.00	-.01	-.07	.07	-.02	-.19	.16	.12				
(10)	RURAL	.01	.01	-.17	-.14	-.17	.12	-.05	-.08	-.41			
(11)	PARS	-.03	.07	.13	.10	.31	.10	-.17	-.02	-.05	.00		
(12)	MINOR	.04	.01	-.13	-.11	-.24	-.52	.39	.34	.33	-.21	-.14	
(13)	DISAD	.04	.02	-.37	-.32	-.44	-.27	.23	.18	.04	.22	-.14	.41

Results

We report descriptive statistics in Table 3 and bivariate correlations in Table 4. The regression results reported in Table 5 make clear that category of residence is unrelated to parental involvement, as measured by PINVOLVE. The partial regression coefficients corresponding to RURAL and URBAN are statistically nonsignificant.

The empirical question we asked was "Are rural parents' levels of involvement in schools lower than those of urban and suburban parents?" Our answer based on this analysis is an unambiguous "No." This is consistent with some past research on parental involvement, but inconsistent with other research. As noted above, findings with regard to a link between parental involvement and place of residence have been conflicting, rendering our results hardly remarkable.

However, when we broaden our focus and examine the other coefficients in our equation, as well as the adjusted R^2 value, our regression results are remarkable, indeed: None of our independent variables plays a substantively significant role in explaining variability in scores on our PINVOLVE scale.

It is the case that three variables, INC, MINOR, and DISAD, have statistically significant partial regression coefficients. However, the negligible values of their standardized weights make clear that this is an artifact of large sample size. This becomes even more evident when we see that the entire equation, with 12 independent variables, explains only 0.3% of the variability in the outcome measure. Parent involvement, then, appears to be an analytically elusive phenomenon: amenable to construction in a variety of ways and, at least in our research, unrelated to important other individual and contextual factors.

Discussion

Our findings suggest flaws in the conventional logic that construes parent involvement as a remedy for low achievement in rural schools. First, parent involvement, measured as "parent involvement in schools" in our study and as "parent involvement in the home" by Keith et al. (1996), does not vary by place of residence. Rural parents are as likely as urban and suburban parents to support education through their interactions with their children and to become directly involved in their children's school experiences.

Second, "parent involvement in schools" is an elusive construct, unrelated to the family and school context variables that influence student achievement in important ways. Of course, this finding may simply demonstrate the limitations of the items used on the NELS88 survey to measure parent involvement. More carefully refined items might reveal subtle distinctions among various types of parent involvement in schools that reflect differences in the characteristics of parents and families, on the one hand, and schools, on the other. Another explanation, however, mirrors the findings of ethnographic studies that show how school practices systematically disadvantage children and families from lower- and working-class backgrounds (e.g., Anyon, 1980; Lareau, 1989). This interpretation implies that teachers and educational reformers may read as different, or value differentially, the efforts of parents with different background characteristics to become involved in their children's schooling.

This latter explanation provides some basis for understanding why educational reformers persist in seeking to expand parent involvement programs in rural schools, despite the fact that (a) parents in these schools may already

Table 5
Regression Results (Dependent Variable: PINVOLVE)

	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients
SEX	-0.07	.01
FED	0.01	.01
MED	-0.01	-.00
INC	0.05**	.03
WHITE	-0.08	-.01
BLACK	0.09	.01
HISP	-0.21	-.02
URBAN	-0.09	-.01
RURAL	0.01	.00
PARS	-0.11	-.01
MINOR	0.05*	.02
DISAD	0.04*	.02

Note. $N = 16{,}903$. Adjusted $R^2 = 0.3\%$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

be sufficiently involved and (b) added involvement may contribute little to student achievement. Given this set of circumstances, we might aptly construe the prescription for increased parent involvement as a symbolic marker within ideologically motivated rhetoric. Educators who find it difficult to influence school outcomes in impoverished neighborhoods may invoke low parent involvement as an explanation. When they want to improve upon educational opportunities in these communities, educators often exhort parents to become more involved in their children's schooling.

In rural schools, the call for parent involvement may have a particularly ironic sting. Already excluded from crucial decisions about schooling, parents are subsequently invited to play a less threatening and obviously more tangential role than the one they would prefer to play. That this role matches the schools' needs, not necessarily those of the children, parents, and community, seems particularly disturbing (see Johnson, 1990). A more responsive approach to parent involvement in many rural districts would implicate efforts to sustain and build upon the small, local schools that these communities cherish (see, e.g., DeYoung, 1993). But such efforts contravene the motives of an educational apparatus tuned to the instrumentalities of global competitiveness, modernization, and educational standardization (Howley, 1996). In short, significant support for parent involvement in rural schools runs counter to the national agenda for educational reform, which, itself, provides the official endorsement for a certain, bowdlerized version of the same phenomenon.

Our research suggests the possibility that the conventional wisdom about parent involvement may serve ideological—rather than primarily instructional—ends (see also Christenson et al., 1992). In light of this possibility, we advocate a critical accounting for each point in the logic of parent involvement. Such an accounting ought to include a thoughtful comparison of what educators and community members in particular locales actually mean by the term "parent involvement," and it should involve a theoretical and methodological critique of the research that purports to demonstrate the unmediated relationship between parent involvement and school achievement. Moreover, such an accounting ought to distinguish carefully among quite different constructions of parent involvement, such as those captured in Muller and Kerbow's (1993) typology. Pending this type of critical examination, the construct, "parent involvement" and all of the prescriptive literature resting upon it ought best to be treated skeptically.

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