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School Community Journal publishes a mix of:

(1) research (original, review, and interpretation), (2) essay and discussion, (3) reports from the field, including descriptions of programs, and (4) book reviews.

The journal seeks manuscripts from scholars, administrators, teachers, school board members, parents, and others interested in the school as a community.

Editorial Policy and Procedure

School Community Journal is committed to scholarly inquiry, discussion, and reportage of topics related to the community of the school. Manuscripts are considered in four categories:

(1) research (original, review, and interpretation),
(2) essay and discussion,
(3) reports from the field, including descriptions of programs, and
(4) book reviews.

The journal follows the format suggested in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Sixth Edition*.

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As a refereed journal, all submissions undergo a blind peer review as part of the selection process. Therefore, please include the author's description and other identifying information in a separate electronic file.

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Contents

Six Years Later: Effect of Family Involvement Training on the 9
Language Skills of Children From Migrant Families
Lisa St. Clair, Barbara Jackson, and Rose Zweiback

Family–School Connections in Rural Educational Settings: 21
A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature
Carrie A. Semke and Susan M. Sheridan

A Community Partnership to Facilitate Urban Elementary 49
Students' Access to the Outdoors
Maria M. Ferreira, David Grueber, and Sandra Yarema

"I Feel Much More Confident Now to Talk With Parents": An 65
Evaluation of In-Service Training on Teacher–Parent Communication
Loizos Symeou, Eleni Roussounidou, and Michalis Michaelides

Unpacking Parent Involvement: Korean American Parents' 89
Collective Networking
Minjung Lim

Influence of a Parent Leadership Program on Participants' 111
Leadership Capacity and Actions
Shayna D. Cunningham, Holly Kreider, and Jenny Ocón

The Impact of a Junior High School Community Intervention Project: 125
Moving Beyond the Testing Juggernaut and Into a Community of
Creative Learners
Larry P. Nelson, Sarah K. McMahan, and Tacia Torres

Contents continued next page

School Counselors' Partnerships With Linguistically Diverse Families: 145
An Exploratory Study
Nadire Gülçin Aydın, Julia A. Bryan, and David K. Duys

Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement With Parents, Families, ...167
and Communities in New Zealand
Carol Mutch and Sandra Collins

Book Review: A Historic Model for Teaching and Learning Perspectives ..189
Joy M. Thomas

Editor's Comments

We begin this Spring/Summer 2012 issue with a very important article—a follow-up to a study we published in the Spring/Summer 2006 issue. That small but significant quasi-experimental study has now become a longitudinal look at the lasting effects of an intervention with migrant parents of ELL children in an Even Start family literacy program. The children whose parents participated had significantly higher scores on the statewide reading assessment in 5th or 6th grade, compared to those in the control group. We echo the call of the authors of the study, St. Clair, Jackson, and Zweiback, for further research to examine this phenomenon in more depth so that these positive results can be replicated broadly. Semke and Sheridan provide us with a thorough review of research on family and school connections in rural settings, again calling for more rigorous studies, in particular, those with well-defined contexts and sound methods to fill the void on this topic.

Then we have several examples of various projects designed to improve parent and school relationships, from a variety of approaches. Ferreira, Grueber, and Yarema describe a collaborative project that involved a university, community organization, and parents with schools and teachers to engage students in outdoor learning. Symeou, Roussounidou, and Michaelides describe a successful approach to professional development that helped school professionals practice skills to facilitate improved communication with students' parents. Lim describes how a group of Korean American parents organized themselves to facilitate improved involvement in their children's school. Cunningham, Kreider, and Ocón describe a parent leadership training program whose participants sing its praises. Nelson, McMahan, and Torres describe an ambitious collaboration with a wide variety of stakeholders bent on engaging junior high students in their school community, only to be derailed by a leadership change that did not share their vision. Aydin, Bryan, and Duys surveyed school counselors to ascertain their perceptions of and factors affecting their partnerships with linguistically diverse families. Mutch and Collins give us a glimpse into the schools of New Zealand and some common factors which have facilitated their engagement with "the parents and whānau (families and extended families) of their students" (p. 167), findings which could easily be applied nearly anywhere in the world.

Finally, we have a book review of *School Leadership for Authentic Family and Community Partnerships: Research Perspectives for Transforming Practice* to round out the issue and inspire you to read further!

Lori Thomas
June 2012

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Six Years Later: Effect of Family Involvement Training on the Language Skills of Children From Migrant Families

Lisa St. Clair, Barbara Jackson, and Rose Zweiback

Abstract

This six year follow-up study to the previously published quasi-experimental study on this group of children and their migrant families examines the effects of a parent involvement program on kindergarten children's families. Parents in the original study participated in sessions available throughout their child's kindergarten year that helped them engage their children in academic activities linked to their children's curriculum in school. These parent involvement sessions were implemented as one component of a Migrant Education Even Start family literacy program. The study was conducted at a rural Midwestern elementary school with 22 kindergarten children from families participating in the parent involvement training program, and 28 kindergarten children from families not participating. This longitudinal study first followed these children through the end of first grade. Findings indicated that by the end of first grade, children from families participating in the parent involvement training program scored significantly higher on language measures than children in the control group. Now researchers at the University of Nebraska Medical Center have followed these children through 5th or 6th grade and have collected state reading assessment scaled scores. Results demonstrate that children in the treatment group again scored significantly higher than children in the control group. This suggests that equipping migrant families with new abilities to nurture their children's language skills leads to positive and lasting reading outcomes for their children.

Key words: parents, involvement, race, ethnicity, migrant, early childhood education, reading, literacy, longitudinal research, family, families, Even Start, quasi-experimental research, control group, intervention, effects

Introduction

Our interest in this research topic began eight years ago when then growing numbers of federal initiatives such as Reading First, Early Reading First, and No Child Left Behind signaled the importance of early literacy experiences for young children. With the tremendous growth in the number of English language learning (ELL) students in the United States, a great concern was and continues to be how best to effectively support students who primarily speak a language other than English. ELL children from low-income families are less likely to enter school with a rich literacy background and are twice as likely as English-speaking, White students to be below grade level in reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Targeting this population of ELLs at a young age is crucial as poor school performance in first grade is a significant predictor of students who will drop out of school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001).

The question becomes: What strategies might help ameliorate these negative effects? The previous publication of this study of children's performance at the end of first grade found that providing parent involvement training to families resulted in significantly higher language standard scores for children in treatment families at the end of first grade compared to children in the control group (St. Clair & Jackson, 2006). Parenting quality is predictive of long-term academic achievement of students and of their social and behavioral progress in school (Belsky et al., 2007). Numerous other studies have noted that literacy-rich home environments (Denton & West, 2002) are essential to positive outcomes of children and that parent involvement positively influences social-emotional competence (Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002). In their meta-analysis of 51 research studies, Henderson and Mapp (2002) found higher student achievement occurred when real partnerships between families and schools existed. These positive working relationships between home and school are especially important for children who are socially and economically disadvantaged (Lin, 2003). Findings from a study of four high performing school districts with large populations of migrant families suggest that parental involvement of the most marginalized students is critical to their success (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

Given the importance of parent involvement to the positive academic outcomes of disadvantaged students, more information was needed, then, to examine how specific parent education curricula are related to kindergarten

children's early literacy development, especially for those from migrant backgrounds. Our earlier published study found that parent involvement training with families during a child's kindergarten year resulted in significantly greater broad language skills for children at the end of first grade, compared to a control group including children with families that did not participate in the parent involvement training. We decided to follow this same group of children into 5th and 6th grade to examine whether the intervention group would continue to have significantly higher scores on state reading assessments.

Purpose and Research Questions

This began as a two-year study and was designed to evaluate the efficacy of the family involvement component of a Migrant Education Even Start (MEES) family literacy program and its long-term impact on the young elementary children in these families. It has now become an eight-year study, and we have followed children into 5th and 6th grade. To measure the impact, children drawn from families participating in the family involvement training comprised approximately half of the sample, while children with matched demographics from families not participating in the program made up the other half. Participating families were provided training and support during the children's kindergarten year.

One primary research question guided the first study: Does the integration of the kindergarten educational curriculum into a MEES parent education program positively impact children's language skills through first grade? For this study, our research question is simply, "Do youth in the intervention group continue to perform significantly higher than youth in the control group on the state reading assessment?"

Method

Participants

Initial Study	Male Children	Female Children	Totals
Intervention	7	15	22
Control	13	15	28
Totals	20	30	50

Families for this study were recruited from a MEES family literacy program in the Midwest. The school district in which the program is located had experienced a dramatic increase from 2.6% to 29% ELL students in the 10 years preceding the implementation of this study. Over the course of the study, 22 families participated in the family involvement training program, and their 22 ELL kindergarten and then first grade children were assigned to the intervention group. Twenty-eight families were recruited to allow their children to serve in a control group, resulting in 28 ELL kindergarten and then first grade children serving as the control group. Most of the children and families (in both

groups) were Hispanic (97%). One family was Vietnamese. All children spoke English with varying degrees of fluency.

Procedures

Design

This study utilized a quasi-experimental research design, designated as such because parents self-selected whether or not to participate in the migrant education family involvement training program (MEES). Parents were recruited from the MEES program for the intervention. Their children attended one of two elementary schools in the community: one public and one parochial. A control group matched for ELL status was obtained through the recruitment of children from the same school locations as the intervention group.

Participating families were offered a total of 25 one-hour training sessions over the course of the school year. Typically, families participated in about half of the offered sessions. There was a wide range of participation, with families participating in as few as 8 and as many as 24 sessions. MEES staff, working closely with the kindergarten teachers to design the weekly offerings, facilitated educational and networking sessions with the parents. The content of the parenting curriculum was drawn from their child's kindergarten curriculum (e.g., letter of the week, theme, literacy skills, sight words, and literature). In addition to modeling ways to support their children's learning in these content areas, families were also provided resource materials to support learning at home. These resources included Play Station equipment and *Light Span Achieve Now* software to be played on the Play Station equipment (reading and math concepts in game form), Leap Pads (talking books), Leap Desks (letter and word identification), and books. Materials were checked out on loan to families. Duplicated materials, such as nursery rhymes and sequencing activities, were provided on a timely basis to support kindergarten classroom curriculum.

The conceptual framework of the family involvement program consisted of two core elements: (1) a culturally sensitive approach to working with parents from diverse cultures and economic backgrounds, and (2) the use of highly qualified parent educators. The program's key component was modeling, with opportunity for supportive practice, provided to the adult family members to facilitate their use of the resource materials at home with their children.

Assessment

In our earlier study, we used the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey (WMLS) to measure children's knowledge and skills on broad English language skills, as well as in sub-tests including picture vocabulary, verbal reasoning

through analogies, letter and word identification, and writing (Woodcock & Muñoz-Sandoval, 2001). Reliability for the broad English ability score ranged from .96 to .97 for five- to seven-year-olds. Sub-test item reliability ranged from .70 (picture vocabulary) to .99 (letter-word identification) for the same age group. Concurrent validity was established by the authors using a school-age study which consisted of 254 participants randomly selected from public and private schools in rural, suburban, and urban environments. The WMLS was compared to the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Third Edition (WISC-III; Wechsler, 1991). Correlations for the broad English ability test to the WISC-III resulted in .80 for verbal IQ, .55 for performance IQ, and .76 for the verbal comprehension index. For these reasons, the WMLS was selected as an appropriate instrument to measure child language outcomes.

The WMLS was individually administered in English with each child in the intervention and control groups. Data were collected in the fall and spring of the children's kindergarten year. In the second year of the study, the WMLS was only administered in the spring of the children's first grade year. At this third administration of the WMLS, there were 19 children remaining in the intervention group and 23 children remaining in the control group, totaling 42 of the original 50; the remainder had moved away from the district.

In the summer of 2010, the researchers obtained state reading assessment scaled scores for all of the children continuing in the district. Of the original 50 children, 33 had recently completed 5th or 6th grade, depending upon which year they began in our study (13 from the intervention group, 20 from the control). The Nebraska State Reading Assessment, NeSA-Reading, is a statewide assessment developed by Nebraska educators. It aligns with state content standards in order to fulfill statutory requirements. The 2009-2010 school year was the first year of NeSA-Reading implementation for grades 3–8 and 11. The 50-item multiple choice test consists of reading passages and vocabulary questions. NeSA-Reading results consist of three standard scores: an overall score, and two content standard scores—reading comprehension and vocabulary. It is administered online or in print versions, depending on the school district's preference (Nebraska Department of Education, 2010).

Results

As noted in our earlier study, kindergarten fall WMLS broad standard scores were analyzed using a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA). There were no significant differences between children's scores in the intervention (M = 98.07, SD = 9.68) and control groups (M = 97.56, SD = 7.28), $F(1,28) = 0.027$, $p > .05$, two-tailed. These results suggest that both groups of children

had comparable skills at the initiation of the study. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) for gender differences revealed no significant differences between girls (*M* = 100.24, *SD* = 5.77) and boys (*M* = 102.58, *SD* = 10.19), $F(1,27) = 0.625$, $p > .05$, two-tailed.

Intervention Effects on Children

After all participants completed kindergarten, gains in standard scores for participants were analyzed using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Children of parents who participated in family involvement training scored higher in letter-word identification and on overall broad score, but not significantly more so than the children in the control group. Scores in picture vocabulary, verbal reasoning, and writing were similar.

These children were assessed again using the WMLS at the end of first grade. Using analysis of variance (ANOVA), the differences in children's scores from the beginning of kindergarten to the end of first grade were compared. Children in the intervention group made larger standard score gains than those in the control group across the overall broad English ability test (see Table 1). First grade children in the intervention group made significantly greater gains than the control group on overall broad scores (see Table 2).

Table 1. Descriptive Data (First Grade Cohorts 2004, 2005;WMLS broad score differences)

		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Broad Score Differences	Control	23	-1.83	7.70	1.61	-5.16	1.51
	Intervention	19	4.68	5.44	1.25	2.06	7.31
	Total	42	1.12	7.46	1.15	-1.21	3.44

Table 2. ANOVA of WMLS Standard Score Differences (fall of kindergarten to spring of first grade)

		Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Broad Score Differences	Between Groups	440.995	1	440.995	9.590	.004**
	Within Groups	1839.410	40	45.985		
	Total	2280.405	41			

Note: Two-tailed analysis was used.
**$p < .01$.

