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# *Successful African American Students: The Role of Parental Involvement*

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*Research on parental involvement suggests that families play a key role in students' school success. Using social capital theory as a conceptual framework, this study sought to identify unique characteristics of social capital held by successful African American students compared to those of successful White and unsuccessful Black peers. It examined social capital along four dimensions: (a) parent-teen interactions, (b) parent-school interactions, (c) parent-parent interactions, and (d) family norms. Despite their comparatively more disadvantaged home environments, successful African American students demonstrated higher levels of social capital on 6 of the 11 indicators examined. The implications of these findings for parents, educators, and educational policymakers are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

Changes in technology are increasing the necessity for participants in the U.S. labor market to possess a postsecondary degree. Although the high school completion rate for African American students has increased over the past several decades, attaining postsecondary educational opportunities and achieving lofty academic goals represents a critical challenge for many African American students (Solorzano, 1992). In the search for strategies that foster academic success among African American students, attention has been focused on increasing parental involvement in these students' schooling. However, parental involvement has multiple meanings (Cassanova, 1996), and it has been operationalized in studies in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, parental involvement is widely recognized as an important contributor to the academic success of African American students (Coleman, 1991; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Cooper & Datnow, in press; Epstein, 1995; Lareau, 1989).

The majority of the studies that have investigated the issue of parental involvement are primarily based on samplings of White students. However, the evidence of positive parental involvement on children's school performance based on that demonstrated with White students may not hold true for students of other racial/ethnic groups (Steinberg, Dornbush, & Brown, 1992). Likewise, studies examining the effect of parental involvement on African American students often focus on the factors that place these students at risk and ignore the ways in which African American families promote successful school achievement and experiences.

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More recently, the focus of studies of African American students has shifted to include other factors that contribute to these students' success. Clark (1983) studied high-achieving African American students from low-income home environments. Through intensive interviews and observations, Clark discovered that the parents of such students engaged in distinctive parent-child interactions. That is, they typically created emotionally supportive home environments, engaged in frequent and meaningful dialogue with their children, helped them with homework, and communicated clear and consistent behavioral limits to them. Other studies have supported these findings. Sanders (1997), for example, interviewed high-achieving African American students from urban areas and reported that Black parents' efforts to promote their children's positive racial/ethnic socialization helped promote the latter's academic success as a response to racism and discrimination. Datnow and Cooper (1996) studied the role of peer networks in affirming academic success and racial identity among African American students attending predominantly White independent schools. Using national representative data, Lee, Winfield, and Wilson (1991) examined both family and school factors as they contribute to the academic behaviors of high-achieving African American students.

A notable limitation of the research mentioned above, with the exception of the study by Lee et al. (1991), is that they represent small-scale qualitative studies. In order to address the limitations of previous studies of parental involvement and African American students' educational attainment, the present study utilizes national sample data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88). This comprehensive database allows for in-depth study of the role of parental involvement in promoting academic success among African American students, defined herein as the successful completion of high school and enrollment in a postsecondary education institution.

This study also attempts to identify unique characteristics of the social capital held by successful African American students. Social capital refers to the social networks and social interactions that facilitate educational attainment (Coleman, 1988), particularly those established between parents, students, and schools. There is considerable evidence that social capital leads to improved student achievement, better school grades, and reduced dropout rates (Carbonaro, 1998; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Kahne & Bailey, 1999; Schneider & Coleman, 1993; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). These improvements occur regardless of other social and economic characteristics a family may possess.

### **Social Capital Theory**

Grounded in social capital theory (Coleman, 1988; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987), the conceptual framework guiding this study provides a foundation for studying the process variables associated with parental involvement. According to Coleman (1988), families can provide or possess three types and levels of capital: financial, human, and social. Financial capital is roughly equivalent to income or wealth. In families with low levels of financial capital or income, parents may still have high educational aspirations for their children and support their educational pursuits. In a case study conducted at an Indochinese refugee camp, Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore (1992) found that even among financially poor families, high levels of social capital could be attained, as determined by the high values parents placed on education and academic expectations. Duran and Weffer (1992) report similar results in their study of recent Mexican American immigrants to the United States: high values and aspirations resulted in positive academic outcomes.

Human capital is roughly equivalent to parental education, while social capital is more closely tied to social networks and the relationship between parents and children. The strengths of the latter can be measured in terms of the amount of time children spend

with their parents and by the efforts parents make to provide a positive and healthy environment for their children. Besides social networks and relationships, Coleman (1991) also emphasized the role of family norms, or the standards and values that govern the actions of families in society. A parent's high aspirations for a child's academic success are often an effective motivation when such norms are strong enough.

