African American Middle-Income Parents

How Are They Involved in Their Children’s Literacy Development?

A volume in
Literacy, Language, and Learning
Series Editor: Patricia Ruggiano Schmidt
Literacy, Language, and Learning

Patricia Ruggiano Schmidt, Le Moyne College
Series Editor

African American Middle-Income Parents: How Are They Involved in Their Children’s Literacy Development? (in press)
By Ethel Swindell Robinson

Research and Reflection: Teachers Take Action for Literacy Development (2006)
By Andrea Izzo

Edited by Patricia Ruggiano Schmidt and Claudia Finkbeiner

Preparing Educators to Communicate and Connect with Families and Communities (2005)
Edited by Patricia Ruggiano Schmidt

By Claire White Putala

Reconceptualizing Literacy in the New Age of Multiculturalism and Pluralism (2001)
Edited by Patricia Ruggiano Schmidt and Peter B. Mosenthal
African American Middle-Income Parents

How Are They Involved in Their Children’s Literacy Development?

By

Ethel Swindell Robinson
Dedicated to

The late Peter B. Mosenthal, my grandchildren, and my deceased parents, Mr. Mack and Mrs. Swindell, who instilled in me a love for learning and taught me to never give up on my dreams.
## CONTENTS

Foreword ................................................................. ix

*Alfred W. Tatum, Ph.D.*

Acknowledgments .................................................... xi

1 Introduction: Middle-Income Images and Perceptions ............. 1

2 Child’s Literacy Learning: Like a Brick Wall Keeping Her on Task ....................................................... 13

3 Creating Positive Involvement Roles: Embracing Advocacy ..... 21

4 Religion: The Umbrella for Parental Perceptions of Involvement ....................................................... 29

5 Involvement Roles: Not Fifty–Fifty ................................ 37

6 Involvement and Socialization Practices for Self-Sufficiency ..... 47

7 Perceptions of Involvement and Micromanaging a Child’s Education ....................................................... 57

8 A Parental Literacy Dilemma ........................................ 65

9 Uncovering the Key Meaning of Parental Involvement ......... 75

Conclusion ................................................................. 85

References ................................................................. 87

About the Author ......................................................... 91
FOREWORD

Several years ago, when my son was in the first grade, I was “called” to act on his behalf and on the behalf of other African American students because of an instructional activity that was part of the first-grade curriculum. The students were studying the origins of their classmates and constructing passports to chart their journeys to these different places—Greece, Ireland, Italy, China, Mexico, and Kwanzaa. As an African American middle-income parent, I immediately became concerned, because it was intimated that Kwanzaa was a place of origin, not a celebration envisioned in the late 1960s that emphasizes seven principles for the betterment of African Americans. Sadly, I found out that this same activity was four years old and had never been questioned.

Part of the problem I assessed was the relatively few numbers of African American students in the moderate- to high-income school district. Teachers had very minimal experience interacting with African American parents and had little knowledge about the expectations the parents held for their children. Therefore, the intent to honor the identity of African American students, although honorable, was woefully inadequate and misguided. While the first-grade students enjoyed the activity and failed to recognize the omission of the origin of their African American peers, this created a real tension for me as an African American parent.

This incident and several other culturally-entrenched incidents caused me to strike a delicate balance when communicating with the teachers. My son is a cultural being, but as a seven-year-old, was more interested in having a wonderful school year without the spoils of culture. Developmentally, he shared the same child-like qualities imported to class by the other students.

The intersection of culture, income, and schooling leads to many challenging questions. Which students’ identities are of most worth? How can parents advocate for students’ cultural identities and their academic identities that may have little to do with their cultural characteristics? How do
FOREWORD

African American parents who are increasingly becoming middle-income communicate with primary teachers who are disproportionately White and female to share their desire to have their children’s cultural characteristics acknowledged without reducing their children to “culture only?” How can parents and teachers reconcile differing belief systems about culture, language, and schooling without using children as pawns in these discussions?

To date, there is very little research that provides answers to the questions identified above. Fortunately, Ethel Robinson, has informed us that the role of middle-income African American parents’ involvement during the primary years of their children’s education is too important to ignore. She begins to unpack some to the dilemmas middle-income African American parents face as they move forward to provide the best educational opportunities for their children. This dilemma is couched in a national dilemma.

While schools have become increasingly diverse, many communities have not. Many middle-income communities still have a small relative share of African American families. This means, that in these communities, African American students from middle-income homes still constitute a small percentage of their school’s population. This provides fewer opportunities for interaction between teachers in these schools and African American parents. With increased interactions, heightened understandings, and effective communication, we learn how teachers and African American middle-income parents are best able to protect the educational rights of all children. This text moves us in that direction.

—Alfred W. Tatum, Ph.D.
Northern Illinois University
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, as always, I give glory, honor, and thanks to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for making it possible for me to write this book. Many thanks are extended to my sorority sisters and friends far and near, who believed in my lofty goal of becoming an author.

I am genuinely grateful to my professors for their assistance and guidance over the years. To Dr. Susan Hynds, for her insightful comments and suggestions on drafts of the manuscript—you continue to inspire me; and to Dr. Donald Leu, for your encouragement in absentia. A special thanks to the late Dr. Peter B. Mosenthal, for his enormous support. I miss you!

Appreciation is extended to Dr. Patricia Ruggiano Schmidt for giving me the first chance to write, and her belief and confidence in my capabilities; and to Dr. Alfred Tatum for writing the foreword. I would like to also thank Mrs. Mary McCurty and Dr. Mary Rucker for their editing expertise. Special thanks and appreciation to Dr. Cherlyn A. Johnson for her prayers, friendship, and encouragement.

Much gratitude is given to Mrs. Darlene Williams, Mrs. Jean Phillips, and Mrs. Sonya S. Hines for their support and for listening to my ideas, while I labored over mounds of papers and diskettes, instead of going shopping with them.

Heartfelt thanks to Pastor and Mrs. Milton Kornegay, for their support, and to the Central Baptist Church congregation for their unceasing prayers. I especially appreciate the technological support from Mrs. Carolon Dunlap.

This book could not have been written without the cooperation of the families who opened their homes and shared perceptions of their parental involvement practices. I am indebted to you for your willingness to be a part of this little-understood topic. I love each and every one of you. May God add a blessing to your lives.

Finally, I express my sincerest gratefulness to my son, his wife, my two grandchildren, and to all of my relatives. I adore and love you all.