On the WMLS, a score of 100 represents the mean or average score for the normative group and a deviation of 15 points either way represents above or below average scores. At the conclusion of the two-year study, children in the two groups experienced significantly different outcomes on standard scores. On the overall broad English score, children whose families participated in the training achieved a mean standard score of 102.7 by the end of first grade, whereas children whose families did not participate scored a mean of 95.1 (see Figure 1).

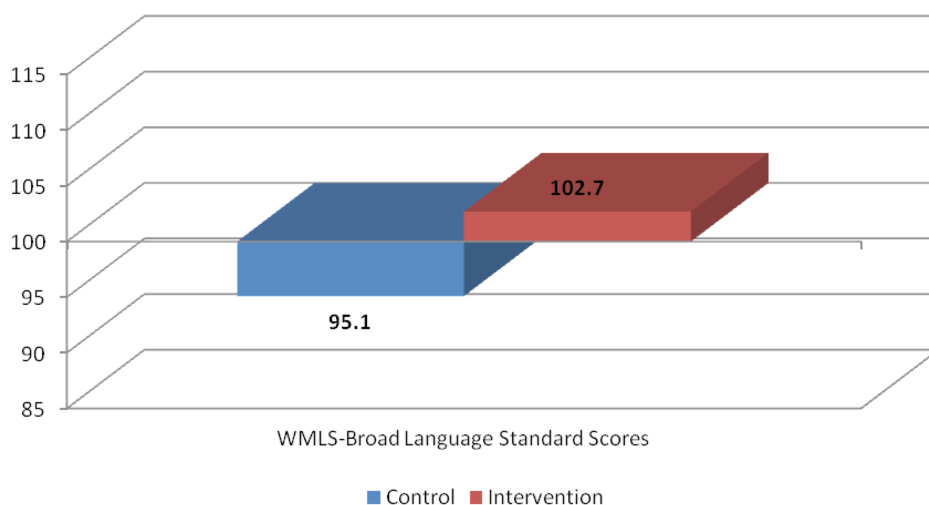
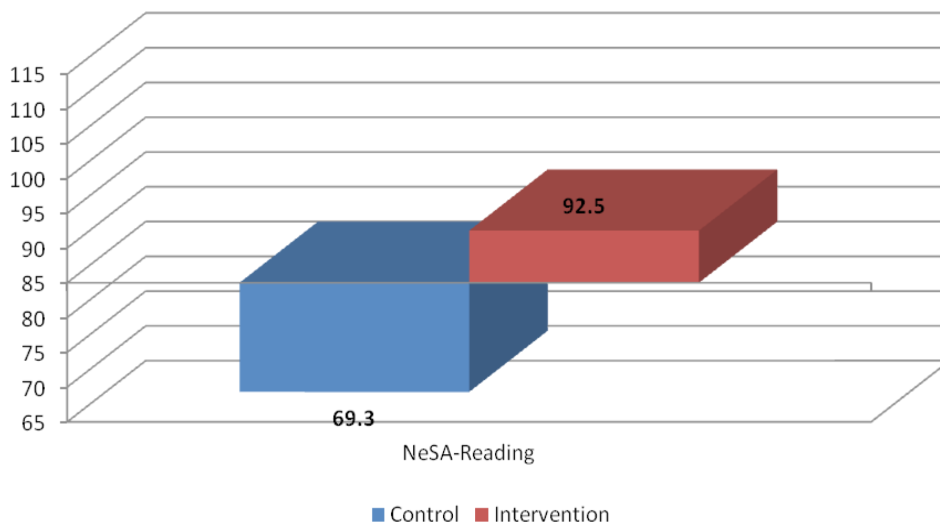


Figure 1. WMLS Broad Standard Scores at End of First Grade

Now, six years since we began the study, we analyzed state reading assessment scaled scores (5th and 6th grades) to determine whether youth in the intervention group would continue to have significantly higher scores than youth in the control group. Given that these were migrant families, we were not surprised that our group of 50 had become a group of 33, with 13 in the intervention group and 20 in the control group.

The state reading assessment yields a scaled score ranging from 1–200, with categories including not meeting, meeting, or exceeding standards in reading. As noted in Figure 2, the intervention students earned a mean scaled score of 92.5, which falls into the "meets standards" range of 85–134. The control group students earned a mean scaled score of 69.3, which falls into the "does not meet" category (scores below 85). An independent samples test was used to assess whether results were significantly higher for the intervention group. The intervention group scored significantly higher on the state reading assessment scaled scores (m = 92.46, sd = 33.488) than the control group (m = 69.30, sd = 32.679), p = .029, one-tailed.



Note: A score of 85 or greater represents proficiency

Figure 2. Nebraska State Reading Assessment Scaled Scores at End of Fifth or Sixth Grade

The mean scaled score of all Nebraska 5th and 6th grade students was 101. Approximately 68% of Nebraska students are "proficient" or meet state standards in reading. Comparing these findings with the results of our study, we find that the treatment and control groups were both below the average score; however, the treatment group was within the range of scores noted as meeting standards, whereas the control group was significantly lower and were in the "does not meet state standards" group.

Discussion

Youth in the intervention group continued to perform significantly higher than youth in the control group in reading at the end of 5th or 6th grade. Despite the small sample size remaining in our study, significant differences continued to be found at the end of 5th and 6th grade on state reading tests. The treatment group scored significantly higher than the control group, with the treatment group falling into the "meets standards" category and the control group children falling into the "does not meet standards" category.

Findings from this study can provide helpful guidance to district leaders and practitioners interested in using preventive rather than reactive measures to assist ELL students in meeting standards in reading. The model tested for this study was a family literacy program enhanced with parent education sessions

designed to instruct parents on how to support learning at home and to provide resources for home use. Ongoing communication between the parent educators and classroom teachers was essential to shape the parent education curriculum. Teachers appreciated the opportunity to engage in this triadic approach (teacher–family–parent educator) to support family involvement. As was noted in our earlier study, however, positive effects of such an intervention may be delayed. Significantly more positive outcomes were found for children of families participating in the parent involvement training program at the end of first grade, rather than at the end of kindergarten. Had we discontinued the study at the end of kindergarten, we would not have realized the significantly higher scores for children in the treatment group at the end of first grade and again at the end of $5^{th}/6^{th}$ grades.

Schools may want to consider ways to partner with parent education programs in their communities to replicate this program. Linking community resources (such as adult education programs or existing parenting programs) and schools has the potential of creating positive learning environments for both children and families. Further, using fun learning aids as part of the curriculum helped to engage both parents and children in extending literacy activities in the home environment.

Another area of future research would be to identify the extent to which the family involvement sessions and the technology aids impacted child outcomes. Because of the research design used in this study, we can only say that the combined use of family involvement training, the technology aids, and the supporting resources, including all components of the MEES program (adult education, parent education, and parent–child literacy activities), made a significant impact on children's standard score gains compared to the control group. We cannot say that one of these made a greater impact or whether one of these alone might be responsible for the outcomes. A future research project might examine the differential impact of these variables.

As school districts seek to meet the expectations of future federal initiatives such as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, educators may want to consider approaches to better support parents and other family members in their role as educators of their children. This may require a shift in thinking on the part of some educators of what constitutes family involvement, so that non-traditional strategies might be identified which would strengthen school and family partnerships. This study provides evidence suggesting that equipping migrant families with new abilities to nurture their children's language skills leads to positive outcomes for their children. Key to the success of this project was the collaboration between classroom teachers and parent educators to ensure the integration of the child's curriculum into

home activities. Parent involvement training is a worthwhile approach school districts may wish to utilize in order to meet ever-increasing expectations for student performance.

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Family–School Connections in Rural Educational Settings: A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature

Carrie A. Semke and Susan M. Sheridan

Abstract

Parental participation and cooperation in children's educational experiences is positively related to important student outcomes. It is becoming increasingly evident that context is a significant factor in understanding academic achievement, and the setting in which a child, family, and school is situated is among the salient contexts influencing performance. Although the family–school partnership research literature has increased over recent decades, it has been conducted primarily in urban and suburban settings. The goals of this paper are to (a) review the empirical literature on family involvement and family–school partnerships in rural schools, (b) provide a synthesis of the state of the science, and (c) point to a research agenda in this area. Eighteen studies were identified that met the criteria for this review. A critique of the research methods and analytical approaches is provided, along with a call for more research on the topic of family–school partnerships in rural settings, including rigorous and systematic studies pertaining to the effects of family–school involvement and partnerships in rural schools.

Key Words: rural, parental, parents, family, families, schools, partnerships, research, context, involvement, engagement, family–school connections, literature review, settings, community, communities

Introduction

Parents and schools, separately and together, represent significant influences on and potential sources of support for children's learning and development. A concomitant focus on families *and* schools as foundations for child development and learning is grounded in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992). Accordingly, children develop within multiple contexts, and development is optimal when effective connections and continuities among these major systems are created (Hobbs, 1966). Methods for creating connections are manifest in programs promoting family involvement and participation in education and in discussions promoting collaboration and partnership among families and schools.

Family involvement, family–school partnerships, and school-community partnerships all play important roles in educational programming.[1] Given that each serves unique functions and may address different needs, distinctions between them are meaningful. *Family involvement* is characterized by active, meaningful overtures by parents to engage in activities and behaviors at home and at school to benefit their child's learning and development (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). It is a multidimensional construct that recognizes the multiple pathways by which families participate in supporting their child's learning at home, at school, and through communications across home and school (Fantuzzo et al., 2000). The focus in programs addressing family involvement tends to be the engagement of families, targeting methods for increasing the actions among parents and other family members to play an active and prescribed role in education. *Family–school partnerships* extend the concept of family involvement to recognize the importance of open communication, healthy relationships, respect for differences, and shared power among families and schools (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Programs that promote partnerships involve collaboration and cooperation between individuals across home and school settings and articulate clear roles and shared responsibilities (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Whereas family involvement is concerned primarily with unique roles for parents, family–school partnerships are concerned with promoting constructive connections and relationships, recognizing complementary roles among systems. *School–community partnerships* go a step further and place an emphasis on engaging community resources to offer programs and services that support families and the academic success of their children.

Decades of research findings have pointed unequivocally to the relationship between parents' attitudes, behaviors, and actions and student learning and academic success (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Parental participation and

cooperation in their child's educational affairs is related to several outcomes deemed important in educational arenas: increased student achievement and academic performance, stronger self-regulatory skills, fewer discipline problems, better study habits, more positive attitudes toward school, improved homework habits and work orientation, and higher educational aspirations (Aeby, Manning, Thyer, & Carpenter-Aeby, 1999; Galloway & Sheridan, 1994; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Ma, 1999; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Trusty, 1999). For students living in disadvantaged conditions, parent involvement has been found to be associated with lower rates of grade retention, dropout, and years in special education (Barnard, 2003; Miedel & Reynolds, 2000), and some research has suggested magnified effects for families of low socioeconomic status (Domina, 2005). Students with both externalizing and internalizing behaviors whose families are involved in their education have been shown to demonstrate decreases in disruptive behaviors and improvements in adaptive and social skills (Colton & Sheridan, 1998; Sheridan, Bovaird, Glover, Garbacz, Witte, & Kwon, 2012; Sheridan, Kratochwill, & Elliott, 1990). Meta-analyses investigating the effects with students representing racial diversity (Jeynes, 2003), urban children (Jeynes, 2005b), and adolescents (Jeynes, 2005a) have found effect sizes of parent involvement on academic achievement (i.e., standardized test scores) in the .70s, with benefits evident after students' abilities and socioeconomic status are taken into account (Barnard, 2003; Miedel & Reynolds, 2000). It is clear that children benefit when meaningful connections are made between significant adults in their environment.

Most of the research base pointing to the relevance and efficacy of involvement and partnerships has been conducted in urban settings (e.g., Chicago Child–Parent Centers; Reynolds, 2000). Despite increasing attention to the topic of family–school partnerships, relatively little information is known about their use and effects in rural communities. Rural settings present unique conditions that influence the availability and delivery of coordinated family–school services. Unique contextual realities facing rural educators heighten the need for research on family–school partnerships within rural schools. By definition, rural schools are geographically isolated, presenting a particular problem among rural educators (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Howley & Howley, 2004) and challenges for certain forms of school-based collaborations and partnerships. Rural schools tend to be hard to staff with high teacher turnover, a high percentage of inexperienced or poorly prepared teachers, inadequate resources, and poor facilities (Jerald, 2002).

The composition of the rural student body in America is also changing, with increasing rates of poverty, migrant families, poorly educated parents, and single parent homes in rural communities (Grey, 1997; Schafft, Prins, & Movit,

2008). Services for families in low-density rural locations tend to be either unavailable, inaccessible, or unacceptable (DeLeon, Wakefield, & Hagglund, 2003). The geographic and social contexts of rural communities often require schools to serve many functions beyond their primary mission of education (NEA, 2008). Most rural teachers indicate that beyond providing basic academic and instructional programs, supporting students' behavioral and mental health needs is also part of their role (Roeser & Midgley, 1997). Simultaneously, rural teachers report feeling unprepared to meet the range of educational, social, and behavioral needs of students and struggle to provide specialized services to serve students with learning or behavior problems (Monk, 2007). As a result, parents may serve as crucial partners in meeting the needs of students in and outside of school.

Quality relationships between home and school in rural settings and meaningful involvement of rural family members in educational decision making are often difficult to achieve. There is frequently stigma associated with identification of child or family needs, and rural culture often posits dealing with problems internally rather than pursuing professional help. Fears about being judged, distrust of professionals, and lack of privacy hinder parent engagement in services (Beloin & Peterson, 2000; Owens, Richerson, Murphy, Jageleweski, & Rossi, 2007). Additionally, many rural families are forced to travel a distance to access necessary services, with little or no public transportation. Time and scheduling challenges were reported by both rural parents (Kushman & Barnhardt, 2001) and teachers (McBride, Bae, & Wright, 2002) as inhibiting factors for parent involvement and home–school partnership activities.