### **Factors Influencing Family Social Capital**

*Ethnicity.* Coleman (1988) suggests that the level of parental involvement varies among different ethnic groups. Other researchers contend that ethnic minority and majority students have different home experiences (Ogbu, 1992) and are influenced by different parenting styles (Steinberg et al., 1992). Further, African American and Hispanic American parents have been found to be considerably more authoritative with their children, while Asian American parents appear much less so (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Steinberg et al., 1992). Research also suggests that poor minority parents, in particular, are often less knowledgeable and involved in their children's educational programs than are parents of European American students in the same programs (Lareau, 1987, 1989). Perceptions of educational expectations have been shown to differ among ethnic groups, with Asian American children perceiving their parents as having higher expectations for their children's education than either African American, Hispanic American, Native American, or European American children (Peng & Lee, 1991).

*Socioeconomic Status (SES).* A substantial amount of evidence supports the existence of a positive relationship between SES and parental involvement (Coleman, 1991; Horn & West, 1992; Keith & Lichtman, 1992). The most common measures of SES, parental education and family income, have been shown to be strong predictors of children's educational success (Coleman et al., 1966; Desimone, 1999). Parents with greater formal educational training have been found to provide home environments that support and encourage educational and related activities. Children from working-class families typically socialize within their own kinship groups and often cannot afford to participate in formal out-of-school activities. More affluent families have more extensive social networks in their communities (Lareau, 1987, 1989).

*Family Structure.* Research confirms that social capital and family structure are related (Blake, 1985; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Horn & West, 1992; Thompson, Entwisle, Alexander, & Sundius, 1992; Pong, 1998). Each parent provides a child with a certain amount of social capital. When there is only one parent in the family, that child receives less parental contact, and thus does not have access to the same amount of social capital.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Ethnicity, SES, and family structure are all thought to contribute to the concept of social capital. Thus, several areas related to these factors are important to the present study, including: (a) conceptualizations of parental involvement using social capital theory, (b) similarities and differences in parental involvement between African American and European American families, and (c) the relationship between parental involvement and family background. Following Coleman's (1988) theory, various indicators allow the measuring of social capital. However, most research has taken a unidimensional perspective in this regard. For example, many studies use only indirect measures of social capital such as family structure or the number of times a student has changed schools. Other studies use only a single item such as a measure of whether or not the parents of one student know the parents of their child's closest school friends. Few studies have included specific measures of social capital that tap schooling-related patterns of social interactions

and relationships (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1997). To address the limitations of previous studies and emphasize the social interactions and relationships in the family involvement process, the present study defined social capital along four dimensions: parent-teen interactions, parent-school interactions, interactions with other parents, and family norms.

The first of these variables captures social interactions between parents and students. It includes (a) parents' discussions with teenagers about school experiences and future plans, (b) discussions between parents and teenagers about topics and issues of interest to teens, and (c) joint (parent-teenager) participation in cultural activities. The second variable captures social interactions between the school and family and is measured by the extent to which parents (a) participate in parent-teacher organization activities (e.g., PTA), (b) contact their teenager's school about the child's school experiences and future plans, and (c) have knowledge of their teenager's school experiences and future plans. The third variable, interaction with other parents, captures the social interactions among parents, including those that involve (a) discussing teenagers' school experiences and future plans with other parents, and (b) knowing the parents of their teenager's friends. The fourth variable, family norms, encompasses (a) family rules, (b) educational expectations, and (c) positive relationships between parents and teens.

From this inquiry, factors influencing parental involvement should become apparent. These findings may be used to make more social capital available to all students, thereby enhancing overall opportunities for academic success. More specifically, however, they can be used to help shape policy aimed at helping African American students gain broader access to secondary educational opportunities and successfully achieve their academic goals.

## METHODS

### Data Source

Data for this study were drawn from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), a panel study designed and conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The NELS:88 database is the largest and most comprehensive database in the field of education. The NELS:88 sample is composed of eighth graders first surveyed in 1988 (wave 1) and with whom follow-up surveys were conducted in 1990 (wave 2), 1992 (wave 3), and 1994 (wave 4). For a detailed description of NELS:88, see Ingles et al. (1990, 1994) and Ingles, Scott, Lindmark, Frankel, and Myers (1992).

