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Defining Engagement: A Study of Parent-Educator Perspectives

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Abstract

Developing professional, reciprocal relationships between parents and educators that lead to meaningful parental engagement in schools is challenging and often results from differing definitions of engagement and associated activities. Therefore, we aimed to investigate parents' and educators' definitions of parental engagement. We further explored educators' expectations for parental engagement and whether parental engagement activities match those expectations. Parents and educators of school-age children were surveyed to investigate their proposed definitions of parental engagement and associated activities. Surveys were delivered electronically to parents and educators residing and working in local schools and early care programs. The results indicate similarities and differences in proposed definitions and associated engagement activities. Educator implications and characteristics necessary to developing parent-educator partnerships aimed at enhancing parental engagement in schools are further discussed.

Keywords: Parental engagement, educators, parent-educator partnerships

Defining Engagement: A Study of Parent-Educator Perspectives

For decades, practitioners, professionals, and researchers have discussed the value of parental engagement in a child's education. Since the 1950s, researchers outlined the positive benefits of parental engagement on student academic and social success in school. Parent involvement in a child's education increases attendance, test

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scores, grades, attitudes, homework completion, and higher high school graduation rates (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Smith et al., 2011). These findings paved the way for including parents in early care, education standards, compensatory programs (e.g., Project Head Start), and legislation (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). Since the advancement of public education, parents' roles in schools fluctuated. However, theorists and researchers continue to report that a child's education (in and out of school) is enhanced by parental engagement in school (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2017). In this manuscript, a parent is defined as any individual filling the roles and responsibilities of the parent or guardian.

Theoretical Perspectives on Parental Engagement

Epstein's framework on parental engagement in schools, one of the most widely recognized models in the field, identifies six key types of engagement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein et al., 1987, 1992, 2002). Central to this framework is the emphasis on building strong, reciprocal partnerships between the community, school, and parents, with the student positioned at the center of these relationships. Epstein and her colleagues argue that "when parents, teachers, students, and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around students and begins its work" (Epstein et al., 2002, p. 7).

Expanding on Epstein's work, Paseka and Byrne (2019) highlight how parental involvement differs across cultural and systemic contexts in European education systems. They emphasize that parents' roles in school engagement are shaped by varying national policies, institutional structures, and cultural norms. This variability underscores the importance of adopting flexible and context-specific approaches to parental engagement, as what works effectively in one educational context may not translate seamlessly to another.

Further, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) proposed a shift from parental involvement—participation in school-directed activities such as attending meetings or volunteering—to parental engagement, which centers on active collaboration and partnership between parents and educators. Their continuum model highlights the evolving nature of parent-school relationships, emphasizing that meaningful engagement goes beyond surface-level involvement. Authentic engagement occurs when parents are empowered to contribute actively to their child's learning at school and home in ways that align with their unique skills, resources, and cultural perspectives.

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When integrating Epstein's framework with these broader perspectives, it becomes evident that successful parental engagement requires more than a predefined set of activities. Educators and schools must recognize and address the inherent differences between parents and educators, including their roles, expectations, and the power dynamics that often characterize their interactions. Additionally, it is crucial to acknowledge the diversity among parents themselves, considering the unique social, cultural, and economic contexts in which they operate and the constraints they face, such as time limitations, language barriers, or limited access to resources. By being attuned to these factors, schools can develop engagement strategies that are inclusive, culturally responsive, and adaptable to all stakeholders' varying needs and circumstances. This nuanced approach strengthens partnerships, ensures that contributions from parents and educators are equally valued, and fosters a more equitable and collaborative educational environment.

Evolving Perspectives on Parental Engagement in Education

Historically, during the late 1800s and early 1900s, parents' role in their children's educational success was undervalued mainly, particularly in their work outside of the school setting. However, contemporary research recognizes that these out-of-school responsibilities and contributions significantly foster academic success. For instance, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) argue that parental involvement should be viewed as a continuum, evolving from simple engagement to deeper, more meaningful partnerships. They emphasize that engagement strategies must be adaptable and responsive to the diverse needs of both parents and students to ensure meaningful participation in the educational process.

Similarly, Paseka and Byrne (2019) underscore the importance of examining parental involvement across different educational contexts. They note that the extent and form of engagement vary considerably across European education systems. Their work illustrates that the engagement practices in one system may not be directly applicable to others, highlighting the need for a contextual understanding of parental engagement strategies.

Although there is no universally agreed-upon definition of parental engagement, these scholars point to the growing recognition of its critical role in student achievement inside and outside the classroom. The following section will provide an overview of the definitions and frameworks currently guiding research in this field.

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Table 1 Types of Parent Engagement

Type of Engagement	Description	Examples
Parenting	Establish home environments to support children as students	Family support programs, workshops, school-community-parent liaison
Communicating	Design effective methods for school-to-home and home-to-school communications	Communication notebooks, class/school blogs, conferences
Volunteering	Develop opportunities, recruit engagement, and organize parents	Engagement surveys, volunteer programs, classroom parent
Learning at Home	Provide families with information on how to help with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning	Class website with brief instructional videos, Links to websites, newsletters/ informational briefs
Decision Making	Include parents in school decisions, and develop parent leaders and representatives	PTO/PTA, district-level councils and committees, school representatives
Collaborating with in the Community	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning development	Information on community events, alumni participation, summer programs, hosting meetings at accessible community locations

Note. Adapted from "School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action" by Epstein, J. L., Salinas, K. C., Sanders, M. G., Van Voorhis, F. L., Simon, B. S., and Jansorn, N. R., 2002, *Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, Inc.*

Educator and Administrator Definitions of Parental Engagement

Often, educators believe parental engagement starts in an education-supportive home (DePlanty et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Educators also emphasize the importance of parents aiding their children's social-emotional development through effective discipline (Wilson, 2011). Although the concept of discipline may have different meanings to some, in this context, it refers to enforcing a schedule with the child while adhering to consistent expectations, such as dedicated time for homework and a timely bedtime. Educators trust and encourage parents to instill an appreciation for learning in their children through active participation and modeling in their child's education through school-community engagement (Wilson, 2011).