Rural parents have been found to talk with their children about school programs, attend school meetings, and interact with teachers *less frequently* relative to their counterparts in suburban and urban schools (Prater, Bermudez, & Owens, 1997). In the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2007 (NCES, 2007), only 54% of rural parents reported being satisfied with the way that school staff interacted with them. Contributing to the challenges associated with family–school connections in rural settings is the lack of research providing empirical guidance since the majority of research on family–school connections has been conducted in urban and suburban settings to date (Prater et al., 1997). Compared to research in nonrural settings, the state of empirical research on the effects of and processes contributing to family–school connections in rural schools is unclear. This dearth of research attention greatly limits our ability to understand the differential role and impact of family–school partnerships within school contexts that vary in their location, size, access, and other salient characteristics. The purposes of this paper are to "take stock" of the literature on family–school connections in rural education. Specifically, our

intent is to (a) review the research literature on family involvement and family–school partnerships in rural schools, (b) provide a synthesis of the state of the science, and (c) point to a research agenda in this area. Procedures used to identify and extract relevant research will be described, methodologies used in the relevant studies will be discussed, and general findings for rural communities summarized. A critique of the research methods and analytical approaches will be provided, along with a call for rigorous and systematic studies pertaining to the effects of family–school involvement and partnerships in rural schools.

Method

Selection of Articles

Studies included in the review were those conducted from 1995 to 2010 that were related to family–school partnerships and/or family or parental educational involvement in rural settings. Studies were limited to the last 15 years with the purpose of summarizing the most current research. The structure and composition of rural educational systems have significantly changed over time (Grey, 1997; Monk, 2007; Schafft et al., 2008), which may have limited the comparability of investigations conducted more than 15 years ago. Alternatively, 15 years provided a sufficient time span to encompass an adequate number of studies to gain a thorough, yet updated perspective on this topic. No parameter was provided for the definition of "rural" setting as this construct was under investigation in this review; therefore, all articles that utilized the term *rural* to describe their sample and/or location qualified for this review. However, populations examined in the studies needed to be completely rural, or include comparative groups with one group being completely composed of a rural sample. That is, studies that included a combined sample of individuals from rural and urban settings were not included in this review, as no interpretations about practices or outcomes exclusive to the rural context could be drawn. Studies included in this review were limited to those that were examining North American rural settings to reduce variability in educational structure and functioning. An additional criterion for inclusion was that the study was published in a refereed journal.

Search Procedures

A variety of procedures were utilized to locate articles included in this review. Specifically, search procedures involved searches of computer databases, select journals, and references cited in relevant articles. In all, these procedures resulted in 18 studies that were included in this review.

A computer-aided search was completed for the electronic databases of PsychInfo; Academic Search Premier; and Education: A SAGE Full-Text Collection for studies published in 1995 to 2010. A combination of key words was entered into the search engine for each electronic database to generate a list of relevant articles. Key words included a combination of *rural* and *family–school*, *family–school partnership*, *parent–school partnership*, *family–school relationship*, *parent–school relationship*, *family involvement*, or *parent involvement*. Abstracts of the generated articles were reviewed to assess relevancy and appropriateness for inclusion based on selection criteria. Nine studies were identified via computer searches (i.e., Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1995; Caspe, 2003; Chavkin, Gonzalez, & Radar, 2000; Dalton et al., 1996; McBride et al., 2002; Meyer & Mann, 2006; Porter DeCusati & Johnson, 2004; St. Clair & Jackson, 2006; Xu, 2004).

Given its specific focus on rural education research, a hand search of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* (JRRE) was conducted to identify relevant articles that met our search criteria. The authors first previewed all of the titles and abstracts of JRRE published between 1995 and 2010. The articles that appeared relevant (e.g., contained family, parent, family–school, or similar terms in the title or abstract) were then carefully read by the first author for appropriateness for inclusion based on the focus (i.e., family–school partnerships; family/parent involvement in education) and rural setting. Articles that dealt with school–community partnerships were uncovered in this process and were also included given their conceptual closeness. Eight additional studies were identified via the select journal hand search (i.e., Agbo, 2007; Barley & Beasley, 2007; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000; Howley, Bickel, & McDonough, 1997; Keith, Keith, Quirk, Coehen-Rosenthal, & Franzese, 1996; Kushman & Barnhardt, 2001; Prater et al.,1997; Weiss & Correa, 1996).

Studies that were identified by the previous two procedures (i.e., computer and hand searches) were closely reviewed to identify further studies of family–school partnerships in rural schools. Specifically, the introduction or literature review and reference sections of each article were examined to identify and locate additional relevant studies, based on the title and/or description within the primary article. These secondary studies were then extracted from their published source and carefully read for their appropriateness. Studies identified in this way often overlapped with those identified through other means or did not meet selection criteria; however, one additional study was identified in this manner (i.e., Owens, Murphy, Richerson, Girio, & Himawan, 2008).

Analysis of Studies

Context for Review

Two research summaries describing the current state of rural education research and the research agenda for future rural education studies (i.e., Arnold et al., 2005; Coladarci, 2007) were used to guide the analysis and interpretation of the studies included in this review. Arnold and colleagues (2005) conducted a comprehensive literature search of rural education studies and summarized prominent topics and elements of research quality. Specifically, Arnold et al.'s review found that (a) rural education research is dominated by descriptive research; (b) much more rigorous research on rural education is necessary; (c) there is a paucity of high and medium quality studies on parent involvement in rural education; (d) topics explored in rural research need conceptual refinement around rural research questions; and (e) approximately one-third of research conducted in rural settings is not intended to identify a rural phenomenon per se. Coladarci (2007) also summarized challenges inherent in rural education research and provided suggestions for how to improve the state of the science. Similar to Arnold et al., Coladarci asserted that (a) it is often unclear whether rural education researchers uncover a rural phenomenon or if the phenomenon is observed incidentally in a rural setting; (b) research questions tend to fail to establish research as rural in nature; (c) rural education researchers typically fail to describe the context of "rural" in sufficient detail; and (e) no current reviews of the literature exist. Assertions made by Arnold et al. and Coladarci were used to identify important variables in the articles identified for this review of the literature. Specifically, the variables of interest were: definition of rural used in the study, intent to study a rural phenomenon per se, whether research questions were specified as rural in nature, and study design. In addition, we coded studies for definitions and/or descriptions of the family–school partnership construct under investigation, and the studies were summarized regarding the location and description of the rural sample and study findings.

Coding Procedures

The authors coded each article on variables identified as important to rural educational research, based on previous reviews (Arnold et al., 2005; Coladarci, 2007). The first author coded all articles uncovered in the search, and the second author coded a random sample of 80% of them. Articles were first coded based on whether or not (i.e., yes/no) the author(s) provided a definition or description of "rural" for their study. Second, each article was examined as to whether or not (i.e., yes/no) the study was rural specific. *Rural specific*

is defined as research that is conducted to specifically study rural education issues. In contrast, *rural context only* is research that is conducted in a rural context with no intent to investigate a rural education issue or explain how the rural setting influences some aspect of schooling (Arnold et al., 2005). Third, the research questions and/or purpose statement for each study were assessed for whether or not (i.e., yes/no) the research questions were clearly phrased as rural in nature. Lastly, the research design of each of the 18 studies was reviewed. The research design for each study was classified as either descriptive, single-group pre-/post-test, causal-comparative (i.e., comparing two groups, without invoking an experimental design), correlational, quasi-experimental, or experimental. We also assessed the family–school construct under investigation in each study to gain a better understanding of the manner in which the construct had been conceptualized. The construct under investigation for each study was classified into one or more of the following categories: parent/family involvement, family–school partnership, or community–school partnership. Categories (defined above) were developed based on definitions articulated in previous research (e.g., Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Fantuzzo et al., 2000).

Two-thirds of the studies were coded independently by the two authors to ascertain interrater agreement. In the initial coding, there was 84% agreement between coders across all study variables. The main area of disagreement was categorizing the family–school construct being addressed in each study, with agreement between coders totaling 60%. The coders met to review the constructs and definitions, discuss the discrepancies, and gain agreement on the coding criteria. It was determined that although each study's author may use their own terminology, the code should reflect whether or not the construct under investigation corresponded with the identified category definitions (regardless of the terminology used by the studies' authors). Furthermore, it was determined that studies may be coded using multiple categories (e.g., Agbo, 2007 was categorized as investigating both family involvement and community–school partnership). This discussion of the definitions of constructs and recoding of the studies yielded 100% agreement within the category. In the final analysis, overall agreement between coders totaled 92%.

Results

The studies included in this review are described in Table 1, with a summary of findings in Table 2. A total of 18 studies met criteria and were included in the review. Study publication dates ranged from 1995 to 2008. The study samples were all located in North America and included self-described rural

communities in Canada (i.e., Ontario) and the United States. U.S. states represented included Colorado, Missouri, Wyoming, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, West Virginia, Ohio, Michigan, Iowa, Alaska, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Florida. Other samples were less specific and reported general geographic information only, including "rural New England" (i.e., Caspe, 2003) or in a Midwestern state (i.e., Meyer & Mann, 2006; St. Clair & Jackson, 2006), or they did not identify the rural location at all (Xu, 2004). Research participants varied across studies and included community members, schools, teachers, school administrators, students, and parents. Several studies (i.e., Howley et al., 1997; Keith et al., 1996; Prater et al., 1997) used a broad sample taken from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS). Sample sizes ranged from 13 teachers (i.e., Caspe, 2003) to 18,000 students from the NELS sample (i.e., Prater et al., 1997). Several studies did not report sample size (i.e., Dalton et al., 1996; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000; Kushman & Barnhardt, 2001; McBride et al., 2002).

Each study is classified with respect to each variable of interest (i.e., definitions of rural, rural specificity of the research design, rural nature of research questions, study designs, and family–school constructs examined) and summarized based on location and description of the sample and study findings. In addition, Table 1 provides a summary of the proportion of studies categorized on each of the identified variables and the general findings.

Definitions of Rural

Of the reviewed articles, five (28%) specifically defined rural for their sample (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Brody et al., 1995; McBride et al., 2002; Prater et al., 1997; Weiss & Correa, 1996), albeit utilizing various definitions. For example, one study used the National Center for Education Statistic's (NCES) definition of rural which includes open country and small settlements of less than 2,500 persons that are not in the vicinity of the densely populated suburban areas known as urban clusters (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Similarly, Brody and colleagues (1995) used a sample that was drawn from rural areas with populations less than 2,500. Prater et al. (1997) and Weiss and Correa (1996) described rural as areas outside the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), defined as "at least (a) one city with 50,000 or more inhabitants, or (b) a Census Bureau-defined urbanized area of at least 50,000 inhabitants and a total MSA population of at least 100,000." Overall, approximately three-quarters of researchers failed to define rural, and among those who did, there was no consensus of "rural" in rural family–school partnership research.

Table 1. Summary of Rural Family–School Partnership Studies by Variable of Interest

Source	Location	Sample	Specified Definition?	Rural Specific?	Research Questions Rural?	Design[1]	Construct[1]
1. Agbo (2007)	Brown Lake, a small fly-in reserve in Northwestern Ontario, Canada	58 community members of First Nations people (Aboriginal people of Canada); 8 Euro-Canadian teachers	No	No	No	D	FI, CSP
2. Barley & Beesley (2007)	Rural schools in Colorado, Missouri, and Wyoming	20 high-needs, high-performing schools at each level (i.e., elementary, middle, high)	Yes	No	Yes	D	CSP
3. Brody et al. (1995)	Non-metropolitan communities in Georgia and South Carolina	90 rural African American youths ages 9–12 and both parents (i.e., living in 2-parent homes); 19% poverty status	Yes	No	No	CO	FI
4. Caspe (2003)	Subset from School Transition Study in rural New England	13 teacher interviews regarding 7 children from 1st to 2nd grades	No	No	No	QA	FSP
5. Chavkin et al. (2000)	Rural district in Lyford, TX	5 schools with more than 1,600 students and their families; 95% Hispanic	No	No	No	P, D	FSP, CSP
6. Dalton et al. (1996)	Atenville Elementary in small West Virginia community	1st, 2nd, & 3rd graders and their parents in Parents and Partners Program	No	No	No	D	FI
7. D'Amico & Nelson (2000)	3 rural schools in Ohio, Michigan, and Iowa with improvement initiatives	Interviewed a broad range of individuals from the 3 schools, such as teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members	No	No	Yes	D	CSP
8. Howley et al. (1997)	NELS[2] sample	4,977 rural, 4,855 urban, and 7,071 suburban high school students	No	Yes	Yes	CO	FI
9. Keith et al. (1996)	NELS[2] sample	16,378 students in 8th grade at base survey and 10th grade at follow-up and their parents	No	Yes	Yes	CO	FI
10. Kushman & Barnhardt (2001)	7 Alaskan communities involved in Alaska Onward to Excellence	Remote fly-in villages or towns and ranged in size from 125 to 750 residents; most communities are nearly 100% Alaska native	No	No	Yes	D	FI

Table 1, continued

11. McBride et al. (2002)	9 rural Illinois communities	21 classrooms in prekindergarten at-risk programs; 3- to 4-year-olds from economic disadvantage; identified as at-risk for school failure	Yes	No	Yes	D	FI
12. Meyer & Mann (2006)	Rural school district in a Midwest state	26 Kindergarten–Grade 2 teachers conducted home visits prior to the school year	No	No	No	D	FI
13. Owens et al. (2008)	Ohio Appalachian counties	117 Kindergarten–Grade 6 children with inattention and disruptive behaviors; 78% male; 71% diagnosed with ADHD	No	No	No	E	FSP
14. Porter DeCusati & Johnson (2004)	Public school in rural, central Pennsylvania	56 Kindergarteners (57% female) and 18 parents (83% mothers; 82% 2-parent homes; 75% middle class)	No	No	No	D, CO, QE	FI
15. Prater et al. (1997)	NELS[2] sample	18,000 8th grade students; 44% suburban; 31% rural; 25% urban; 51% males; 49% females; 11% Hispanic; 12% Black; 77% White	Yes	Yes	Yes	CC	FI
16. St. Clair & Jackson (2006)	Midwestern Migrant Even Start Family Literacy Program	29 children in Kindergarten-Grade 1 and their parents (64% female, 97% Hispanic)	No	No	No	QE	FI
17. Weiss & Correa (1996)	Rural counties in Florida	14 rural counties; 14 administrators (mean rural residency 21.9 years) and 13 teachers (mean rural residency 8.5 years)	Yes	No	Yes	D	FI
18. Xu (2004)	Not reported	121 racially diverse middle school students in urban setting (grades 6-8), 81.1% free or reduced meals; 920 middle and high school students in rural setting (grades 5-12), majority Caucasian, 30.5% free or reduced lunch	No	No	No	CC	FI
Totals			Yes: 28%	Yes: 17%	Yes: 44%	3	4

[1]Total > 100% due to multiple coding on this variable.