NELS:88 data are particularly well suited for the present study's research purposes. First, they provide information gathered from students, parents, teachers, and school administrators, with particular attention to patterns of interaction between each group, thus allowing the creation of specific measures for determining the types and levels social capital involved. Secondly, NELS:88 data provide information from a nationally representative sampling of students from 8th through 12th grade and two years after these students graduated from high school. This information presents researchers with a great opportunity to study the occurrence and patterns of parental involvement during the period from high school to postsecondary education.

For the purpose of this study, the following three groups of students were identified from NELS:88 data: the target group, which consisted of successful African American students and two comparison groups, one composed of successful European American students and the other composed of nonsuccessful African American students. In this

study, "successful students" were defined as those NELS:88 students who had successfully completed high school and enrolled in postsecondary education. The study sample consisted of data from all four waves of NELS:88 data including student and parent data. This resulted in a total sample of 6,459 students, comprised of a subsample of 707 successful African American students, 5,293 successful European American students, and 459 other (nonsuccessful) African American students.

### Measures of Social Capital

Items that captured the four constructs of social capital (parent-teen interactions, parent-school interactions, interactions with other parents, and family norms) were chosen from the NELS:88 questionnaires and subjected to an exploratory factor analysis. To maximize the conceptual and psychometric soundness of these factors, only items loading on a single factor were used. Descriptions of each family social capital indicator are presented in Table I. The reliability of these variables was examined using Cronbach's alpha method. Results show that these coefficients ranged from .55 to .86. Family background measures (e.g., family income, parental education level, single-parent-headed status, and stepparent-headed family status), which have commonly been used in previous studies on parental involvement, were also included in this study.

### Data Analysis

The first part of this analysis was descriptive in nature, involving comparisons of the means for each social capital and family background variable of the entire sample of African American and European American students ( $N=6,459$ ). Bonferoni's  $t$  tests were used to detect the significance and adjust for Type I errors. The second part of the analysis included a series of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions to evaluate each dimension of social capital evidenced by the African American students by adjusting for family background effects. The analyses were structured hierarchically. The first step evaluated the observed differences in social capital between Black and White families. The second step estimated the effects of family background on these differences.

To account for possible confounding elements in this study, several other variables were examined in minor analyses. These were: student achievement test scores, behavior variables, and urbanicity. These factors were examined to provide possible reasons for differences in school contact rates, social class, and to account for possible differences in parental involvement.

The standard statistical analysis program (e.g., SPSS) assumes that data are collected from a simple random sampling design. The cluster sampling design of NELS:88 violated this assumption, resulting in a somewhat inflated significance level. To compensate for this bias, every weight used in this study was divided by the mean of the weight and was then further divided by the estimated design effect of 2.54 (Ingles et al., 1992, 1994). This new weight was used in all data analyses.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive statistics pertaining to the social capital and family background variables are presented in Table II. Parental education level was based on the highest level attained by either parent or guardian, ranging from less than high school (code 1) to PhD (code 6). Family income ranged from no income (code 1), less than \$1,000 (code 2), \$1,000 to \$2,999 (code 3), and so on, to \$200,000 or more (code 15).

**TABLE I**  
*Family Social Capital Variables*

VARIABLES	DESCRIPTIONS
<b>PARENT-TEEN INTERACTIONS</b>	
<i>Discussing Teen's School Experiences and Future Plans</i>	
F2P49A Course selections	A factor-weighted, standardized composite score. Factor has an eigenvalue of 3.03 and explains 50.4% of variance. Alpha = .80
F2P49B School activities	
F2P49C Topics studied in class	
F2P49D Grades	
F2P49E Plans to take SAT/ACT	
F2P49F College applications	
<i>Discussing Matters of Interest to Teen</i>	
F2P49G Jobs for which teen might apply	A factor-weighted, standardized composite score. Factor has an eigenvalue of 2.03 and explains 50.7% of variance. Alpha = .67
F2P49H Community/national/world events	
F2P49I Matters troubling teen	
F2P49J Teen's interests/hobbies	
<i>Participating in Cultural Activities Together</i>	
F2P50A Attend sports events outside school	A factor-weighted, standardized composite score. Factor has an eigenvalue of 2.14 and explains 53.5% of variance. Alpha = .84
F2P50G Take day trips/vacations	
F2P50H Work on hobby/play sports	
F2P50C Attend concerts, plays, movies	
<b>PARENT-SCHOOL INTERACTIONS</b>	
<i>Participating in Parent-Teacher Organization Activities</i>	
BYP59A Belong to parent-teacher organization	A factor-weighted, standardized composite score. Factor has an eigenvalue of 2.22 and explains 55.5% of variance. Alpha = .73.
BYP59B Attend parent-teacher organization meetings	
BYP59C Take part in parent-teacher organization activities	
BYP59D Act as a volunteer at the school	
<i>Contacting School About Teen's School Experiences and Future Plans</i>	
F2P44A Academic performance	A factor-weighted, standardized composite score. Factor has an eigenvalue of 2.50 explains 62.5% of variance. Alpha = .80
F2P44B Academic program	
F2P44C Teen's plans after high school	
F2P44D College course selections	