Moriwaka (2012) investigated the perceptions of special educators and parents of children with disabilities regarding the characteristics they felt were necessary to create strong partnerships. To do so, Moriwaka conducted focus group interviews with educators. Participants overwhelmingly supported the importance of communicating with parents through various methods (e.g., letters, e-mails, notes, phone calls). Many participants also insisted that educators must create organized, consistent, and regular communication while being adaptable and open to communicating with families to improve home-school relationships.

Unlike most educators, the study participants described being frustrated when parents did not respond to their communication. However, these participants remained adamant and resilient in their efforts, whereas other studies suggest that educators who did not receive feedback from families discontinued their attempts (Miretzky, 2004). According to Miretzky, most communication between the school and parents involved student-related problems, causing tension and distancing among the parents. Although educators were proactive in communicating with families, their efforts did not result in a positive communication exchange. Often, findings from studies that focus on educators' perceptions of parental engagement imply that educators would like to see more efforts made by the administration to support increased engagement (Miretzky 2004; Moriwaka, 2012).

Researchers have also investigated administrators' perceptions of parental engagement and found that "active engagement" and "support" are the two dominant characteristics (Young et al., 2013). One participant stated, "Parental involvement is when the parent starts at home by instilling the value of an education. Then the parent introduces reading and social behavior at birth to school age and beyond" (p. 295). Young and colleagues (2013) concluded that school administrators provide definitions that strongly reflect effective parenting, and administrators should be responsible for collaborating with the school's educators to create a mainstream definition. One piece consistent across published studies is a widespread definition of parent involvement that could ensure that all educators are on the same page and hold the exact expectations for families.

Educators and administrators want parents to comply with their requests for engagement and hold themselves accountable for supporting their students' academic success (Wilson, 2011). These same educators also want children to come to school with a positive outlook on education and a "ready to learn" attitude. In addition, educators want parents to respect and trust their work and professional judgment (Moriwaka, 2012; Wilson). Further, educators want parents to model and teach their children to appreciate education and respect authority. In the studies,

effective communication between parents and professionals seems to be a recurring theme in educators' and administrators' definitions of parental engagement. Effective communication leads to effective partnerships, and as such, most educators place communication as the most important form of engagement (Wilson). Finally, educators often prefer that parents focus on more meaningful interactions and role models within the home setting because they feel positive home-school partnerships start within the home (Moriwaka, Wilson).

Parent Definitions of Parental Engagement

Like educators' perceptions of parental engagement, parents' specific definitions of engagement can differ drastically from family to family, given differences in experiences and beliefs. Varying definitions can confuse misplaced ownership of responsibilities related to student outcomes and lead to missing educational support in students' lives. Ladner (2003) found that a parent's definition will fall into one of three categories: general, identification of a specific activity, or statement of the importance of parental activity. Educators need to understand how a parent defines their engagement so they are not surprised or disappointed with their actions (Gbadamosi & Lin, 2003). This is also true for parent-preferred school engagement activities.

Ladner (2003) surveyed parents and educators to understand better the differences between each group's definitions and perceptions of parental engagement. When parents were asked to define parental engagement, some responded with definitions of engagement that typically included an awareness of what is going on in school and general engagement in their child's education. Further, some parents explained why they thought engagement was meaningful. Most parents in the study (67%) defined a specific activity, including communicating with the educator (e.g., notes, phone calls), assisting with homework, volunteering, or being visible in school. However, DePlanty and colleagues (2007) found that parents ranked these activities, except homework, as less important. The Ladner (2003) study participants could write in unique descriptions, and participants in the DePlanty and colleagues study ranked pre-written activities.

Further, Gbadamosi and Lin (2003) surveyed parents to identify their engagement preferences and actual engagement activities. Some of the most common activities parents preferred included eating lunch with their child, volunteering for field trips, visiting or observing the classroom, and helping with classroom parties. In comparison, parents' engaged activities included helping with homework, reading with their child every night, reviewing graded papers with their child, helping with class parties, and attending after-school activities. Varying participation percentages from the

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parents of students in three classes involved in the study supported the idea that parents were interested in and engaged in activities they enjoyed. Researchers found that parents were likelier to be involved in the activity they enjoyed. According to Gbadamosi and Lin, educators need to understand the preferred engagement methods of the parents they work with to improve classroom engagement.

Although there is some variation in definitions of parental engagement and engagement activities, specific activities can also carry varying levels of importance for different families. Most parents acknowledge the importance of engagement within the home and school, but each family has their perception of what engagement looks like. Researchers investigating this topic indicate the importance of school professionals recognizing and accepting each family's views and limitations and effectively considering this when deciding the best way to reach out to families (Gbadamosi & Lin, 2003). Without a more objective and widely accepted definition of parent engagement, teachers and parents might inadvertently place ownership of student activities and outcomes on each other. As a result, student outcomes might be affected.

Purpose

Understanding the individual components of engagement helps parents and educators find the most effective ways to feel successful and satisfied. Parental engagement is continually a significant factor related to student success. To best support parent's engagement in their child's education, teams must be able to answer questions like: What is parental engagement? What does parental engagement look like? Is parental engagement important?

Although parents and educators often describe similar definitions of parental engagement, parent definitions encompass a wider range of activities and perceptions when compared to educators. For example, DePlanty and colleagues (2007) found that educators and junior high-level students had much higher expectations of parental engagement than parents. Given this, there is a need for a more direct definition of parental engagement that includes the perceptions of both educators and parents and is more inclusive of familial and cultural components, as well as containing a broader conceptualization of the term (Hilado, Kallemeyn, & Phillips, 2013; National Center for Family Literacy, 2008). Therefore, we investigated parent and educator definitions of parental engagement in school.