[2]National Education Longitudinal Study

[3]D: 56% ; CO: 17%; CC: 11% ; QE: 11% ; QA: 6%; E: 6% ; P: 0%

[4]FI: 72%; CSP: 22%; FSP: 17%

Note. D = Descriptive, QA = Qualitative, CC = Causal-Comparative, CO = Correlational, QE = Quasi-Experimental, E = Experimental, P = Single-Group Pre- Post-Test, FI = Parent/Family Involvement, FSP = Family–School Partnership, CSP = Community-School Partnership

Table 2. Findings from Studies on Family–School Connections in Rural Settings

Source	Findings Related to Family–School Connections
1. Agbo (2007)	• Interviews resulted in the identification of the lack of community participation in the affairs of the school. • In First Nations communities, the school should partner through collaborative efforts that foster respect for multiple perspectives.
2. Barley & Beesley (2007)	• All schools reported a supportive relationship with their community as a critical aspect of their programming. • Close relationship with the community was thought to help schools enact high expectations and facilitate principal leadership.
3. Brody et al. (1995)	• Parental educational attainment was linked with family financial resources and with parental involvement with the adolescent's school. • Maternal involvement linked directly with adolescent academic competence, mediated by the youth's development of self-regulation.
4. Caspe (2003)	• Teachers collected information about families through communication and observation. • Teachers made meaning of the information through comparisons to other families, their own families, and the child's family over time.
5. Chavkin et al. (2000)	• Parents, students, and staff reported the MegaSkills program is a vehicle to improve home–school connections; links parents, teachers, and students; and improves communication, student citizenship, parenting and teaching skills, school climate, discipline, and student achievement.
6. Dalton et al. (1996)	• The Parents and Partners program resulted in increased: number of parent volunteers, parent communication with the parent liaison, parental influence on educational policy, child expectations about graduation from high school, and attendance at Title I parenting sessions.
7. D'Amico & Nelson (2000)	• Common elements underlying the success of school improvement efforts included a culture stressing continuous improvement, reflection, and self-analysis, and amenable to change/experimentation; attention to principles of change; solid research; local adaptation; and added resources. • Aspects of the schools' context significantly influenced success: rural, poor, and small; rural insecurity; integration of school and community.
8. Howley et al. (1997)	• Parent involvement in school was not predicted by place of residence (i.e., rural, urban, or suburban community).
9. Keith et al. (1996)	• Rural school attendance did not affect parental involvement or changes in student achievement. • Parental involvement had the same effects on achievement of students in rural schools as in urban and suburban schools. • The effect of parental involvement on student achievement was small, but significant.
10. Kushman & Barnhardt (2001)	• Reform efforts in small rural communities require inside-out approach; educators must develop trusting relationships with the community. • Parents and teachers need to expand their conceptions of parent roles beyond the role of parents supporting the school to include roles in which parents are active participants in school life and decisions. • School and district leaders must move from top-down to shared leadership with the community. • Educators and reformers must recognize that education in rural Alaska has a larger purpose than teaching academic skills and knowledge.

Table 2, continued

11. McBride et al. (2002)	• Teachers focused a majority of their efforts on "traditional" forms of parent involvement activities (e.g., helping parents meet basic needs). • Most parent involvement activities took place within the schools with the parent visiting the school. • The majority of parent involvement activities were focused on administrative issues. • Parents and family members initiated a majority of contacts between home and school. • Parents' lack of time was identified as a significant barrier to family involvement activities. • Most frequently cited benefits of parent involvement were (a) helps children realize the importance of education, (b) improves children's self-esteem, (c) increases parental understanding of the child, (d) increases parental commitment for future involvement, and (e) better teacher understanding of enrolled children and their families.
12. Meyer & Mann (2006)	• Teachers reported that home visits resulted in improved relationships with children and families. • Teachers reported that home visits lead to improved communication with parents, a better understanding of the child, and a better understanding of the influence of the home on school performance.
13. Owens et al. (2008)	• An intervention program with a family–school partnership component resulted in significant reductions in children's ADHD symptoms and early aggressive/delinquent behavior and improvements in relationships with adults, setting-specific functioning, and overall functioning.
14. Porter et al. (2004)	• Students who participated in parent-enriched reading groups had improved scores compared to students who did not have parent support. • Students indicated positive perceptions of parents in the classroom. • Parents' reading practices with their children were associated with classroom participation of parents.
15. Prater et al. (1997)	• Specific aspects of parent involvement varied across community settings. • Suburban and urban parents talked more frequently about school programs with their children, attended school meetings with more regularity, and interacted with teachers more frequently than rural parents. • Rural parents attended school events more often. • Rural parents did not limit television watching as habitually as urban or suburban parents.
16. St. Clair & Jackson (2006)	• By the end of first grade, children from families participating in the parent involvement training program scored significantly higher on language measures than children in the control group.
17. Weiss & Correa (1996)	• Major problems faced by early interventionists in rural counties included rural ecology (e.g., geographic isolation, poverty), family conditions (e.g., lack of parental involvement), professional staff (e.g., excessive regulation, teacher competencies), and educational programs/funding. • The panel suggested the following solutions: increase number of bus routes, provide incentives to rural teachers and support staff, parent liaison programs, increased counseling services for families, effective family and parenting education programs, increased home visit programs, uniform paperwork, use a transdisciplinary team approach, and improved screening procedures in daycare programs.
18. Xu (2004)	• For the rural sample, family homework help related to all five features of homework management. • Students who received family homework help reported more frequently working to manage their workspace than those who received no homework help, took more initiatives in managing time, made more effort to avoid internal distractions, were more likely to use self-motivation or self-reward strategies, and were more careful about monitoring and controlling emotions.

Rural Specificity of Research Design

Arnold and colleagues (2005) defined *rural specific* as research that is conducted to specifically study rural education issues. *Rural context only* is defined as research that is conducted in a rural context, without intent to investigate a rural education issue or explain how the rural nature of the setting influences some aspect of schooling. Three (17%) of the reviewed articles were identified as rural specific (Howley et al., 1997; Keith et al., 1996; Prater et al., 1997). For example, the study by Howley and colleagues (1997) was identified as rural specific because it specifically examined the effect of place of residence (i.e., rural, urban, suburban) on levels of parent involvement as reported by high school students. Alternatively, 83% of the reviewed studies were classified as rural context only. For example, St. Clair and Jackson's (2006) study was considered rural context only because it investigated the relationship of the intensity of family participation in a rural Migrant Education Even Start parent education program on children's language outcomes. The goal of the study was not to directly assess the impact of the rural setting; rather, it simply utilized a rural sample to investigate the effect of a parent involvement program on children's language. Very few research studies concerning family–school partnerships have been conducted that are intended to specifically study the influence of the rural context on family–school partnerships or their effects.

Rural Nature of Research Questions

A problem with rural education research in general is that poorly framed research questions fail to establish research as rural in nature (Coladarci, 2007). Of the 18 studies examined for this review, eight (44%) articulated research questions or purpose statements that were rural in nature (Barley & Beesley, 2007; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000; Howley et al., 1997; Keith et al., 1996; Kushman & Barnhardt, 2001; McBride et al., 2002; Prater et al., 1997; Weiss & Correa, 1996). In studies where research questions or purpose statements may be framed in this way (i.e., the author(s) establishes the relevance of rural to the goal of their study), they may not be considered rural specific. In fact, 62.5% of studies that have research questions or a purpose statement that are clearly stated as rural in nature are considered rural context only and not rural specific (Barley & Beesley, 2007; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000; Kushman & Barhardt, 2001; McBride et al., 2002; Weiss & Correa, 1996). Consequently, although authors of research studies may articulate a goal to investigate a rural phenomenon via their research questions, the study design may not allow for interpretations regarding how a rural setting influences some aspect of schooling. For example, Barley and Beesley (2007) articulate one of their questions

as rural in nature: "What characteristics describe a successful rural school?" and investigate elements of success by interviewing principals in high performing rural schools. However, this study is considered to be rural context only because the sample includes all rural schools and the design of the study is descriptive; therefore, inferences cannot be drawn regarding how a rural setting influences some aspect of schooling.

Study Designs

Of the 18 studies examined in this review, the majority of the studies (56%, or 10) were descriptive (Agbo, 2007; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Chavkin et al., 2000; Dalton et al., 1996; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000; Kushman & Barnhardt, 2001; McBride et al., 2002; Meyer & Mann, 2006; Porter et al., 2004; Weiss & Correa, 1996); three (17%) of the studies were correlational (Brody et al., 1995; Howley et al., 1997; Keith et al., 1996); two of the studies (11%) were causal-comparative (Prater et al., 1997; Xu, 2004); two (11%) were quasi-experimental (Porter et al., 2004; St. Clair & Jackson, 2006); one (6%) was considered experimental (Owens et al., 2008); and one (6%) was qualitative (Caspe, 2003). One study (6%) used multiple research methods to explore the stated research questions (Porter et al., 2004). No studies used a single group pre-/post-test design. The lack of experimental studies in this area renders firm conclusions about the effects of family–school connections in rural schools premature; thus, findings of the available studies should be interpreted with caution. For example, Owens et al. (2008) utilized an experimental design (i.e., participants were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups) to investigate the effectiveness of a collaborative family–school intervention program for youth with disruptive behavior problems in a rural, Appalachian region; however, all participants in both treatment and control groups were considered rural, and the research questions were not rural in nature. Therefore, the study used an experimental design to describe the effects of a collaborative family–school program in a rural setting, but it is considered rural context only as there was no intent to investigate a rural education issue or explain how the rural context influenced the efficacy of the intervention.

Family–School Constructs Examined

Due to the exploratory nature of this review, we used inclusive descriptions of family–school connections to capture the family–school construct under examination. Studies could potentially fall under more than one category depending on the procedures provided by the author(s) for each study. Thirteen of the articles (72%) targeted parent or family involvement (Agbo, 2007; Brody et al., 1995; Dalton et al., 1996; Howley et al., 1997; Keith et al.,

1996; Kushman & Barnhardt, 2001; McBride et al., 2002; Meyer & Mann, 2006; Porter et al., 2004; Prater et al., 1997; St. Clair & Jackson, 2006; Weiss & Correa, 1996; Xu, 2004); four (22%) investigated community–school partnership (Agbo, 2007; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Chavkin et al., 2000; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000), and three (17%) targeted family–school partnership (Caspe, 2003; Chavkin et al., 2000; Owens et al., 2008). Two studies (11%; Agbo, 2007; Chavkin et al., 2000) examined multiple constructs. Thus, most studies conceptualized the role of families in rural education as one of "involvement," rather than "partnership."

Summary of Findings

As the research on family–school connections in rural communities is limited to only 18 published studies with various methodologies, designs, treatment targets, and research questions, it is difficult to summarize the findings at this time and premature to draw widespread conclusions. However, the importance of family–school connections in rural areas is a theme throughout the available studies. In fact, several studies identified positive outcomes of family–school connections for rural children. For example, Brody et al. (1995) found that maternal involvement was linked to rural African American youth's academic competence via the child's development of self-regulation. Keith et al. (1996) found that parental involvement significantly influenced student achievement in rural, urban, *and* suburban schools. In addition, relative to students who received no homework help, rural students whose families were involved in homework help reported more frequently working to manage their workspace, taking more initiatives in managing time, making more attempts to avoid internal distractions, using more self-motivation strategies, and monitoring and controlling their emotions (Xu, 2004).

Participation in intervention programs focused on improving the home–school connection in rural schools was also reported to be beneficial in several studies. For example, involvement in the Parents and Partners program, a parent involvement program at a rural elementary school in West Virginia, resulted in increased child expectations about graduation from high school (Dalton et al., 1996). Owens et al. (2008) found significant improvements (e.g., decreased aggression, improved symptoms, enhanced adult–child relationships) for children with ADHD whose parents partnered with teachers, relative to a control group. Rural teachers reported that rural home visit programs fostering family involvement delivered in a rural community yielded improved relationships, improved family communication, and enhanced teacher–child and teacher–parent relationships as reported by teachers (Meyer & Mann, 2006). Lastly, a parent involvement family literacy program delivered in a rural community

was found to improve children's language performance compared to controls (St. Clair & Jackson, 2006).

Many studies also emphasized the importance of the connection of the school with the community as a whole. For example, following interviews with community members, teachers, parents, students, principals, and administrators, a close, collaborative relationship with the community was identified as critical to school success (Agbo, 2007; Barley & Beesley, 2007; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000). Several studies went further to emphasize the importance of including community members in the development of research projects for or within rural communities (Agbo, 2007; Dalton et al., 1996; Kushman & Barnhardt, 2001).

Two studies reported that residence in a rural community did not predict parental involvement (Howley et al., 1997; Keith et al., 1996). However, several studies investigated *how* parents are involved in rural communities and how specific involvement practices may differ across settings (McBride et al., 2002; Prater et al., 1997). When examining teachers in a prekindergarten classroom, McBride and colleagues (2002) found that (a) teachers limited their parent involvement activities to helping parents meet their basic needs, (b) most parent involvement activities took place within the schools, (c) most parent involvement activities were administrative in nature, and (d) parents initiated most contacts between home and school. Prater and colleagues (1997) revealed that in comparison to suburban and urban parents, rural parents (a) talked less frequently about school programs with their children, attended school meetings less regularly, and interacted with teachers less frequently; (b) attended more school events; and (c) did not limit television viewing as habitually.

Barriers to parent–school connections in rural settings were also apparent across studies. For example, in a study by Brody et al. (1995) involving rural African American children, parental educational attainment was linked with parental involvement in school, indicating that low parent educational achievement (often apparent in rural communities) predicted reduced parental involvement in education. A panel of school administrators and teachers in rural Florida reported problems with rural ecology (e.g., geographic isolation, poverty), family conditions (e.g., lack of parental involvement), professional staff (e.g., teacher competencies), and educational programs and funding as barriers faced by early intervention professionals in rural areas (Weiss & Correa, 1996). Rural teachers reported that the most significant barrier to family involvement activities was parents' lack of time (McBride et al., 2002).

Discussion

Summary of the Research

The results of this study echo previously published gaps in the rural education research literature identified and summarized by Arnold et al. (2005) and Coladarci (2007). Research on family–school partnerships in rural educational settings tends to be nonsystematic when considering the kind of variables recommended as preeminent for advancing its scientific foundation. Further, the methodologies used have not fully grasped the benefits of rigorous designs from either quantitative or qualitative paradigms to understand the phenomenon or its effects in rural settings. Thus, many conclusions drawn from the reviewed studies are made cautiously.