*Knowing Teen's School Experiences and Future Plans*

- F2P46A Which courses teen is taking
- F2P46B How well teen is doing in school
- F2P46C Credits teen has toward graduation
- F2P46D Credits teen needs to graduate

A factor-weighted, standardized composite score. Factor has an eigenvalue of 2.08 and explains 52% of variance. Alpha = .68

*INTERACTIONS WITH OTHER PARENTS*

*Discussing School Experiences and Future Plans with Other Parents*

- F2P56A Matters at teen's school
- F2P56B Teen's educational plans
- F2P56C Teen's career plans

A factor-weighted, standardized composite score. Factor has an eigenvalue of 2.35 and explains 78.3% of variance. Alpha = .86

*Knowing Parents of Teen's Friends*

- F2P54B1 Knows parents of teen's 1st friend
- F2P54B2 Knows parents of teen's 2nd friend
- F2P54B3 Knows parents of teen's 3rd friend
- F2P54B4 Knows parents of teen's 4th friend
- F2P54B5 Knows parents of teen's 5th friend

A factor-weighted, standardized composite score. Factor has an eigenvalue of 1.80 and explains 35.9% of variance. Alpha = .55

*FAMILY NORMS*

*Family Rules*

- F1S100F Parents limit TV watching or video games
- F1S100G Parents limit time with friends
- F1S100D Parents limit privileges due to poor grades
- F1S100E Children required to work around the house

A factor-weighted, standardized composite score. Factor has an eigenvalue of 1.84 and explains 46% of variance. Alpha = .61

*Educational Expectations*

- F2S42A How far in school father wants teen to go
- F2S43B How far in school mother wants teen to go
- F2S43C How far in school teen thinks he/she will go
- F2P61 How far in school parents expect teen to go

A factor-weighted, standardized composite score. Factor has an eigenvalue of 2.20 and explains 55.1% of variance. Alpha = .80

*Positive Parent-Teen Relationship*

- F2S100A Parents trust teen to do what they expect
- F2S100D Parents believe teen will be a source of pride to parents
- F2S100E Teen and parents get along well with each other

A factor-weighted, standardized composite score. Factor has an eigenvalue of 1.67 and explains 55.7% of variance. Alpha = .60

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NOTE: NELS:88 variable names are capitalized. The NELS:88 prefixes "BY," "F1," and "F2" refer to the base year, the first follow-up, and the second follow-up, respectively.

**TABLE II**  
*Means of Family Background Variables and Social Capital Measures*

VARIABLES	SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS (n = 707)	NONSUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS (n = 459)	SUCCESSFUL EUROPEAN AMERICAN STUDENTS (n = 5,293)
<b>FAMILY BACKGROUND</b>			
Family Income	9.276	7.920*	11.063*
Parental Education	2.983	2.400*	3.436*
Single-Parent-headed	.413	.446	.134*
Stepparent-headed	.119	.141	.126
<b>PARENT-TEEN INTERACTIONS</b>			
Discussing School Experiences and Future Plans	.242	-.333*	.124*
Discussing Matters of Interest to Teen	.105	-.214*	.080
Participating in Cultural Activities Together	.081	-.191*	.022
<b>PARENT-SCHOOL INTERACTIONS</b>			
Participating in Parent-Teacher Organization Activities	.140	-.460*	.081
Contacting School About Teen's School Experiences and Future Plans	.255	-.010*	-.006*
Knowing About Teen's School Experiences and Future Plans	-.003	-.116	.077
<b>INTERACTIONS WITH OTHER PARENTS</b>			
Discussing School Experiences and Future Plans with Other Parents	-.086	-.107	.031*
Knowing Parents of Teen's Friends	-.023	-.349*	.061
<b>FAMILY NORMS</b>			
Family Rules	.147	-.049*	.077
Educational Expectations	.052	-.437*	.142
Positive Parent-Teen Relationship	-.059	-.317*	.074*

NOTE: Sample sizes are presented unweighted. Means are computed using NELS:88 panel student weight. The social capital measures are standardized scores ( $M=0$ ,  $SD=1$ ).