Gathering definitions from educators and parents was essential to understanding similarities and differences in expectations. Another purpose of this project was to investigate educator expectations for parental engagement to determine if

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parental engagement activities matched expectations. The following research questions guided this study: a) How do parents define parental engagement? b) What activities do they report being involved with? c) How do educators define parental engagement? d) How do educators expect parents to be involved? e) Do parent and educator definitions of parental engagement match the engagement activities they participate in or are expected to participate in?

The level and intensity of parental engagement in their child's education is a multifaceted issue (e.g., home environment, job demands, culture); however, investigating definitions, expectations, and activities is important to understanding whether educators and parents are on the same page.

Method

Researchers developed a survey to learn parents' and educators' definitions of parental engagement and the types of activities parents should engage in. The survey included open-ended questions related to these definitions and checklist-type questions about the types of activities parents are asked to participate in.

Survey Development and Piloting

An educator and parent version of the survey was developed based on literature in the field (Alexander, 2012; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007; Ladner, 2003; Moriwaka, 2012). Although the open-ended questions were primarily developed based on the research questions, checklist-type questions related to the types of engagement activities were derived from outcomes in related investigations. Once the primary investigator developed both versions of the survey, the survey was sent to three experts with backgrounds in home-school partnerships for validation purposes. This step ensured that the questions represented typical engagement activities and verified that all questions would help answer the research questions. Based on the review from the experts, no adjustments to the surveys were needed.

The educator survey was piloted with a group of educators enrolled in continuing education coursework. The parent survey was piloted amongst parents who were acquaintances and colleagues of the primary researcher. The parents or educators who piloted the surveys reported no issues or concerns. After development and piloting, the survey was delivered electronically through the Qualtrics platform via district email and posted on an associated Facebook page.

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Participants

Participants in this study included parents and educators of students in early care settings (e.g., daycare, preschool) and those in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade in DeKalb County, Illinois. Recruitment was coordinated through school emails and a local Facebook group for educators and parents of school-age children in the region. This group was closed, requiring authentication and permission to be included. Surveys were distributed to 63 educators and 129 parents; however, participation in the survey was voluntary. Not all participants completed every section or question, leading to some inconsistencies in the data across various survey questions.

DeKalb County is home to a diverse demographic of families, with notable variation in socioeconomic status (SES). According to U.S. Census data, the median household income in the County was approximately $60,000, with 15-20% of families living below the poverty line. This socio-economic diversity presents a unique context for examining parental engagement, as families from varying economic backgrounds face distinct barriers and opportunities when participating in their children's education. The survey results may reflect these disparities, offering insights into how SES influences the levels and types of parental involvement in students' educational experiences.

Data Collection

Researchers developed an anonymous online survey with questions centered around parent and educator definitions and engaged activities. They included questions such as a) How do you define parental engagement (qualitative) and b) How do you expect parents to be involved (educator survey) or how educators expect you to be involved (parent survey; checklist), along with c) demographic questions (e.g., grade level taught, child grade level, number of children).

Participants were asked to explain their desired definition of parental engagement at the onset of the survey. They were then asked to select all activities that applied from a given list associated with parental engagement in school. This question was provided after participants provided their definition of parental engagement. The order of survey questions carries significance because parents had to define their engagement without any prompts or leading questions initially. The activity choices were then provided to parents (after defining parental engagement). For example, they included assistance with homework, attending parent-educator conferences, volunteering in a classroom or school, practicing skills at home, and reviewing information from home-school communication notebooks.

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Links sent through school email were forwarded to educators working in schools and parents of children where they attend. Administrators at the local districts and members of an associated Facebook group could access mailing lists and distribute surveys.

Data Analysis

Data from the parent and educator definitions were analyzed through a multiple-coding approach used to organize the data (Barbour, 2001). Two investigators completed line-by-line coding until a consensus was reached on all codes (see Tables 2 and 3). Codes centered on consistently labeling activities parents engaged in or educators' expectations of engaged activities, as well as verbs describing actions associated with engagement in school. Codes were then merged to eliminate redundancy amongst similar codes and categorized based on similarities such as codes related to assisting with work at home, attending, and volunteering. Similarities and differences were then identified among participants and within the codes and themes. The constant comparative method was used to guide the analysis, repeatedly returning the data and organizing and discussing categories and themes as recommended by Charmaz (2000).

Once coding was finalized, themes were developed to conceptualize parental engagement. Based on codes and themes, new parent and educator definitions were created. Analysis of the demographic data and data on the frequency of engaged and expected activities were completed through descriptive statistics. Data from the checklist item asking parents and educators to identify which activities they most engaged (or asked to engage in) were analyzed by calculating frequency. Data were analyzed to determine which engagement activities parents participated in and which engagement activities educators expected engagement from parents most frequently.

Results

How Do Parents Define Parental Engagement?

Parent definitions of parental engagement were investigated by asking parents to define it in their own words. Often, parents define a general definition of engagement by identifying specific activities that define their engagement or stating the importance of their engagement in their child's education, which is aligned with findings from several published articles on the topic (e.g., Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ladner, 2003; DePlanty et al., 2007). One participant defined parental engagement

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as “parental support for education at home demonstrated by a clear commitment to putting education first, supporting child participation in homework and other learning activities, expressing an interest in school (and related activities), and responding to communication from school as well as initiating communication.” In this definition, the parent articulated specific activities that defined engagement. Whereas another parent indicated that parental engagement meant, “full participation and cooperation where necessary, keeping the school rules and ethos in mind.” In this instance, they provided a more general definition of engagement. Yet, some parents provided a definition that responded more to the importance of engagement, for example, “[engagement is] necessary for success.”