First, research in family–school connections in rural education lacks a commonly accepted definition of "rural." Descriptions of rural communities, towns, and counties range from research-developed definitions to classifications suggested by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), or the U.S. Census Bureau. A consensus definition is necessary to collate or compare results across studies. Second, most studies do not specifically seek to investigate a rural phenomenon via their research aim or design. That is, studies may utilize a rural sample, but they do not purposefully aim to answer a rural education question at the outset. Alternatively, several studies seek to investigate a rural issue, but do not include a comparison group to facilitate inferences about the rural impact of the study's findings. As a result, it is unclear whether these studies have revealed phenomena unique to rural settings, or if the findings are simply incidental to rural schools. Third, the majority of studies summarized for this review were descriptive in nature. Thus, the conclusions drawn from the reviewed studies are narrowly limited by study design. To gain a more complete picture of the role of family involvement and partnering in rural communities, it is imperative that research be extended to included rigorous, high-quality experimental and quasi-experimental studies. Fourth, research in family–school connections in rural education lacks a commonly accepted definition of the constructs involved in those connections. The authors of this review provided definitions for multiple constructs examined in the field of family–school connections in rural communities, including family/parent involvement, family–school partnerships, and community–school partnerships. The majority of the identified studies explored a construct best described as parent or family involvement in education, rather than family–school partnership, per se. Lastly, the research on family–school connections is limited to a relatively small number of published studies (n = 18) with various methodologies, designs, treatment targets,

and research questions, preventing the ability to generalize results or infer widespread conclusions.

Research Agenda for Family–School Connections in Rural Settings

This review represents the first of its kind to investigate family–school connections in rural settings. However, only 18 studies were identified that met the criteria for this review, revealing the lack of research attention to this important topic. Preliminary findings from initial studies indicate that family–school connections may be important for fostering healthy child outcomes in rural schools. Interventions that support family–school connections have the potential to positively impact children, parents, and teachers, and the connection between the school and the community may also be a critical component of effective rural schools. It is likely that parental involvement or partnership practices in rural schools may differ from other settings; however, too few studies have been conducted with research questions that investigate the unique and specific effects of the rural setting on family–school connections and outcomes. Finally, rural communities may present barriers to the development of family–school connections, warranting greater attention to the importance of uncovering specific and operational strategies fostering connections within rural school settings.

Given the dearth of studies conducted on family–school connections in rural settings and the reliance on descriptive and qualitative methods, their distinctive role and efficacy at producing positive student outcomes for students in rural schools cannot be stated unequivocally. It is essential that research in the area of rural family–school connections increase, particularly studies with a sound research design and deliberate intent to investigate rural phenomena. A research agenda is offered below that specifies empirical needs across these and other dimensions investigated in the present review.

Advances in Methodologically Rigorous Research Pertaining to Family–School Partnerships in Rural Schools

A significant challenge in much of rural education research is the lack of rigorous experimental designs that allow for conclusions regarding causality of educational strategies in rural contexts (Arnold et al., 2005). The area of family–school connections is not immune to this limitation. At present, few studies in the rural family–school literature have utilized experimental designs, and of those that have (i.e., Owens et al., 2008), the question of rurality is suspect given definitional problems or failure to define the questions or issues as rural specific. Much more research is needed that is designed to draw clear and causal relationships between variables under investigation within rural edu-

cational settings. There is a dire need for research that is designed to address questions of causality and efficacy using rigorous experimental designs. When testing the efficacy of interventions to promote family–school partnerships, evidence of random assignment, reliable and valid measures, implementation fidelity, and statistical validity is necessary. When comparing rural and nonrural samples, objective sampling criteria and relevant controls are necessary.

Experimental studies designed with attention to controls for internal and external validity are the cornerstone of high quality educational research. Nonetheless, they are not capable of addressing all research questions that are relevant within rural settings. Certain questions regarding rural context and place-based education are best addressed through rigorous qualitative approaches or mixed methods designs. There are many benefits of qualitative research to this field, including the ability to explore new questions in areas of family–school connections in a flexible and investigative manner, as well as gather complex and detailed information not accessible via experimental designs. As a result, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods can help us better interpret and understand the complex realities of rural education. Any one type of research is not sufficient to advance a rich and broad agenda, and the strength of conclusions one can draw is bound by the rigor of the design used. A general call for increased sophistication and rigor in research related to family–school partnerships in rural schools is made, irrespective of the methodological paradigm employed.

Articulation of Well-Defined Samples

Confusion in the literature on rural education in general, and certainly in the area of family–school connections, is due in part to the lack of specification on the definition of "rural" used in studies. Cursory or incomplete descriptions of the context within which studies take place preclude clear interpretations and sound conclusions regarding rural issues (Coladarci, 2007). This is compounded by the various definitions available and the fundamental differences between them. For example, some definitions emphasize school size or population base as the criterion for "rural," whereas others consider proximity to urban areas. Whereas we are not purporting to state with resolve the correct or most appropriate definition to be used in future research, we do charge researchers with the responsibility of clarifying for whom their writings pertain, in what type of rural context, and for what purpose. In addition to definitional criteria, the regional characteristics surrounding the context within which studies take place likely influence the variables and sample of interest and therefore require careful depiction. Descriptions can include features such as community size, population density, proximity to urban and suburban areas,

economic dependencies, average income levels, racial and ethnic composition of the community, population trends (e.g., stability, migration), school size and staffing patterns, services available to students and families, and other relevant features (Coladarci, 2007).

Uncovering and Understanding "Inherently Rural" (Coladarci, 2007) Phenomena in Family–School Connections

Like other areas of research on rural education, simply conducting family–school partnership research in rural settings does not necessarily allow for study conclusions to be characterized as "rural findings." Rather, it is possible and desirable to design and execute studies that compare approaches or perspectives in rural versus other geographic contexts to begin to unpack issues that are unique to the rural context. For example, studies might be designed that study the structure of family–school conferences and its effects in rural schools compared to their suburban or urban counterparts. Alternatively, in some circumstances, the variable under study may be unique to rural settings such that a comparative study is not possible. In such cases, it is possible to embellish studies with rich descriptions of the rural context under study and draw inferences cautiously based on measured and validated data. In the area of family–school connections, realities families face when desiring to work collaboratively with teachers or configurations preschool teachers may use to engage in home visits in remote farming communities are worthy of investigation. Mechanisms to foster communication, support home/community learning opportunities, and promote parents' roles in school governance may be fundamentally different in rural contexts, and research is needed to investigate their efficacy in ways that inform rural education in a distinctive way. Within entirely rural samples, comparisons or relationships among variables that differ in relevant ways (e.g., rural communities populated with English versus non-English speaking families or those characterized by high versus low degrees of migration or generational family stability) can cast light on differential patterns of family–school relations.

Types of Family–School Connections in Rural Settings

A significant issue plaguing research on family–school connections in general, and certainly within the rural education literature, is the definitional confusion surrounding the constructs under investigation. To advance science in rural family–school connections, it is first necessary to provide agreed upon operational definitions for practices related to the roles, responsibilities, and relationships among families and schools. Terms such as parent involvement, family–school partnership, and family–school–community collaboration are often used interchangeably, despite the fact that they can represent unique

perspectives, promote different goals, and denote distinctive practices (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Certainly within rural schools, the distinctions of what type of family–school paradigm works for which students under what contexts or conditions is of significant import and only possible with clear and objective specification of the independent variable under investigation.

In addition to clearly specifying the nature of family–school connections within rural education research, broadening the questions of interest is necessary. For example, Arnold et al. (2005) called for research that addresses parent expectations for student achievement, asserting that schools can improve student achievement by encouraging parents and community members to recognize the potential of high academic aspirations and expectations. This is an important aspect of family/parent involvement (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2011), and one dimension of our conceptualization of family–school partnerships that boost learning and achievement. Also necessary are broadened questions that begin to ask about relevant roles and novel practices for rural families and schools to work together to promote student achievement. For example, the efficacy of actions associated with joint decision making, collaborative problem-solving, complementary learning opportunities, and relevant out-of-school activities are ripe areas for research attention in rural schools.

Intervention Programs Targeting Family–School Connections in Rural Communities

Directly related to clear specification of the various types of family–school connections relevant in rural schools is a need to test their efficacy both within and between geographic contexts (i.e., investigating unique rural issues impacting their delivery and between rural and nonrural settings). Whereas the literature on interventions supporting family–school partnerships is improving generally, the majority of intervention studies have been conducted in urban or suburban settings. It is clear that the findings to date support the benefits of family–school connections and various approaches to parent involvement; however, assumptions regarding efficacy and mechanisms regarding how or why they produce their effects cannot be generalized to rural contexts. Dedicated intervention research related to the unique conditions facing both schools and families—and the relationships among them—is warranted. As already impressed, conclusions regarding the efficacy of family–school interventions in rural schools are predicated on the quality and rigor of available studies. Thus, methodological sophistication in intervention research is needed.

Topically, research is needed that investigates the outcomes of family–school connections and interventions on student, family, and school outcomes. Indeed, the fundamental rationale for establishing family–school connections

and testing their efficacy concerns the enhancement of rural students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes. The investigation of family–school interventions aimed at producing a broad array of positive results for student learning and adaptation is necessary. It is also the case that much family–school research has demonstrated positive effects for schools, teachers, and families. Each of these areas is worthy of study.

Conclusions

Family–school connections, linking parents and educators and promoting shared responsibility for children's academic success, are instrumental in addressing the needs of students (Henderson et al., 2007) and may be particularly beneficial in promoting achievement gains for students in rural settings (Owens et al., 2008). Enhancing the availability of and access to cross-system (family–school) supports represents one means of augmenting the quality of education in rural settings (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Lowe, 2006). Coordinated family–school interventions can address significant gaps evident for rural students by increasing the social capital available to support children's development (Crosnoe, 2004). At present, a common, integrated, research-based understanding of family–school connections in rural schools and outcomes associated with such practices is lacking. Factors identified as important in fostering and realizing the benefits of family–school partnerships (e.g., school climate and commitment to families, parental self-efficacy and role construction; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) may operate differently in rural school settings (e.g., climate, commitment to families). Empirical research testing claims on the effects of family–school partnerships for students, families, and schools has not sufficiently explored the unique influences of the rural context. Studies that have been conducted in rural settings are limited by a lack of clear definitions of the rural context, few methodologically sound causal or comparative studies, underrepresentation of rural-specific investigations, and confusion regarding the family–school variable of interest. With the need for greater levels of high quality research, we exercise cautious optimism vis á vis the potential for family–school connections in rural settings.

Endnote

[1]We use the term "family–school connection" throughout this manuscript as a general term denoting the variety of labels used in the literature, including and especially parent/family involvement and family–school partnerships. Several authors include collaborations with the community in this realm; thus, our notion of family–school connections includes school–community connections as well.

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A Community Partnership to Facilitate Urban Elementary Students' Access to the Outdoors

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Abstract

Today's children spend less and less time in the outdoors, leading Richard Louv in 2008 to coin the term "nature deficit disorder." Louv pointed out that experiences with nature are essential to a child's physical and emotional development and that the lack of these types of experiences has led to an increase in child obesity, attention disorders, and depression. Poor urban students in particular have little access to experiences with nature, and outdoor classrooms are increasingly being used to foster a sense of community in schools and to provide students with learning opportunities related to nature. This field study describes a partnership formed between a local university, a school district, and a community organization in order to develop and implement outdoor classrooms and curriculum in seven local elementary schools. Results based on teacher reflections on using the outdoors for educational purposes, collected before and after the implementation of the program, indicated a shift in teachers' perceptions about the value of the outdoors for instructional purposes which translated into a greater number of learning experiences for their students and helped foster a sense of community in their schools.

Key Words: outdoor classrooms, environmental education, community organizations, university partnerships, urban students, school as community, nature

Introduction

Many children today grow up having few experiences in the outdoors or simply playing outside (Cleaver, 2007). Indeed, according to a 2009 study

conducted by the Nielsen Company, on average, children aged 2–5 spend more than 32 hours a week watching TV, while those aged 6–11 spend about 28 hours per week watching TV (McDonough, 2009). Louv (2008) contended that children's lack of experiences with nature, which he calls "nature deficit disorder," is connected to an increase in child obesity, attention disorders, and depression. Louv pointed out experiences with nature are essential to a child's physical and emotional development. Similarly, Cleaver (2007) maintained, "children who spend time outdoors are healthier, happier, and smarter" (p. 20).

Despite the evidence pointing to the importance of outdoor and environmental education to the educational, physical, and emotional development of youth, most states continue to lack standards for teacher certification related to environmental education and/or environmental studies. In elementary or middle schools, environmental education often occurs through curriculum supplements and/or student activities supported by grants for teacher training (Engels & Jacobson, 2007; Kenney, Militana, & Donohue, 2003). Conversely, in secondary schools environmental education is often viewed as a less rigorous science, is rarely offered, and when available is used as an elective to substitute for other "harder" sciences such as chemistry or physics (Hart, 2010).

Given this lack of focus on environmental education, most teachers finish their teacher preparation programs unaware of the ways in which environmental or outdoor education can be used as a context to teach other areas of the curriculum such as science, language arts, mathematics, and social studies (Johnston, 2007, 2009; Parlo & Butler, 2007). These teachers have difficulty realizing the connection between environmental education and the standards they have to cover in the content area(s) they teach (Parlo & Butler, 2007). In fact, teachers frequently mention the pressure related to content standards and/or standardized tests as a reason for not including topics related to environmental education in their lessons (Johnston, 2009; Parlo & Butler, 2007).