\* Indicates a difference from successful African American students, based on Bonferoni's *t* tests at the .05 level.

Results from Bonferoni's *t* tests indicate significant differences between Black and White families in terms of family income, parental education, and family structure. Generally, African American students were more likely to come from economically disadvantaged households than were European American students. Moreover, their households often had lower family incomes, less-educated parents, and higher occurrences of single parents.

### Differences in Social Capital Measures

All of the social capital measures were constructed through factor analysis based on the whole NELS:88 population, including those students who were not enrolled in postsecondary education (nonsuccessful). These measures were standardized scores, with zero representing the average level of social capital. Most of the social capital measures of the successful African American and European American students were near zero or positive, which indicates that those students' families possessed average or above-average social capital.

To compare the means for each social capital measure for Black and White families, 11 *t* tests were performed. Using the Bonferoni suggestion (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1984), the alpha level was adjusted to detect significance only for  $p < .005$  (.05/11). The results of this analysis reveal that the African American students' families possessed two social capital measures that were significantly higher than those of the European American students' families: home discussion and school contact. Two social capital measures of Black families were found to be significantly lower than those of White families: discussion with other parents and parent-teen relationship.

### Relationships of Family Background Variables and Social Capital

Are the noted differences in social capital related to family background? Correlation analysis was used to examine the extent to which measures of parental involvement correlated to family background variables. Results of this analysis show that all variables of social capital were positively related to family income, as indicated by the correlation coefficients listed in the first column of Table III. The positive coefficients mean that a higher level of family income was related to a higher level of social capital. The strength of the relationship between social capital variables and family income varied. For example, family income had the strongest relationship with educational expectations ( $r = .315$ ), followed by parental participation in PTA activities ( $r = .251$ ), parent-teenager home discussions about school experiences and future plans ( $r = .204$ ), and parent-teenager participation in cultural activities ( $r = .168$ ). The relationship between parental education and social capital variables showed similar patterns (see the second column of Table III). All social capital variables except for home discussion and school contact were negatively related to single-parent-headed family status (see the third column of Table III). The strength of these relationships, however, was small and varied. For example, single-parent-headed status had the highest negative relationship with educational expectations ( $r = -.139$ ), followed by parent-teenager relationship ( $r = -.131$ ), participation in PTA activities ( $r = -.073$ ), and participation in cultural activities ( $r = -.062$ ). The relationships of social capital variables and stepparent-headed family status showed a similar pattern. Six out of 11 social capital indicators had small and negative relationships with stepparent-headed family status (see the fourth column of Table III). These results confirm previous findings that high school students have less capital when they come from low-SES families, have parents with little or no formal education, and come from single-parent-headed or stepparent-headed families.

**TABLE III**  
*Correlations Between Social Capital Measures and Family Background*

VARIABLES	FAMILY INCOME	PARENTAL EDUCATION	SINGLE-PARENT-HEADED	STEPPARENT-HEADED
<b>PARENT-TEEN INTERACTIONS</b>				
Discussing School Experiences and Future Plans	.204**	.216**	-.010	-.007
Discussing Matters of Interest to Teen	.145**	.157**	-.001	.015
Participating in Cultural Activities Together	.168**	.136**	-.062**	-.044**
<b>PARENT-SCHOOL INTERACTIONS</b>				
Participating in Parent-Teacher Organization Activities	.251**	.244**	-.073**	-.125**
Contacting School About Teen's School Experiences and Future Plans	.081**	.149**	.027**	.003
Knowing About Teen's School Experiences and Future Plans	.143**	.118**	-.022*	.007
<b>INTERACTIONS WITH OTHER PARENTS</b>				
Discussing School Experiences and Future Plans with Other Parents	.059**	.061**	-.033**	-.057**
Knowing Parents of Teen's Friends	.115**	.100**	-.026**	-.088**
<b>FAMILY NORMS</b>				
Family Rules	.120**	.119**	-.064**	.005
Educational Expectations	.315**	.368**	-.139**	-.070**
Positive Parent-Teen Relationship	.124**	.075**	-.131**	-.023*