To further understand the definitions of the parent participants articulated, an analysis of the frequency of codes and themes found in their definitions was completed. From this analysis, a new definition of parental engagement was created. This definition states parental engagement is necessary for student success *(engagement importance)* and includes engagement and active participation in school events and activities, assisting with schoolwork and skill development, communicating regularly with the educator, staff, and their child *(specific engagement activities)*, and remaining informed about school expectations, news, and child progress *(general definition*; see Table 1).

Other frequently used themes, such as “attending” and “monitoring,” are closely related to themes that occur much more frequently (see Table 2). Researchers found that parents either provided a definition expressing their feelings toward parental engagement (e.g., poor, lacking) or listed actions they associate with engagement. Overall, the proposed definition above encompassed most of what parents stated in this study and others (e.g., Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ladner, 2003; DePlanty et al., 2007).

Table 2 Frequency of Codes and Themes Found Within Parent Definitions

Theme		Codes	Frequency
Engagement	**Volunteering**	School events, sharing talents, classroom	25
	Attending	School events, parent-educator conferences, open house	9
	Engagement	Actively participating in school (presence), engaged with students, staff, educators in and out of school, relationship with school staff	14
Assisting		Home (schoolwork, reinforce skills)	17
Monitoring		Progress, homework, implement educator feedback	3
Communicating		Educators, staff, own child	14
Educational sentiments		Convey educational importance to child, convey interest in school activities, convey positive sentiments about school/ educators	3
Supporting		Educators, administrators, child	5
Informed		Classroom happenings and expectations, curriculum, students, educators, schoolwork, progress	11
Meetings needs of child		Enriched home environment, discipline, basic needs (sleep, food),	4
Cooperation		Activities done with educators within school	1

What Activities Do Parents Report Being Involved With?

Analysis was completed on data from the checklist portion of the survey on parental engagement activities that parents reported engagement. Based on this analysis, the most frequently chosen activities were: "Ask the child about their school day," "Review information sent home," "Assist with homework," "Practice skills at home," "Monitor homework and grades," and "Attend parent conferences and school programs" (see Figure 1).

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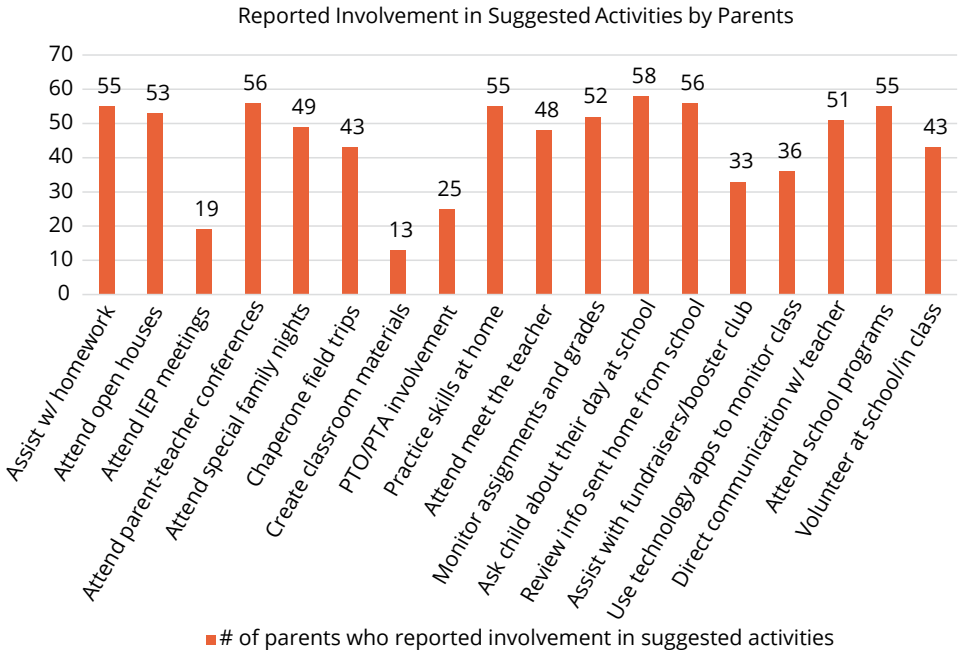
Figure 1 Frequency of Participation in Specific Engagement Activities Reported by Parents



How do Educators Define Parental Engagement?

Educator definitions of parental engagement were investigated by asking educators to define it in their own words. Like parent definitions, educators often defined parental engagement through the activities they expected parents to engage in. As one educator noted, parental engagement means having "conversations with teachers about daily activities and event and their child, participating in events, volunteering to stay to help in the classroom, donating materials/time/money, helping with curriculum planning, sharing pictures of events with the school, participating on parent-teacher boards or learning events, attending conferences, etc." Further, some educators defined parental engagement in terms of importance or lack thereof. One educator stated, "Severely lacking." Another defined parental engagement as "only when needed." Further, some educators defined parental engagement more generally, as one educator stated, "...anyone concerned about their child's education and growth, both academically and socially."

To further understand the definitions educator participants articulated, an analysis of the frequency of codes and themes found in their definitions was completed. As

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with the analysis of parent definitions, the frequency of codes and themes found in educators' definitions were used to create a new definition of parental engagement. This definition states parental engagement is necessary for student success *(engagement importance)*. It includes parental engagement in school events, communicating regularly with the educator regarding the progress and needs of the child, assisting with and monitoring schoolwork, performance, and behavior *(specific engagement activities)*, and conveying educational sentiments about the value of education, the educator, and the school *(general definition*; see Table 3).

The frequency of keywords provided by educators clearly distinguished what was viewed as the most important aspect of engagement. Codes such as "informed" may have been stated less frequently because educators assume that parents should automatically be informed if they actively communicate with their child and the school. Overall, the proposed definition includes what most educators stated.