Environmental Education and Student Outcomes

Although environmental education is often ignored in schools, researchers have found a correlation between environmental education and student outcomes, including achievement, motivation, and environmental literacy (Bartosh, Tudor, Ferguson, & Taylor, 2006; Engels & Jacobson, 2007; Stepath, 2005). In a 2006 study examining the impact of environmental education programs on student achievement in math, reading, and writing, Bartosh and colleagues found that schools using environmental education programs performed better on standardized tests than did those using traditional curriculum (Bartosh et al., 2006). Others found significant short-term and long-term effects of environmental education programs on participants' science content

knowledge, connections with nature, environmental stewardship, and interest in learning and discovery (Engels & Jacobson, 2007; Farmer, Knapp, & Benton, 2007; Manzo, 2008; Stern, Powell, & Ardoin, 2008). According to Eckert, Goldman, and Wenger (1997), learning activities in which a student collaborates with other students and adults to examine local problems help build community and lead to greater learning. Battistich and Hom (1997) point out that when schools function as communities they are characterized by "caring and supportive interpersonal relationships" (p. 1997). Furthermore, students who experience schools as communities have fewer behavior problems, attend school more often, and have more positive attitudes about school (Battistch & Hom, 1997; Manzo, 2008; Mayes, 2010; Reeves & Emeagwali, 2010). According to Reeves and Emeagwali (2010), children who are disengaged and alienated from school find a sense of purpose when working with others in outdoor projects such as building and tending gardens. These children develop a sense of belonging towards their school because of their meaningful participation in a community of practice (Eckert et al., 1997; Supovitz, 2002).

"No Child Left Inside" Legislation

Legislation related to environmental education has not been passed in the U.S. in the past 25 years. However, increasing environmental awareness due to discussions of global warming and other environmental issues, as well as reports about children's lack of experiences with nature and health issues related to obesity and diabetes, have led some in the government to introduce new legislation related to environmental education. In 2007 Congressman J. Sarbanes of Maryland and Senator J. Reed of Rhode Island introduced legislation know as "No Child Left Inside," which was approved in June 2008 by the committee on Education and Labor. In September 2008 the House of Representatives approved the No Child Left Inside Act, H.R. 3036, and the Senate and House versions of the act were introduced in 2009 on Earth Day. If passed, the legislation will lead to the authorization of new funds for states to provide high-quality, environmental education and outdoor learning activities both at school and in non-formal environmental education centers. The legislation also includes funds for teacher professional development and the creation of state environmental literacy plans. Therefore, if the No Child Left Inside bill is passed and funds appropriated, many more children in the future will have access to environmental and outdoor education.

Meanwhile, initiatives such as the one described here bring the community together to help offset the lack of educational opportunities related to environmental and outdoor education in some of the most indigent schools. This program, supported by a grant from the Michigan Department of Education,

led to a collaborative partnership between a local university, a school district, and a community organization in their efforts to develop and implement outdoor classrooms and curriculum in seven local elementary schools.

Method

Background on Partnership

The Greening of Detroit is a 501(c)(3) not for profit organization, established in 1989 with its main goal to reforest the city of Detroit (see http://greeningofdetroit.com/). Since then and through partnerships between schools, other community organizations, and businesses, the organization has been involved in the development of community gardens, outdoor classrooms, and neighborhood and park tree planting.

In 2009, a collaborative partnership was formed between a local university, the Greening of Detroit, and the local school district, supported by a grant from the Michigan Department of Education. The main goals of the project were to: (1) help develop teacher efficacy in the use of environmental and outdoor curricula; (2) foster the development of a sense of community in participating schools by involving students, parents, teachers, and others in the design, building, and upkeep of the outdoor classrooms facilitated by the Greening of Detroit; and (3) foster the development of a community of practice among the teachers by involving them in curriculum development that could be implemented in their schools' yards and the surrounding community.

Program Participants

Sixteen teachers from seven elementary schools participated in the program. All the teachers except one were female, and 63% of them were African American. The great majority of the teachers (81%) did not possess a major or minor in science.

Program Implementation

The project was implemented with the concept of collaborative practice in mind by providing teachers, students, and parents opportunities for meaningful participation in the school community (Eckert et al., 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1998; Supovitz, 2002). According to Eckert and colleagues (1997), in a community of practice people share a sense of purpose and come together around common endeavors. In the program described here, members of the school community gathered together to design and build outdoor classrooms to increase their children's access to outdoor education.

The program began in the summer of 2009 when the teachers joined university faculty to participate in a week-long series of workshops related to outdoor and environmental education support curricula: Project Wild/Wild Aquatic; and three units of the Michigan Environmental Education Curriculum Support (MEECS) – Ecosystems and Biodiversity, Energy, and Land Use. All the teachers received free copies of the Project Wild books and all the instructional materials related to each MEECS unit. Working in collaborative groups, the teachers took turns leading other teachers through the activities in these curriculum resources.

In the fall, the Greening of Detroit visited each school to meet with students, teachers, and administrators to discuss the site for the outdoor classroom. Once the site was chosen, the students participated in a "Dream and Design" series of activities that included deciding the location and shape of the garden(s), as well as the type of garden(s) to be planted (e.g., butterfly, vegetable, perennial, or combination of any of these). For example, one school chose to build a butterfly and vegetable garden in the shape of the state of Michigan.

Early the next spring, the Greening of Detroit brought to each school all the materials needed to build the outdoor classrooms (wood for the plant boxes, soil, mulch, and plants). The school community (teachers, students, and parent volunteers) gathered together and collaborated in the building of the boxes, carrying the soil, planting and watering the plants, and mulching. An observation station was included in each garden in the form of a box attached to a post, containing a journal and a pencil, for students to record their observations related to weather, animals found in the garden, plant growth, and so on. Partnerships with community businesses were established for the watering of the plants during summer recess.

Curriculum Development

During the summer of 2010, a group of teachers spent a week together in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1998; Supovitz, 2002) developing lessons and activities across the content areas that could be implemented using the outdoor classrooms and schoolyard. Some of the lessons were related to weather, while others were related to wildlife, habitats, mathematics, and social studies. Language arts were integrated in all the lessons as students read books, made observations, and kept journals. The lessons and activities were organized by topic and grade level and distributed to all the teachers who had participated in the program. In addition, each school received instructional materials to support these lessons, such as outdoor weather stations and bird and tree identification field guides.

Data Collection and Analysis

The evaluation of the program included quantitative and qualitative approaches in data collection and analysis. Before and after the implementation of the program teachers rated their level of preparedness to teach concepts related to the areas in which they received professional development, as well as some aspects of their pedagogical practice, using a four-point scale from 1 (not adequately prepared) to 4 (very well prepared). Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to find statistically significant differences between their "before" and "after" program ratings with statistical significance determined at $p < 0.05$.

To determine the impact of the program on teachers' practice, participants used electronic portfolios in which they recorded their reflections related to the usefulness of the activities in which they participated, as well as their use of the outdoors and schoolyard for instructional activities before and after participating in the program. These qualitative data were analyzed using techniques of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). As data were read several times, individual segments of data were coded and similar codes grouped into themes.

Results

Pre- and post-program comparisons indicated the program had a significant impact on participating teachers' perceptions of their level of preparedness to teach concepts related to life and environmental science as well as on their use of the outdoor classrooms and schoolyard for instructional purposes.

Program Impact on Participants' Science Content Knowledge and Pedagogical Practice

As indicated in Table 1 below, there was a significant difference in teachers' perceptions of their knowledge before and after participating in the program in two major areas related to environmental science: organization of living things, and ecosystems. After participating in the program, teachers also felt better prepared to facilitate problem solving among their students, help their students make connections within and between science topics, make connections from science to real-world situations, and engage their students in hands-on/project-based activities.

Table 1. Program Impact on Teachers' Perception of Science Knowledge and Pedagogical Practice: Pre- and Post-Treatment

Science Topic	Pre-Treatment *M*	Post-Treatment *M*	*M* Difference
Organization of living things	2.11	2.56	0.45*
Ecosystems	2.63	3.30	0.67*
Involve students in problem-solving	3.21	3.61	0.40*
Help students make connections within and between science topics	2.93	3.37	0.44*
Help students make connections from science to real world situations	3.19	3.52	0.33*
Engage students in hands-on/project-based activities	3.07	3.50	0.43*

*$p < .05$

Qualitative data support the results from the quantitative analysis. When commenting on the workshops related to Project Wild and MEECS, one of the teachers wrote: "I learned a lot about energy I did not know before," while another wrote, "I feel stronger and more confident in presenting and demonstrating science to my students in a more constructive and fun way." Another teacher commented, "These workshops filled a hole in the amount of information I had. I feel a lot more comfortable and prepared when working with the students."

When reflecting on her teaching style before and after participating in the program, one of the teachers wrote in her portfolio:

> Before participating in this program my attitude toward teaching science—and science in general—was one of fear and mistrust. Fear of what I didn't know about the subject and mistrust of my own ability to teach it. After my participation in this program I found that my comfort with the subject matter has increased and my fears have abated. I no longer look with terror on my science curriculum. I can enter my classroom feeling secure and confident—secure in the knowledge that I know and confident that I will be successful at it. (Participant E 3)

Another teacher described the following change in her teaching style:

> Before this program, I taught in front of my class with students sitting in rows and being taught from the textbook. They would read the chapter, copy the vocabulary words, write the definitions, and answer the checkpoint questions and end of chapter questions. During the program, I learned lots of fun activities that I implemented in my classroom.

> Students began liking to come to science class and doing hands-on/minds-on activities. (Participant C 4)

Another teacher shared the following reflection:

> I have always believed that if students are having fun, they will learn more. However, I have succumbed to the "old ways" of keeping students quiet and busy, because it's expected by most principals and co-workers. This program has encouraged me to return to my beliefs that school can and should be fun, hands-on, and project oriented. The children respond with great enthusiasm and excitement. They are more involved, and I know they are learning by how they interact with purpose and intelligence. (Participant B 1)

Further analysis of the data from teacher reflections recorded in their electronic portfolios led to the identification of four major themes: (1) usefulness of the curriculum resources they received; (2) their immediate impact on their practice at the classroom level; (3) a sense of community that evolved in schools; and (4) a shift in perception about the use of the schoolyard as an educational setting.

Usefulness of Curriculum Resources

One of the most useful aspects of the program, according to the participants, was the amount of ideas, activities, and curriculum support materials that they received and the fact that most of these materials were "ready to use," or as one of them put it, "easy, friendly, hands-on activities." This was particularly important since the great majority of the teachers did not have a science major or minor. As pointed out by one of the participants, "this workshop should be available to all teachers. I will use these activities next school year. The kids will love them, and they can't help learning as they do them." Another teacher commented, "I received a lot of information to use in my class, and I cannot wait to do some of the activities." Another teacher felt the "activities will keep my students engaged," while another couldn't "wait to do these lessons!" Some teachers also commented on the usefulness of such activities in helping them to accomplish certain goals for their school, as indicated in the following comment: "I will use these activities as part of our plan for becoming a Michigan green school."

The fact that the curriculum materials they had received were "ready-to-use" and contained all the supplies needed to implement the activities had immediate impacts on teacher practice, as illustrated in the comments below:

> Having these resources at my fingertips and the confidence to use them along with a sense of their purpose was an excellent start. By the time I

> was dissecting an apple to help my students understand the amount of fresh water on our Earth, we were all hooked! (Participant F 2)
>
> Before this program, the resources I used were primarily from the Harcourt Science Unit provided to me by the district. This year, I used a lot of resources from Project Wild and Project Wild Aquatic because they fit into the fourth grade unit on “Animal Adaptations.” (Participant B 2)
>
> Before this program, I was not at all familiar with the resources available through Project Wild, Wild Aquatic, or MEECS. During and after this program, I was very excited to share some of these great activities with my students. One of the very first activities we did was “wild versus domesticated.” (Participant G 3)
>
> I wasn’t familiar with Project Wild/Wild Aquatics K–12 Curriculum and Activity Guide, MEECS. All of these resources have become an integral base for me to further use in my teaching practice. (Participant D 1)

Outdoor Classrooms and Sense of Community

As previously indicated, members of the school community collaborated with the Greening of Detroit to design and implement outdoor classrooms that could be used for outdoor and environmental education. The outdoor classrooms were composed of raised garden beds containing a variety of different plants including vegetables such as tomato, zucchini, peppers, cucumbers, and varieties of cabbage. These in turn led to lessons on nutrition as students picked the various fruits and vegetables to eat in collaboration with the school cafeteria. Some of the containers were used to plant a butterfly garden to attract butterflies. As illustrated in the quotes below, the outdoor classrooms helped strengthen the sense of community in the schools:

> We are a K-8 school, and each grade level created and built their own garden. Our goal was to have each grade level take ownership of their garden. The older students did the heavy building and lifting, and the younger students helped plant the gardens. The gardens were beautiful when they were completed; they stayed intact for about a week. Then some vandals came in and ripped out the plants. This turned out to be a great learning experience for the students. They were very angry that their work had been destroyed, and they made it their goal to fix the garden and pass the word around that “we want to keep our school beautiful.” The gardens are now put back together, and just today the students in my class saw a bunny in the garden. They were able to write about it in the journals. (Participant F 3)

> After we met with the Greening of Detroit to decide the type of garden we were going to plant, the students decided on a butterfly garden. After finishing planting the garden, I brought my students back to the site to observe the finished project. The students were thrilled to see the finished project, and I heard a lot of conversation about what each one of them had done to make the project a success and what flowers they had worked together to plant. Now we have been observing many of the flowers, waiting for them to bloom. (Participant G 1)

> Last year, I sought to teach students about plants in a hands-on way. However, I had never heard of the Greening of Detroit. The plants often went home only to never be transplanted and eventually died in their containers. This year, it's thrilling to see that the children will be actively participating in this endeavor. This is the first year that I had a student come in with a bird's nest that she found because she wanted to share it with her classmates. (Participant G 2)

The Schoolyard as an Extension of the Classroom

Results also indicated a shift in teachers' perceptions about the value of the school grounds for instructional purposes, not only the outdoor classrooms that had been built, but the schoolyard as a whole. This shift in turn translated into a greater number of learning experiences for students. The following excerpts illustrate these findings:

> Since participating in the program, I have attempted to do more with the students using the outdoors. Some of the activities included comparing temperatures on multiple surfaces on the playground; comparing and contrasting ecosystems in different locations around the school using string circles; and measuring and collecting, identifying and sorting litter found near the school. (Participant D 3)

> After attending the workshops at the university, I taught an outdoor lesson about snowflakes to the first grade in February. We had been studying weather, and we discussed different types of snowflakes. One Friday it started snowing really hard, so I took them outside with magnifying glasses in hand to examine snowflakes. It was a huge success! They could easily see six branches on each snowflake. They were squealing with delight. In March, April, and May I taught outdoor lessons to the first and second grades. The first grade unit was Seasons, and the second grade unit was Plants. In April, I taught a bird observation lesson to the third graders; in May, I repeated it with the first and second grades. (Participant F 2)

> In January, I took my 25 fourth graders outside for an outdoor education class. I was really enlightened by some of the things the children noticed. They noticed that not all trees lose their leaves, they saw a couple of squirrels' nests way up near the top of some larger trees. We stayed outside for about 40 minutes. Once indoors, I had the children write down what they observed outside while their thoughts were still fresh in their minds. (Participant C 2)

Some teachers were also helping their students make connections between their outdoor classroom and other educational settings in the community as illustrated in the comment below:

> This past week, we went to the Detroit Zoo where we visited their butterfly garden. Students were able to compare the zoo's garden to the one that we had planted at our school. Students identified plants at the zoo that we had planted in our garden. We researched the different perennials that we planted. The students are learning why butterflies are attracted to these plants and what butterflies are native to Michigan. Just recently, the students have started to observe various butterflies in our garden. We observe which flowers or plants they seem to like best. (Participant B 1)

Discussion

In this program, students of various grade levels, their teachers, and parents formed a community around a common goal: to build outdoor classrooms that could serve as a context for student learning. Their efforts were facilitated by a community organization which had a long history in their city and by collaboration with the local university. These various stakeholders came together at different points in the life of the program to ensure its success. Researchers contend that when schools develop and cultivate relationships with other organizations and institutions in the community, their circle of connections widens, leading to future collaborations (Hands, 2005; Manzo, 2008; Mayes, 2010). Similarly, involving parents in the school community fosters relationships between the school and families and widens teachers' understanding of the students they teach (Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2005; Souto-Manning & Lee, 2005).