\*\* $p \leq .05$ ;

\*\*\* $p \leq .01$

## Differences in Adjusted Social Capital Measures

To adjust for the influence of family background variables on social capital measures, two series of OLS regressions were performed to compare the social capital measures of successful African American students with those of unsuccessful African American students, and successful African American students with successful European American students. In these analyses, family background variables (i.e., family income, parental education, single-parent-headed and stepparent-headed family status) were included in the regression model as control variables. To facilitate comparisons across the 11 measures of social capital and to discuss these results in a meaningful way, the regression coefficients representing the contrasts between successful African American students, unsuccessful African American students, and successful European American students were converted to effect sizes. Effect size (ES) was computed by dividing the unstandardized regression coefficient for each outcome variable by the standard deviation of the comparison group for that variable. Positive effect sizes indicate that the successful African American students possessed a higher level of social capital than did the comparison groups. A summary of these effect sizes is presented in Table IV.

*Parent-Teen Interactions.* In general, the parents of successful African American students were more likely to discuss school experiences and future plans with their teens than were the parents of the other African American students ( $ES = .575$ ) and the successful European American students ( $ES = .118$ ). These effect sizes were positive and significant even after family background was taken into account ( $ES = .373$  and  $ES = .201$ , respectively). Parents of successful African American students were also more likely to discuss items of interest to teens (e.g., jobs to which teens might apply) than were the parents of unsuccessful African American students ( $ES = .319$ ). It is not surprising that students' participation in cultural activities such as sports, vacations, concerts, and plays were positively related to family income and parental education and negatively related to single-parent-headed and stepparent-headed family status. Without adjustment for family background variables, Black parents did not differ from White parents with regard to their participation in cultural activities with their teens. However, after family background variables were taken into account, African American parents were found to demonstrate a higher level of participation in cultural activities than did European American parents ( $ES = .192$ ). These results indicate that students' participation in cultural activities such as sports, vacations, concerts, and plays are related to family background variables such as family income, parental education, and family structure.

*Parent-School Interaction.* Consistent with the literature on parental involvement, the level of parent-school interaction was positively related to family income and parental education, and negatively related to stepparent-headed family status. Parents of successful African American students were more likely to participate in school activities (e.g., PTA meetings, school volunteer activities) than were the parents of unsuccessful African American students ( $ES = .601$ ), even after controlling for family background ( $ES = .451$ ). Before adjusting for family background variables, no difference was noted between Black and White parents in terms of their participation in PTA activities. However, when family background was controlled for, the African American parents appear to have demonstrated a significantly higher level of participation in such activities compared to European American parents ( $ES = .256$ ).

Compared to the parents of unsuccessful Black and successful White students, the parents of successful Black students were found to contact the schools more frequently about their teens' school experiences and future plans ( $ES = .354$  and  $ES = .261$ , respectively). This effect size was positive and significant even after family background was

**TABLE IV**  
*Summary of Effect Sizes of Adjusted Social Capital*

VARIABLES	SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN VS. NONSUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS Before Adjustment	SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN VS. NONSUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS After Adjustment	SUCCESSFUL EUROPEAN AMERICAN STUDENTS Before Adjustment	SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN VS. NONSUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS After Adjustment
<b>PARENT-TEEN INTERACTIONS</b>				
Discussing School Experiences and Future Plans	.575***	.373***	.118**	.201***
Discussing Matters of Interest to Teen	.319***	.182*	.025	.084
Participating in Cultural Activities Together	.273**	.114	.060	.192***
<b>PARENT-SCHOOL INTERACTIONS</b>				
Participating in Parent-Teacher Organization Activities	.601***	.451***	.060	.256***
Contacting School About Teen's School Experiences and Future Plans	.354***	.188*	.261***	.316***
Knowing Teen's School Experiences and Future Plans	.113	-.013	-.080	.021
<b>INTERACTIONS WITH OTHER PARENTS</b>				
Discussing School Experiences and Future Plans with Other Parents	.020	.177	-.117*	-.099
Knowing Parents of Teen's Friends	.327***	.337***	-.083	-.055
<b>FAMILY NORMS</b>				
Family Rules	.195*	.132	.064	.201***
Educational Expectations	.489***	.325**	-.090*	.110**
Positive Parent-Teen Relationship	.258**	.280**	-.132**	.033

*NOTE:* Effect size was computed by dividing the unstandardized regression coefficient for each outcome variable by the standard deviation of the comparison group for each variable. Student family ground variables (family income, parental education, single-parent-headed and stepparent-headed family status) were included in the regression model as control variables.