Table 3 Frequency of Codes and Themes Found Within Educator Definitions

Theme		Codes	Frequency
Engagement	**Volunteering**	Conferences, class events, school functions, open house, holiday party, curriculum night, partnering with educator, classroom, meetings, workshops, observing	42
	Attending		
	Engagement		
Assisting		Reading, skills, developmental activities, homework, learning strategies, learning at child's level	14
Monitoring		Check folders, homework, grades, email and other correspondences sent home (i.e., newsletter), returning work/ permissions	13
Communicating		Regularly, as needed, verbal, notebook, educators, administrators, needs of child, performance, behavior, consistent, respond, maintain	28
Educational sentiments		Importance of school, expectations, engage in discussions about school, convey educational value, convey interest in child's learning	13
Supporting		Educator, what's being taught	2
Informed		Aware of class happenings, news, assigned work, progress, grades	5

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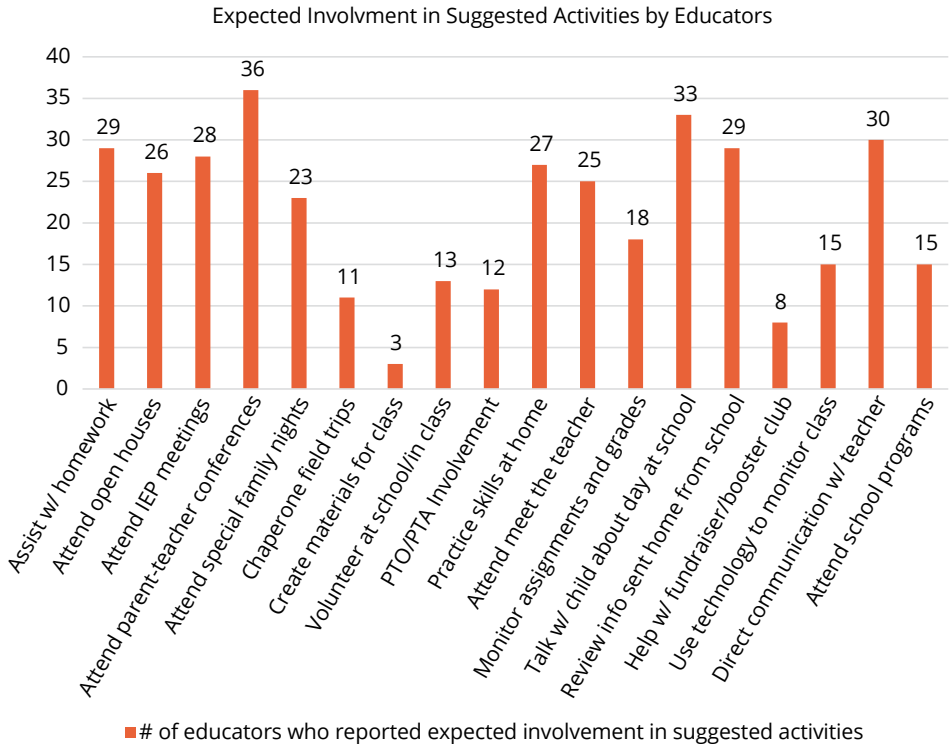
Theme	Codes	Frequency
Meetings needs of child	Showing concern for growth (academic, social), hold child accountable, teach positive behaviors	3
Donating	Time, resources, materials, money, needed supplies	7
Sharing	Pictures	1

How do Educators Expect Parents to be Involved?

As with parents, educator participants were asked to select all applicable activities from a given list of activities they expected parents of students in their class to engage in. The activity choices were the same as the list provided to parent participants (see above). Based on analysis of the survey checklist item, the activities that were chosen most by educators were "attending parent-educator conferences," followed by "talking with the child about the day at school," "direct communication with educator," "assisting with homework," "review information sent home from school," "attend IEP meetings," and "practice skills at home" (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Educator Expectations of Parental Engagement Activities



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Do Parent and Educator Definitions of Parental Engagement Match the Activities They Engage in or Are Expected to Engage in?

A comparison between provided definitions and selected activities was conducted to extend the discussion on differences between parents and educators in defining and discussing parental engagement. According to the proposed definitions for parents and educators (see above), both groups most frequently noted words like engagement, assisting, and communicating (see Table 4). However, the parent definition also included "informed," and the educator definition included "monitoring" and "conveying educational sentiments." This extends the question: What is the difference between staying informed and monitoring? Some of the words that followed "informed" in parent definitions included "classroom happenings and expectations," "curriculum," "students," "educators," "schoolwork," and "progress." In contrast, some of the words that followed "monitoring" in educator definitions included "check folders," "homework," "grades," "email and other correspondences sent home" (e.g., newsletter), and "returning work/permissions." In general, staying informed and monitoring both required many of the same activities.

Table 4 Comparison of Theme Frequencies Between Parents and Educators

Parent Frequency	Theme	Educator Frequency
17	Assisting	14
3	Monitoring	13
14	Communicating	28
3	Educational sentiments	13
5	Supporting	2
11	Informed	5
4	Meeting needs of child	3
n/a	Donating	7
n/a	Sharing	1
1	Cooperation	n/a

This comparison is particularly interesting given that parents used the word "informed" most often and rarely used the word "monitor." The opposite is true for educators, in that many used the word "monitor," and few used the word "informed." This requires a deeper look into these two words and their differences. The word "informed" was mainly used as an adjective (e.g., be informed, stay informed), while

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the word "monitor" was used as a verb. This suggests that educators wanted parental engagement to actively monitor the child's education, which would typically result in noticeable and measurable acts. In contrast, parents defined parental engagement through acts of being informed, which are more difficult to quantify.

While parents indicate that they should be informed about issues such as the curriculum and school activities, which reveals their desire to know what is happening at school, educators tend to assign parents to monitor pupils at home and respond to school communications. In other words, teachers often focus on tasks like ensuring parents check homework and schoolwork, leaving them out of the active educational processes at school. This disconnect between how parents and educators view engagement is a source of conflict, often visible between more engaged parents and educators.