While the school community collaborated with the Greening of Detroit in the development and implementation of the outdoor classrooms, the local university provided the participating teachers with professional development in environmental education curricula that could be integrated with the outdoor classrooms. This aspect of the program helped increase teachers' knowledge of

topics related to environmental science and their confidence in the use of the schoolyard as a context for teaching and learning. Like the teachers in Tal's (2010) study, our participants had little knowledge about outdoor and environmental education. Parlo and Butler (2007) suggested teacher professional development should focus on subject matter knowledge so that teachers become aware that certain science concepts can be covered using topics related to environmental education. In the program described here, the science content related to each of the activities the teachers received was covered as teachers immersed themselves in these activities as students. This approach helped to build community among the participants and developed their confidence in their ability to use these activities with their own students. The combination of professional development on content related to environmental education topics, ready-to-use activities, and supporting instructional materials clearly contributed to a sense of empowerment among our participants.

The use of the schoolyard as an instructional resource to teach concepts across the curriculum is receiving increasing attention (Alexander, 1991; Billmore, Brooke, Booth, Funnell, & Bubb, 1999). The results of this study indicate that many of our participants were beginning to realize the potential of the school grounds as an educational setting and source of authentic science experiences. The schoolyard was no longer seen as a place for recess; instead, it had become an extension of the classroom. Some of our participants also began realizing that academic topics can be linked to the local environment, which in turn makes the material more relevant and helps students make real-world connections (Parlo & Butler, 2007). Johnston (2007, 2009) maintained that teachers and schools need to realize that many of the subject areas can be integrated into topics related to the environment and that the environment should be viewed as an integrated context for learning. For example, in language arts students can read and write about environmental topics and issues, while in mathematics they might examine environmental data or simply measure objects outside and use the measurements to determine distances between objects or the area and volume of such objects. Children become more motivated to write about something they are seeing and will better remember the formulas to determine area and volume when they practice such skills in the context of determining how much wood or soil they will need to build plant beds for their school gardens. These learning experiences provide students with opportunities for "meaningful participation" (Eckert et al., 1997, p. 3) and create community by fostering a sense of shared purpose (Supovitz, 2002). According to Manzo (2008), teachers and schools need to shift from seeing environmental education as something related only to a field trip to a local park or something for special projects, viewing instead the schoolyard as an integral extension of the

classroom. According to Johnston, "outdoor learning should be seen as fundamentally important for all education" (2009, p. 6); while Orr (1992) argued that all education is environmental education.

Research indicates that when schools use the environment as an integrating theme across the curriculum, their student test scores in the traditional subject areas such as reading, writing, mathematics, and science go up (Bartosh et al., 2006; Cleaver, 2007; Engels & Jacobson, 2007; Stepath, 2005). Furthermore, students who learn core subjects within the context of the outdoors are more motivated, have fewer discipline problems, and develop a sense of belonging and ownership in their school (Manzo, 2008; Mayes, 2007; Reeves & Emeagwali, 2010). Eckert and colleagues (1997) stressed that "schools need to provide the opportunity for students to form communities of practice around subject matter" (p. 3).

Implications

The National Science Standards acknowledge the importance of using the environment outside the school as a source of scientific inquiry. As stated in Teaching Standard D, the area outside the school can be used "…as a living laboratory….Whether the school is located in a densely populated urban area, a sprawling suburb, a small town, or a rural area, the environment can and should be used as a resource for science study" (National Research Council, 1996, p. 45). In large urban areas such as Detroit, many children have few experiences with nature. Yet, the schoolyard as well as the surrounding community can be a source of scientific inquiry all year long to students in all grade levels and can also provide opportunities for community involvement. Students can study the changes that the seasons bring, plant adaptation, habitats, weather conditions, and many other topics. These types of learning experiences do not require major allocation of resources and lead to benefits for the whole community (Haines, 2006). They mainly require a shift in the perception of school administrators and teachers about the meaning of "classroom." In a city such as Detroit, with many vacant lots, the school—in collaboration with parents and other members of the community—can develop meaningful projects that result in student learning and lead to community-building (Eckert et al., 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1998; Supovitz, 2002). Johnston (2009) pointed out that creating a sense of community is an essential aspect of being eco-friendly and of living in a sustainable manner.

Environmental literacy needs to become an integral part of our educational curriculum as we face current and future environmental issues. Cassell and Nelson (2010) caution that,

> Humanity is facing, and must deal with, enormous ecological and social problems and challenges. This situation has created an urgent and compelling need centered on how the future citizenry of the industrialized West will be prepared relative to addressing and dealing with these problems and challenges. (p. 179)

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"I Feel Much More Confident Now to Talk With Parents": An Evaluation of In-Service Training on Teacher–Parent Communication

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Abstract

This paper describes a teacher in-service training program on teacher–parent communication in Cyprus and its impact on teacher trainees. Data were gathered through questionnaires completed by teachers prior to their training and after having tried, in real school settings, the communication skills and approaches taught during the course. The analysis of the data showed a considerable modification of teachers' perceptions about various aspects of communicating with parents and a positive appraisal of their competence in organizing and implementing communication sessions with parents. The findings provide evidence for the effectiveness of teacher training on communication skills.

Key Words: teachers, parents, in-service training, Cyprus, professional development, school–family communication, skills, conferences, active listening

Introduction

School–family communication appears to be the most prevalent practice initiated by schools aimed at linking them with their pupils' parents (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Lightfoot, 2003; Martin, Ranson, & Tall, 1997; Symeou, 2002). Through their communication, teachers and families usually exchange information and ideas about the development and progress of the children in school and at home (Pang & Watkins, 2000; Wandersman et al., 2002). When

effective, communication between teachers and families provides the two parties with a deeper understanding of mutual expectations and children's needs, thus enabling both to effectively assist children and to establish the basis of cooperation (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Wandersman et al., 2002).

Nonetheless, during their encounters with parents, schools and teachers are often criticized as sending out—either consciously or subconsciously—a message that parents are not welcome and that they should leave their children's schooling to the experts, that is, the teachers (Bastiani, 1996; Crozier, 2000; Epstein, 2005; Symeou, 2002). In addition, some evidence suggests that even though many schools attempt to establish a variety of practices in order to facilitate two-directional communication, it is more likely that the flow of information between school and families is mainly directed from the former to the latter and that communication and its content is likely to be controlled by the school (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Crozier, 2007; Epstein, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Reay, 1998; Symeou, 2010; Vincent, 1996). In this sense, schools themselves appear to be inhibiting collaboration with parents. Hence it has been argued that blaming parents for the lack of interaction with school is incorrect and pathologizes parents (Bakker, Denessen, & Brus-Laeven, 2007; Crozier, 2000; Symeou, 2009), especially socially excluded parents (Crozier, 2007; Lareau, 2000; Symeou, Luciak, & Gobbo, 2009; Tett, 2004).

School communication with families is usually written or oral. Written communication might take the form of memos, lists, forms, permission notes, report cards, calendars of the school year, and notices of special events sent to the home. It refers to individual children, the whole class, or the school community as a whole. Schools usually establish some formal ways for achieving oral school–family communication also, for instance, parent–teacher conferences and open houses. Finally, many informal ways of contacting and communicating with parents may provide opportunities in which teachers and parents gain insights into one another's perspectives, for instance, casual conversations before school, afterschool meetings, and telephone calls.

School–Family Relationships in Cyprus

This paper describes the implementation of a teacher in-service training program in Cyprus, more specifically, in the Greek–Cypriot educational school system, aimed at enhancing teachers' effectiveness in communicating with pupils' parents. (Note: For the purposes of this study, any reference to formal education in Cyprus applies to the Greek-Cypriot educational system; no reference is made to the Turkish-Cypriot educational system. The two systems have been distinct since the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960.) The Greek-Cypriot educational system is a highly centralized system, characterized

by centralized structures of educational administration, curriculum development, and policymaking (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2006). Inspectors have a dominant role, being responsible for guidance, supervision, teacher and school evaluation, and teacher in-service training (UNESCO, 1997). Education is provided through pre-elementary and elementary schools, secondary general and secondary technical or vocational schools, special schools, institutions of tertiary education, and informal institutions and centers. Schooling is mostly provided in state-run schools, free for all students through age 18, but there is also an increasing number of private, self-funded institutions, the latter also being liable for supervision by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

School–family relationships in the Greek-Cypriot educational system appear marginalized in the agendas of policy and practice. The lack of any recent legislative action in relation to the issue is indicative of the lack of substantial relations between families and schools. Research in the field, which is mainly conducted within elementary education, is limited. Typically, any relationship between parents and teachers stops at elementary types of involvement (e.g., Georgiou, 1996, 1998; Phtiaka, 1998; Symeou, 2002, 2010).

Current school–family links are largely determined by the activities of schools' Parents Association (PA), formally named the Parents and Guardians Association. These are voluntary associations elected by an annual general meeting of each school's parents and guardians. The PA's responsibility is to fund school events and occasionally students in poverty using money they collect from events they organize during nonschool time. The PA does not participate in any educational decisions or policymaking. Parents' representatives at a national level, however, constitute a significant power group and manage to influence the official educational policy.

Schools also establish informal teacher–parent contacts, the extent and nature of which depend on the culture of the school itself and the initiatives of the families. Such relationships are the informal communication between parents and the school administrators or teachers, as well as parents' visits to the school to attend events and social activities. Moreover, there are opportunities for parents to volunteer in noneducational activities, for example, in offering breakfast to students, repairing and preserving school equipment, and so on.

A distinctive institution of state schools in the Greek-Cypriot educational system is the parents' weekly visiting period. Regulations specify that teachers in all school levels assign one weekly period on their weekly timetable when parents and guardians can visit their child's teacher to be informed about their child's school attainment and discuss with the teacher any relevant issues. Teachers would typically expect parents to come to the school for these 10- or 15-minutes conferences or briefings on a one-to-one basis. The aim of these

contacts is to provide families with information about their children's academic progress and behavior, about the schools' function, and about how families can support the school's work (Symeou, 2002).

Teacher Training on School–Family Communication in Cyprus

In the absence of specific requirements for professional development for teachers to maintain their jobs, agreed standards for training programs, or links between continuous professional development participation and promotions, training provision in the Greek-Cypriot educational system is mainly informal, individual, and voluntary. As with all other aspects of the Greek-Cypriot educational system, in-service training is centrally controlled by the Ministry of Education and Culture with limited school input. It is centrally determined, supply driven, and functions in isolation to identified individual and school needs (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2006, 2007).

The Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, through which the training described in this paper was offered, is formally responsible for professional training courses for educators of all levels—pre-primary, primary, secondary, and vocational—during afterschool hours through a series of optional seminars provided in five training centers throughout the island. Compulsory courses are provided only to school leaders, due to the existing educational legislation and the service plans. Seminars offered by the Pedagogical Institute are initially suggested by the Institute and presented to the consulting and interdepartmental Committees for feedback (Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, 1999). They aim to meet the needs of all teachers, as identified by the Pedagogical Institute and the Ministry of Education, and focus on school subjects, social and psychological issues, educational research skills, and information technology. Certificates of attendance offered to course participants do not count towards promotions or salary increase. Moreover, school-based seminars are organized on specific topics of interest to the staff of a school after agreement with the Pedagogical Institute. Additionally, the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute offers seminars, one-day workshops, and conferences in cooperation with the teachers' unions and teachers' associations on specific subjects.

This paper reports on the impact of an in-service teacher training program on teacher perceptions about a number of skills for communicating with parents during conferences and about their competence in organizing and implementing such conferences by using the particular skills. The training was set up through the official process presented above and resulted as an initiative to respond to the general interest and concern of teachers in the Greek-Cypriot educational system regarding the absence of appropriate training on effective teacher–parent communication during teachers' initial studies and prior in-service training.

Implementation of Training for Effective Teacher–Parent Communication

Effective communication is an essential component of professional success, especially in contexts where the professional is faced with the necessity of problem solving and/or decision making (Malikiosi-Loizou, 2000, 2001). Teachers' professional environment with the diversity of students' family situations is such an environment, where the teacher is concerned with adult-to-adult interactions and needs to function and communicate in a multilevel system (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Keyes, 2002) while communicating with families, during meetings, or when discussing sensitive issues (Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, Hartman, & Kemp, 2010). At present, there are few empirically validated interventions to address the communication skills of education professionals (Hertel & Schmitz, 2006; Lasky, 2000).

The use of counseling skills facilitates effective communication in which problem solving and decision making are concerned. Counseling and teaching present similar characteristics associated with becoming an effective partner in the school setting. Although counseling is relatively new as a profession, the services of counseling have been provided for many centuries. In classical antiquity teachers naturally and consistently held the counseling role, for instance, Socrates was Plato's teacher and counselor; Aristotle was the student and counselee of Plato; and Alexander the Great was the student and counselee of Aristotle (Gouleta, 2006). The use of counseling skills in teaching promotes, directly or indirectly, a number of parameters that assist students' learning, personal growth, and discipline (Malikiosi-Loizou, 2000, 2001). Use of these skills in teacher–parent communication could enhance understanding of teachers' and parents' expectations, ease problem solving and decision making, allow expression of feelings, and increase school–home collaboration (Friend & Cook, 1992).