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

taken into account ( $ES = .188$  and  $ES = .316$ , respectively). Family income and parental education were found to have significant positive impacts on parents' knowledge about teens' school experiences and future plans. Even after family social economic variables were taken into account, no significant difference between Black and White parents' knowledge of these aspects of their teenagers' lives was found.

*Parents' Interactions with Other Parents.* Parents of successful African American students did not differ from the parents of unsuccessful African American students in their interactions with other parents. Compared to White parents, the parents of successful African American students were less likely to discuss their teens' school experiences and future plans with other parents ( $ES = -.117$ ). After family background was taken into account, the differences in Black and White parent-to-parent discussion was insignificant. Parents of successful African American students were more likely to know the parents of their teens' friends than were the parents of unsuccessful African American students ( $ES = .327$  before the adjustment and  $ES = .337$  after the adjustment). No significant difference was found for this measure between successful Black and White students even after controlling for family background.

*Family Norms.* Family rules such as parents' limits on teens' television watching, time teenagers spend with friends, and the granting of privileges to teens were found to be positively related to family income and parental education and negatively related to single-parent-headed family status. African American families were found to have higher levels of family rules than European American families after controlling for background factors ( $ES = .201$ ). Regression analysis revealed an interesting finding for educational expectations—namely, that the parents of successful African American students had significantly higher levels of educational expectations than did the parents of unsuccessful African American students ( $ES = .489$ ). This effect size was positive and significant even after family background was taken into account ( $ES = .325$ ). Among the successful student sample as a whole, however, the parents of Black students were found to have lower educational expectations than the parents of White students before this adjustment ( $ES = -.090$ ). As indicated by regression analysis, educational expectations were strongly and positively related to family SES (family income and parental education) and negatively related to family structure (single-parent-headed and stepparent-headed status). After taking these family background variables into consideration, the negative effect of being African American became positive ( $ES = .110$ ). This result indicates that African American families have higher levels of educational expectations than do socially comparable European American families.

Regression analysis revealed that the parents of successful African American students were more likely to have positive relationships with their teens than were the parents of unsuccessful African American students ( $ES = .258$ ). This effect remained positive and significant even after family background was taken into account ( $ES = .280$ ). Moreover, family income had a positive effect on parent-teen relationships, and single-parent-headed and stepparent-headed families were less likely to have positive parent-teen relationships. Before adjustment, African American families appeared to have less positive parent-teen relationships ( $ES = -.132$ ); however, the observed differences between Black and White families in terms of parent-teen relationships disappeared after family background was taken into account.

In summary, these findings indicate that family social capital is sensitive to both family SES and family structure. After family background variables were taken into account, successful African American students were found to have levels of social capital that were equal to or higher than those of comparable European American students. Of the 11 indicators of social capital investigated in this study, 6 were higher for successful Black

students, including: discussing school experiences and future plans, contacting school about school experiences and future plans, spending time on cultural activities, school participation, family rules, and educational expectations. Five indicators for which no statistically significant difference was found between the parental involvement of African American and European American parents included discussing subjects of interest to teens, knowing about teens' school experiences and future plans, engaging in discussions with other parents, knowing the parents of their teens' friends, and establishing a relationship between parents and teens.

Several more analyses were conducted to eliminate possible confounding elements. To examine the possibility that the high frequency of school contact evidenced by African American parents may have been due to these parents' responses to their teens' behavioral problems or poor academic performance, the students' achievement test scores and behavioral variables were added into the regression model as control variables. The results indicated that student achievement and behavior did not significantly contribute to the variance in the levels of parents' contact with the schools. Likewise, to control for any possible effect of urban environment on the frequency of school contact, the urbanicity variable was added into the regression model. The results indicated that urbanicity did not have a significant effect on parents' contact with their teens' schools.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study illuminate the role of parental involvement in the academic success of African American students and challenge the stereotype of traditional Black-White comparisons. For example, this study found that despite the relatively disadvantaged home environments of the African American families in the NELS sample, Black parents demonstrated higher or equivalent levels of parental involvement than did White parents. The former also tended to discuss subjects of importance to teens with their children at home more so than did White parents and contacted the schools regarding their teens' school experiences and future plans more frequently.