Although it is hard to draw definitive conclusions from this comparison, it does suggest a need for further research into the varying perceptions of parental engagement and its implications. Educators reported that parents should be involved by "conveying the importance of school, expectations, educational value, and interest in the child's learning" and "engaging in discussions about school." However, phrases about "educational sentiments" were only mentioned three times in completed parent definitions, while these phrases were mentioned thirteen times in completed educator definitions (see Table 4). This disparity indicates a difference in how each group defines engagement and may contribute to the grey area often found in discussions about parental involvement. This gap in definitions and activities could explain some of the tension between parents and educators, highlighting the need for more precise, more aligned expectations and communication regarding parental roles in education.

Do Engaged Activities Match the Expected Activities?

Although the engagement activities parents reported being involved in and the expected activities educators indicated were similar, there were noteworthy differences. Both parents and educators most frequently chose the activities "attend parent-educator conferences," "talk with the child about the school day," "direct communication with educator," "review info sent home from school," and "practice skills at home." Although these activities were not ranked in the same order, they were most frequently indicated (see Table 5).

The activities chosen by parents and not educators included "attended school programs" and "monitor homework and grades." On the other hand, the activity chosen by educators and not parents was attending "IEP meetings." Understandably,

educators may have a higher expectation for attending IEP meetings because they are more closely tied to this item than the parents in the sample. Parents also claimed to be engaged in "attending school programs" and "monitoring homework and grades." However, this cannot be used to infer that parents are involved in activities that do not meet educators' activity expectations. Overall, there were six specific activities that educators expected parents to engage in, and parents were identified as engaging in those six activities.

Table 5 Comparison of Suggested Activities Chosen by Parents and Educators

Most Frequently Chosen	Engaged Activities by Parents (% of parents to choose)	Expected Activities by Educators (% of educators to choose)
1	Talk with child about school day (100%)	Attend parent-educator conferences (95%)
2	Review info sent home from school (98%) Attend parent-educator conferences (98%)	Talk with child about school day (87%)
3	Assist with homework (95%) Attend school programs (95%) Practice skills at home (95%)	Direct communication with educator (79%)
4	Monitor homework and grades (90%)	Assist with homework (76%) Review info sent home from school (76%)
5	Direct communication with educator (88%)	Attend IEP meetings (74%) Practice skills at home (71%)

Implications for Educators and Future Researchers

Our goal with this work was to define parental engagement and the roles that educators and parents play in achieving successful student outcomes. Such definitions are essential; however, they are meaningless without focusing on developing reciprocal parent-educator relationships that lead to meaningful engagement. Future researchers should consider operationalizing, outlining, and guiding educator-parent relationships before implementing interventions. These guidelines are important for successful parental engagement and may be problematic if no foundation exists.

It is essential to focus on the characteristics educators must possess to build long-lasting partnerships with parents. Findings from the completed surveys indicated that educator characteristics included being knowledgeable, vulnerable, responsive,

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inquisitive, accommodating, approachable, and collaborative (see Table 6). Below are specific examples and strategies to guide educators in moving from mindset to action concerning these characteristics. They provide ways to connect with families to enhance and facilitate parental engagement and provide insight on how to communicate with families first.

Table 6 Specific Suggestions and Examples to Implement Each Characteristic

Characteristic	Suggestions for Implementation
Be Knowledgeable	• Make a list of ways that you think parents can be involved in their child's education • Think about some of your morals and values, and determine ways that culture shaped those morals/values • Talk to your new students' prior educators and find out how parents were involved • Research and/or talk to other parents about their feelings/ideas towards parent engagement • Research and stay informed of the new ways that parents are being involved
Be Vulnerable	• Create a social event to present yourself to families in an unprofessional setting, like a park or library • Engage in casual conversations with families, as if you were just meeting them as a new friend, and not necessarily their child's educator • Share fun and interesting facts about yourself • Offer to take pictures of each family to display in the classroom, and to better remember each family
Be Responsive	• Attend community events where families might be present • Keep objective notes on each family • Show families that you are genuinely interested in them • Set up a multitude of different communication methods across a variety of mediums • Avoid assumptions about something you may see or hear about a family
Be Inquisitive	• Provide families with a survey or game that will reveal the communication methods they prefer, and ways they would like to be involved • Give families the option to make suggestions for communication of engagement methods • Investigate methods you may be unfamiliar with

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Characteristic	Suggestions for Implementation
Be Accommodating	• Implement family suggestions • Offer to meet with families outside of school location and time • Offer and suggest home visits • Create events and family functions that are tailored to families' needs • Provide engagement opportunities often, at least 1-2 times per quarter (2-3 times/trimester, 3-4 times/semester) • Send invitations/reminders/notes in a variety of different ways and multiple times if necessary
Be Approachable and Collaborative	• Show families that you are there to be their partner in their child's education through your actions • Learn more about each family, not just during the beginning of the school year • Encourage families to ask questions or voice concerns • Create mutual trust and respect with each family • Never give up on families that may not respond to communication efforts, instead try alternative methods

Building Parent Engagement Through Knowledge and Vulnerability

Educators must recognize that parent engagement varies widely among families. Future research should examine diverse engagement activities, acknowledge parents' shared desire for their child's success, and frame interventions with a participant-focused lens. Proactively building relationships with parents requires clear goals and an understanding of family dynamics (Sawyer, 2015). A strong foundation for these partnerships begins with educators reflecting on their cultural background to foster an inclusive and welcoming environment for all parental engagement (Goodman & Hooks, 2016).

Engagement efforts thrive when educators show vulnerability. Educators should let down their professional guard, presenting themselves as approachable and relatable rather than authoritative figures. This fosters trust, as parents are more likely to engage when they feel mutual respect and safety in the relationship (deFur, 2012). Researchers should consider this dynamic when designing interventions that affect parent-educator relationships, considering the delicate balance required to build trust.

Individualizing Engagement Through Responsiveness

Each family's unique background requires educators to personalize strategies for parent engagement. Meaningful exchanges are essential to understanding parents' beliefs, values, and preferred involvement methods. By listening actively and documenting parent concerns and goals, educators can develop engagement strategies rooted in cultural acknowledgment and respect (Goodman & Hooks, 2016).

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Fostering Dialogue Through Inquiry

Strong partnerships are built on clear, accessible communication (Epstein et al., 2004). Educators must remain open-minded and unbiased when considering parents' preferences for communication and engagement. Offering multiple options for involvement demonstrates respect and reinforces a commitment to collaboration and inclusion (Sawyer, 2015). Programs and events should be designed with parents' input, tailoring opportunities to meet their needs and preferences.

Generating Strategies Through Accommodation

Educators should support parents by providing evidence-based practices they can implement at home or in the community. Stepping outside traditional boundaries, such as arranging home visits or meeting families in informal settings, demonstrates a genuine commitment to building meaningful connections (Okeke, 2014). Coordinating these efforts requires flexibility, persistence, and consideration of family schedules and preferences (Sawyer, 2015). Researchers developing interventions should account for these variables, ensuring adaptability as contexts evolve.

Empowering Parents Through Collaboration

Empowering parents means equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to effectively support their children. Educators can foster this empowerment through workshops, training, and ongoing communication (Sawyer, 2015). Building trust requires consistent, collaborative actions that treat parents as equal partners in their child's education (Morton, 2017). Approachable educators who maintain an "open-door" policy, both in and out of school, are essential for fostering these enduring relationships (Ozmen et al., 2016).

Educators can build strong, lasting partnerships with parents by consistently implementing strategies that emphasize knowledge, trust, responsiveness, and collaboration. These efforts benefit all stakeholders—parents, students, and educators—leading to meaningful, lifelong impacts on education and beyond.

Limitations

Although the findings from this study were aligned with previously published works related to parent engagement and involvement, these results should be reviewed with several limitations in mind. First, the recruitment procedures were limited to schools and a local Facebook group in a Midwestern County, which may have restricted the diversity of responses and perspectives gathered. The modest sample size (63 educators and 129 parents) does not allow the generalization of the results to a larger population. Many participants only partially completed the survey,

limiting the ability to draw comprehensive conclusions. As such, the findings may not be representative of the broader population, and generalizing these results to other settings or locations should be done with caution.

A key limitation of the study is the low response rate from parents, which is particularly significant because the parents who responded are likely already more engaged in their children's education. This is important because it is plausible that these parents represent a particular subgroup that may not fully reflect the broader parent population. Those who typically engage less, often due to challenges such as work schedules, lack of time, difficulty accessing or understanding information, or other barriers, may have had different perceptions and actions related to engagement. The lack of responses from these parents could create a skewed understanding of the broader parent population's involvement or attitudes, as they may differ from more engaged parents in their views and actions.

Additionally, distributing questionnaires and selecting participants through electronic means, specifically via Facebook, may have contributed to a low participation rate and potentially biased the data. The risks associated with using social media as a recruitment tool—such as reaching a homogenous group of participants with internet access or familiarity with the platform—have not been discussed and could affect the validity of the findings. Moreover, the study lacks a precise characterization of the parents and educators involved and the context of the schools, making it difficult to assess the relevance of the findings to specific school settings or communities.

Furthermore, the range of grades and types of education (special and non-special education) represented in the sample is quite broad. These variables can influence parental involvement in education, and a more thorough analysis of these factors would help understand how parental involvement may vary across educational settings.

Finally, the authors of this study qualitatively interpreted the results of the open-ended questions. While measures were taken to validate the reported themes, there is always some degree of subjectivity or prior assumptions in qualitative analysis. In this case, the researchers' firsthand experiences as former educators, parents themselves, and individuals involved in successful and unsuccessful attempts at school-home collaboration could have influenced the interpretation of the data. Although efforts were made to minimize bias, these prior experiences may have shaped the lens through which the data were analyzed.

Concluding Thoughts on Definitions and Engaged Activities

The definitions of parental engagement by parents and educators share many characteristics, including the activities parents are currently engaged in and the activities educators expect parents to engage in. Despite these similarities, it is imperative to pay attention to the discrepancies that have also been identified. These differences make up the gray area within parental engagement. This includes the question, why is parental engagement not more successful and efficient if everyone is on the same page?

Parental engagement is and always will be a multi-faceted issue that looks different in every classroom. Still, some static concepts must undoubtedly be the foundation for parental engagement. With static concepts and guidelines, parents and educators can confidently carry out their respective roles and build upon those strict foundations to best fit their needs. Based on the combined activities that parents are engaged in and the activities that educators expect parents to be involved in, which also match each party's proposed definition, Parental engagement is necessary for student success and includes parental engagement and active participation in school events and activities, communicating regularly with educator, staff, and their child regarding progress and needs of the child, and assisting with school work, skill development, performance, and behavior.

This definition provides a good foundation for what parents and educators need to feel that parental engagement is successful. Other considerations for the combined definition include "monitoring schoolwork," "performance and behavior," "remaining informed about school expectations, news, and child progress," and "conveying educational sentiments about the value of education, the educator, and the school."

Data Availability Statement. The data set associated with this manuscript may be made available by directly contacting the lead author.

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Appendix A: Educator Survey

Educator Definitions of Parental Engagement in Schools

Dear Educator,

You are receiving this information because you work in a school that is participating in a research project, titled "Parent and Educator Definitions of Parental Engagement." X is conducting from X We are seeking your consent to participate in a brief [anonymous] online survey aimed at learning about your definition of parental participation and the types of engagement activities with which you typically expect of parents.