The finding of higher levels of home discussion in successful African American students' families is consistent with previous literature (Clark, 1983; Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, & Dornbusch, 1993). Clark, for example, found that low-SES African American parents who frequently engaged in dialogue with their children also provided them with emotionally supportive home environments for their academic success. Using NELS:88 data, Peng and Lee (1991) found that direct parental school involvement is not as important as frequent parent-child conversations for the academic achievement of students. Ho and Willms (1996) contend that home discussion has a strong relationship to academic achievement. Indeed, as Finn (1998) has noted, home discussion is a component of parental involvement that contributes to students' academic success. Consistent with these findings, the high level of home discussion found in the present study may partly contribute to the high levels of academic achievement found among the successful African American students in the sample.

Previous studies have suggested that parents' contact with schools may be related to students' poor behavior or academic problems (Ho & Willms, 1996). Whether the high frequency of school contact found among this group of African American parents was a response to teachers' reports of teen behavioral problems or whether it was initiated by the parents themselves is not initially clear from the NELS:88 data. However, after analyzing the students' achievement test scores and behavioral variables, it becomes clear that neither student achievement nor student behavior contributed to parents' school contact rates in any significant way.

This study suggests that family background variables are related to family social capital. When these variables were controlled, differences between Black and White students were diminished; some even showed a pattern of reversal. For example, Black students' educational expectations were found to be lower before this adjustment was made; however, after adjustment, they appeared to have higher educational expectations than did their White peers. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Mickelson, 1990). As Kao and Tienda point out, maintaining high expectations is critical for success throughout high school.

### Limitations of the Study

Several cautions are necessary in interpreting the findings of this study. First, this study compared only general group differences between African Americans and European Americans in the NELS sample, concluding that African American parents, on average, have higher levels of home discussion and school contact. Is this true for all African American parents, regardless of income and education? The literature suggests it is not. Lareau and Horvat's (1999) recent case study revealed that social class mediates the ways in which African American parents interact with schools. Their study found that middle-class Black parents were much more likely to intervene in their children's school experience than were poorer Black parents. Indeed, the present investigation's own analysis of socioeconomic variables showed, as expected, significant differences in parental involvement at different socioeconomic levels within the African American subsample. In general, Black families with higher levels of parental education and family income were found to exhibit higher levels of parental contact with schools and more parent-child discussions at home.

Second, the regression model used in this study emphasized the "ethnicity effect" over other factors that might have explained the variations in family social capital. The family background variables accounted for less than 5% of the total variation in family social capital for all three subgroups. Further study that considers more variables is needed to explain the variance in social capital among these groups. Third, the study did not directly evaluate the effects of parental involvement on educational attainment. That is, it did not use parental involvement variables to predict student educational attainment. Rather, it focused on identifying the characteristics of parental involvement for successful African American students. A high level of parental involvement may be critical to Black students' high achievement in school, but it is not sufficient to ensure success. Fourth, as a survey study, this investigation cannot account for any cause-effect relationship evident in the data and therefore cannot provide reasoning for the responses given.

### CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have important implications for parents, educators, and educational policymakers. They indicate that the families of successful African American students demonstrate equal or higher levels of parental involvement than do those of successful European American students, despite the former's comparatively disadvantaged home environments. To compensate for this disadvantage, Black parents must put more emphasis on parental involvement. They should frequently discuss with their teens topics such as school experiences and future plans, including course selections, grades, school activities, topics studied in class, and plans for taking college placement examinations and applying to college. They should also actively and frequently contact their teens' schools about these matters. In this way, parents and students can work

together to create a "school-like family" atmosphere such as that proposed by Epstein (Epstein, 1995, p. 702).

These findings further suggest that educators need to increase their awareness and acknowledgment of cultural differences in parental involvement in order to better challenge their own and others' stereotypical ideas and attitudes toward minority parents. As Lareau and Horvat (1999) point out, some African American parents, deeply concerned about the historical legacy of discrimination against Blacks in schooling, approach their children's schools with open criticism. These researchers contend, however, that school personnel who must address these kinds of situations should not view frequent contact with African American families as overly demanding or unrealistic. Rather, they should work to actively empower Black parents and strive to create warm, welcoming environments that encourage Black parents to become involved and help establish "family-like schools" (Epstein, 1995, p. 702).

Additionally, policymakers need to pay particular attention to the social and cultural differences between African American and European American families. By working more closely with schools and communities, policymakers may be able to build more effective strategies and programs to help various socially and culturally different groups. These efforts should aim at making social capital available to all students, thereby enhancing the overall opportunities for academic success.

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