The purpose of this project is to learn about parent and educator definitions of parental participation. Further, the purpose is to investigate educators' expectations for parental engagement and determine whether parental engagement activities match those expectations.

The brief survey should take less than ten minutes of your time to complete. By continuing on with the survey you consent to sharing your responses with the investigators. Although we will have no way to identify you through your submission, your answers may be shared through future presentations and publications. Participation in this investigation is voluntary and you may terminate completion of the survey at

any point, without penalty or prejudice, by simply exiting out of the survey. Again, by continuing with the survey link you are consenting to participate in this investigation.

Q1 What grade(s) do you teach?

Q2 Which best describes the your current teaching position?
- o Early Childhood (Pre-K) (9)
- o Elementary (1)
- o Middle level (2)
- o Junior high (3)
- o High school (4)
- o Early Childhood Special Education (Pre-K) (10)
- o Elementary special education (5)
- o Middle level special education (6)
- o Junior high special education (7)
- o High school special education (8)

Q3 Which of the following best describes the number of years you have been employed as an educators?
- o Less than two years (1)
- o Three to five years (2)
- o Six to ten years (3)
- o More than ten years (4)

Q4 Which best describes the demographics of the community that you work in?

▼ Urban (1) ... Suburban (3)

Q5 How many parents of children in your class are regularly involved in their child's education?

Q6 How would you define parental engagement?

Q7 How do you expect parents of the children in your class to be involved in their child's education? Check all that apply.
- ▢ Assisting with homework (1)
- ▢ Attending parent-educator conferences (2)
- ▢ Attending Individualized Education Planning (IEP) Meetings (3)
- ▢ Attending open houses (4)
- ▢ Attending special family nights (ex. Family Reading Night) (5)

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- ▢ Chaperoning field trips (6)
- ▢ Creating materials for you to use in the classroom (ex. bulletin board materials) (7)
- ▢ Volunteering in the classroom or school (ex. guest presenter, reader) (8)
- ▢ Engagement in Parent Teacher Organizations/Associations (PTO/PTA) (9)
- ▢ Practicing skills at home (ex. math facts) (10)
- ▢ Attending meet the teacher events (11)
- ▢ Monitoring assignments and grades (12)
- ▢ Engaging in conversations with their child about the school day (13)
- ▢ Reviewing information in home-school notebooks/folders/emails (14)
- ▢ Helping with fundraising and/or booster club events (15)
- ▢ Using technology applications to monitor classroom activities (ex. Classroom Dojo) (16)
- ▢ Maintaining direct communication with you (ex. communication notebook, email, meetings) (17)
- ▢ Attending school programs (18)

Q8 Are there other ways that you expect parents to be involved in their child's education that were not listed above? Please list.

Q9 How do you promote parent engagement in your classroom?

Q10 What, if any, accommodations do you make for parents who are unable to be regularly involved?

Q11 Do you use technology to communicate and involve parents in their child's education? If so what type of technology do you use (ex. Classroom Dojo, email)? Please describe.

Appendix B: Parent Survey

Parent Definitions of Parental Engagement in Schools

Dear Parent,

You are receiving this information because you are the parent of a school-age child. We are currently recruiting participation in a project, titled "Parent and Educator Definitions of Parental Engagement." This research is being conducted by X from X We are seeking your participation in a brief [anonymous] online survey aimed at learning about your definition of parental participation and the types of engagement activities with which you typically participate.

The purpose of this project is to learn about parent and educator definitions of parental participation. Further, the purpose is to investigate educators' expectations for parental engagement and determine whether parental engagement activities match those expectations.

The brief survey should take less than ten minutes of your time to complete. By continuing on with this survey you consent to sharing your responses with the investigators. Although we will have no way to identify you through your submission, your answers may be shared through future presentations and publications. Participation in this investigation is voluntary and you may terminate completion of the survey at any point, without penalty or prejudice, by simply exiting out of the survey. Again, by continuing on with the survey you are consenting to participate in this investigation.

Q1 Which of the following best describes the demographics of the school that your child(ren) attends?
- o Rural
- o Urban
- o Suburban

Q2 How many children do you have?

Q3 What is your child(ren)'s age(s)?

Q4 How would you define Parental Engagement in schools?

Q5 How are you involved in your child(ren)'s education? Please indicate all of the following that apply.
- ▢ Assisting your child with homework (1)
- ▢ Attending parent-educator conferences (2)
- ▢ Attending Individualized Education Planning (IEP) Meetings (3)
- ▢ Attending open houses (4)
- ▢ Attending special family nights (ex. family reading night) (5)
- ▢ Chaperoning field trips (6)
- ▢ Creating materials for the educator to use in the classroom (ex. Bulletin board materials) (7)
- ▢ Engagement with Parent Teacher Organization/Association (PTO/PTA) (8)
- ▢ Practicing skills at home (ex. Math facts) (9)
- ▢ Attending meet the teacher events (10)
- ▢ Monitoring assignments and grades (11)
- ▢ Engaging in conversations with your child about his/her school day (12)

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- ▢ Reviewing information sent home through home-school notebook/folder/email (13)
- ▢ Volunteering at the school or in the classroom (ex. guest presenter, reader) (14)
- ▢ Assisting with fundraising efforts and/or booster club activities (15)
- ▢ Using technology applications to monitor classroom activities (ex. Classroom Dojo) (16)
- ▢ Direct communication with educator (ex. communication notebook, email, meetings) (17)
- ▢ Attending school programs (18)

Q6 What other ways would you like to be involved in your child(ren)'s education that were not included above? Please list.

Q7 How do you prefer to be involved in your child(ren)'s education? Why?

Q8 How does your child(ren)'s educator(s) currently try to involve you?

Q9 Are you able to engage in these activities? Why?

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