Attentive/active listening is achieved by the use of basic counseling skills. Lasky (2000) suggested that by using active listening skills, education professionals can gain important information with which to work and at the same time communicate to a parent a sincere interest in understanding the parent's point of view. Active listening is the intent of the helper (teacher) to "listen for meaning," having as a main goal the improvement of mutual understanding (Ivey, Pedersen, & Bradford, 2001). The goals in active listening are to develop a clear understanding of the speaker's concern and also to clearly communicate the helper's interest in the speaker's message (O'Shea, Algozzine, Hammittee, & O'Shea, 2000).

Attentive/active listening is a structured way of listening and responding. Attending refers to a concern by the helper (teacher) toward all aspects of the client's (parent) communication. One could fully attend to a speaker by suspending his/her own frame of reference and judgment. The physical, emotional, and mental presence which communicate that the helper is listening to, interested in, and understanding what the client has to say comprises effective attentive/active listening. For active listening to be achieved it is important to observe the other person's behavior and body language. Having heard, the listener may then use a number of acts that will encourage the free expression of the client's ideas and feelings about their issues and build a sense of security for the client, thus leading to openness and trust. These acts are paraphrasing the speaker's words (without necessarily agreeing with the him/her—simply stating what was said), listening for and reflecting feelings, asking closed and/or open ended questions, using verbal and nonverbal prompts to encourage communication, summarizing what has been said and agreed on during one or more conferences, and providing closure (Cramer, 1998; Malikiosi-Loizou, 2000, 2001; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990).

The counseling setting, where the teacher–parent conference will take place, should be one that would promote neutrality, assure confidentiality, and encourage communication. These will only be achieved if the helper (teacher) takes measures to organize the greeting context as such. In a school environment, this might be very difficult to achieve, but the teacher who acts as the helper is obliged to do the best he/she can towards the preparation of a safe greeting context (Bayne & Horton, 2001; Bayne, Horton, & Bimrose, 1996).

Recognition of the importance of active listening has resulted in systematic investigations of the use of active listening skills in the helping professions. In a study examining the communication skills of nurses as they worked with families experiencing a medical emergency, Duhamel and Tabot (2004) reported that the use of active listening skills helped nurses to establish a trusting relationship with family participants. Mansfield (1991) used supervised role plays to teach active listening skills to medical students; based on a videotape analysis of their pre- and post-instruction performances, the medical students who had received training were judged to be more skilled in their use of active listening skills and in developing appropriate management plans for their patients. Paukert, Stagner, and Hope (2004) reported that 45 hours of training in active listening and counseling skills produced positive changes in the active listening skills of helpline volunteers as determined by supervisor ratings.

The training presented and discussed in this paper focused on training teachers in organizing the context for teacher–parent conferences and in the use of basic counseling skills in real school settings for teachers to effectively communicate with pupils' parents in implementing the school aims and objectives.

The Content of the Training Course

The training course was covered in five training sessions (four weekly, then a four-week break before the fifth session), each three hours long. During the first four sessions, the theoretical aspects of the training were taught using an interactive teaching methodology, including discussion, role play, and feedback. Through these four sessions, trainees were guided to play roles in order to deconstruct their usual practice during meetings with parents and familiarize themselves with the use of the communication skills taught in the training course. Each weekly session aimed to give teacher trainees both a theoretical and a more practical component; the content is further described below.

During the first session, teachers were introduced to theoretical frameworks regarding:

- parental involvement in children's education
- the effects of parental involvement on parents, teachers, and students
- different theoretical approaches to school–family relationships
- factors that influence the relationship between family and school
- school–family relationships: gender, social class, family diversity
- different ways of communicating with parents—oral communication

This first session concluded with a brief introduction to the concept of communication and the use of communication skills.

The second weekly session started by defining communication and indicating the effects of its good practice on the teaching process. A distinction was further made between the use of communication skills and that of counseling skills. A definition of counseling skills was elaborated with an emphasis on the meaning of nonverbal communication, in general, as well as its meaning in a supportive context. The factors underlying effective teacher–parent communication before and during the teacher–parent conference were discussed. Apart from the factors that facilitate a conference, those that might impede it were also discussed. The teacher–parent conference has to have an apparent aim. Possible aims were discussed with the participants followed by proposing steps for successfully conducting a conference.

The third session focused on how the helper (teacher) could prepare for the parent–teacher conference. It then proceeded to describe and discuss the different stages of a professional interview: the initial investigating phase, the diagnosis and elucidation of feelings phase, the goal setting and action planning phase, the searching for solutions phase, the implementation of agreed upon solutions phase, and the closure and follow-up phase.

In the fourth session, active/attentive listening was analyzed and what it takes to achieve was explained. In that respect, the fourth session was dedicated to the discussion of the use of closed- and open-ended questions, how

the helper (teacher) could paraphrase the client (parent), the use of verbal and nonverbal prompts to encourage parents' expression of thoughts and feelings, how to listen for and reflect feelings, how empathic understanding is achieved, and lastly how a session might come to closure by summarizing what has been said and agreed on by the parties up to that point.

More specifically during the fourth session, the following counseling skills were taught:

- Nonverbal communication and particularly the importance of certain cues such as eye contact, posture, gestures, and nonverbal prompts: The teachers were trained to directly, but not in a threatening way, face the person and maintain eye contact. They were taught how to open their posture and lean towards the parent and were given examples of how to interpret the parents' body language.
- Posing questions in conferences with parents: The trainers stressed the importance of the use of questions and how questions should always be used with caution and that one should not ask too many questions, especially when the answer of a question cannot be used. The training program also included teaching the different types of questions used in counseling. Although closed-ended questions have their place, teachers were taught to avoid asking too many closed-ended questions that begin with "does," "did," or "is." They were encouraged to use open-ended questions which are nonthreatening and encourage description, namely, questions that require more than a simple yes or no answer, which start with "how," "tell me about," or "what."
- The process of paraphrasing as being the restating of a message, but usually with fewer words: The purpose of the use of paraphrasing is to test the understanding of what the teacher heard and to communicate that he/she is trying to understand what is being said. Teachers were also taught that during the process of listening they should consider asking themselves what the speaker's basic thinking and feeling message is.
- Reflection of content and feelings as a primary step to empathetic understanding: This skill was taught to help teachers show parents that they understand parents' experience and to allow teachers to evaluate and acknowledge parents' feelings after hearing them expressed by someone else.
- Summarizing and session closing: This is pulling together, organizing, and integrating the major aspects of a dialogue, session, or sessions; paying attention to various themes and emotional overtones; and, moreover, restating key ideas and feelings into broad statements without altering meanings, facts, and feelings.

Between the fourth and last training session all teacher trainees designed, organized, and implemented at least two teacher–parent sessions in their schools with the same parent, where possible. A four-week period was provided between the last two sessions for teachers to have enough time to plan and execute the two meetings. They were guided to use a structured diary where they would note all information gathered about the specific parent and his/her child prior to their contacts, as well as information about the content of the actual meetings, in order for teachers to use the knowledge and skills practiced during the initial four training sessions in real school settings. Thus, they would have the opportunity to reflect on their experience with their co-trainers in the last session, during which the focus was placed on reflecting on the experience and the impact of using the newly learned skills during teacher–parent meetings on the parent, the pupil, and themselves. They were also guided to note in their diaries all other interactions with other parents that could allow fruitful reflection on the skills taught during the course. During the last training session, teachers presented and discussed with the rest of the teacher trainees their experience in using the acquired skills in their actual teacher–parent sessions held in their school context during the period of time that the trainers left in between the fourth and fifth training sessions.

The Trainers and the Trainees

The training was offered by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, the institution held responsible for professional training courses for state educators. The training was developed and offered by two trainers, namely the two first authors of this paper, who shared expertise on family–school relationships and counseling psychology. It was offered as an optional, after-school hours, in-service training course to teachers of all school levels, that is, early childhood, elementary, and secondary school teachers. The only incentive for attending was their internal motivation to learn, plus a certificate of attendance awarded at the end of the course. The certificate of attendance could be submitted through the school to the inspectorate in the teacher's annual activity report, without counting, however, as an official credential for his/her evaluation or promotion.

The training course was attended voluntarily by 111 early childhood, elementary, and secondary school teachers. Training took place in the five training centers the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute maintains across the country. Each training group consisted of 21 to 25 teachers. As demonstrated in Table 1, most teachers were female and university degree holders. More than 80% of them were primary school teachers. Only 7 trainees were pre-primary school teachers, and 14 were secondary school teachers. A percentage of 28.8% of them had up to 5 years of teaching experience; fewer (17.1%) had 6–10 years;

while 43.2% had 11–20 years of teaching experience. Approximately one-tenth of trainees (10.8%) had 21 or more years of teaching experience.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Trainees

Demographic Characteristic	Demographic Subgroups	Frequency (*N*)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	15	13.5
	Female	95	85.6
	No reply	1	0.9
Age of students	Pre-primary (3–6 years)	7	6.3
	Primary (6–12 years)	90	81.1
	Secondary (12–15 years)	14	12.6
Years in occupation	0–5 years	32	28.8
	6–10 years	19	17.1
	11–20 years	48	43.2
	21+ years	12	10.8
Academic qualifications	University degree	98	88.3
	Masters degree	11	9.9
	PhD	1	0.9
	No reply	1	0.9

More than half of the trainees had no previous training relevant to school–family relations or training on effective communication. Nearly one tenth of them indicated that they had attended a relevant course during their undergraduate degree studies, and four trainees attended such a course during postgraduate studies. A fifth of the trainees had previously attended an in-service course on school–family relations and six an in-service course on communication skills. Some trainees attended other relevant courses.

The Collection of Data

With the purpose of evaluating the impact of the training course on teachers' effectiveness in organizing and implementing meetings with parents and of assessing the relationship between perceived usefulness of communication skills with reported actual usage of these skills, a questionnaire was designed to gather data from trainees prior to the training and after having tried out in their schools the various communication skills and approaches taught during the course. Therefore, trainees completed the same questionnaire at the beginning of the first meeting before the delivery of the course and again in the last meeting of the course, in a one-group pre-test/post-test experimental design.

After requesting information on participants' demographic and training background, the questionnaire inquired as to (a) the extent to which trainees used specific communication skills during conferences with parents, and (b) their perceptions about the usefulness of these skills. Trainees were presented with the same list both at the beginning and the end of the course. They were asked to indicate, first, the extent to which they agreed that the use of each particular skill is useful when meeting and discussing with a parent, and second, the frequency they use these skills and practices during teacher–parent conferences. Table 2 presents the framework of the 48 communication skill items as they were presented on the questionnaire in seven dimensions of communication skills.

Table 2. Framework of Skills Presented on the Questionnaire

Communication Skills	**Item Numbers by Topic**
Setting the meeting's context	15–21
Nonverbal communication (eye contact, facial expressions, voice tone)	1–10
Appreciation of parent's pace	11–14
Verbal and nonverbal tips for encouraging the parent to elaborate	22–29
Paraphrasing	30–32
Reflection of feelings	33–40
Summarizing and closing the meeting	41–48

Each skill was presented in a structured Likert-type ordinal scale, from 1 to 5, with 1 corresponding to "Not at all" and 5 "Very much" in two sections: perceived usefulness of the skills, and usage of skills.

Factor analysis was employed to examine whether the questionnaire items clustered into factors according to the skills presented and developed in the course of the training and that guided the construction of the instrument. Scores on negatively worded items were reversed, such that all items had similar meanings. Following the factor analysis, new interpretable scales were extracted in order to be used for assessing the effectiveness of the intervention. The reliability of the new scales was calculated and, if acceptable, scores on these scales before and after the training course were compared using paired samples *t*-tests. Finally, the scores on the teachers' perception of the usefulness of each skill were compared to the scores on their self-reported actual usage of each skill both before and after the training.

Results from the Analysis of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire data obtained on teachers' perceived usefulness of the 48 communication skills before the training course were analyzed with a factor analytic technique in an attempt to extract empirical dimensions (subscales) of the questionnaire using only the items that contributed to interpretable and reliable (at an acceptable level) subscales. The Varimax rotation method was selected. The factor analysis output revealed multiple groupings of items. Only those that had 3 or more items loading on a dimension were kept. Six subscales, which will be called factors, were retained and can be seen in Table 3. The table includes a listing of the items on each factor and a subjective factor name that was chosen to communicate the common meaning of the items that clustered together.

Table 3. The Six Factors Extracted from the Questionnaire Data

I. Reflection of Feelings
33. When addressing the parent use the phrase "You seem to feel…."
34. When addressing the parent use the phrase "I am sure you feel…."
35. When addressing the parent use the phrase "I feel that…."
36. When addressing the parent use the phrase "I sense that…"
37. When addressing the parent use the phrase "What I understand is that you feel…."
38. When addressing the parent use the phrase "I understood from all you said that …."
II. Verbal Tips to Encourage the Parent to Elaborate
22. Using short expressions like "What?" "Why?" "Yes?" in order to encourage the discussion with a parent
23. Using short expressions, like "Ah!" "Is that right?" "And then?" "And..?" in order to encourage the discussion with a parent
24. Using the expression "What happened then?" in order to encourage the discussion with a parent
25. Using the expression "Tell me more about this." in order to encourage the discussion with a parent
26. Repeating the last words of the last sentence of the parent, in order to encourage the discussion with him/her
Table 3 continued, next page

Table 3, continued
III. Nonverbal Communication
6. The expressions of your face to remain neutral with respect to the content of the discussion with the parent
8. Changing the tone of your voice when talking to a parent according to the content of the message you want to communicate
9. The tone of your voice when talking to a parent remains the same regardless of the content of the message you want to communicate
10. The tone of your voice when talking to a parent reveals neutrality
IV. Facial Expressions During Communication
2. Not looking the parent in the eyes during your discussion
4. Changing facial expressions when talking to parent according to the content message you communicate
5. Changing facial expressions when talking to a parent according to the content message you receive from him/her
7. Changing facial expressions when talking to a parent according to your personal feelings
V. Accurately Paraphrasing the Meaning of the Discussion
30. Avoiding using hints (verbal and nonverbal) when briefing with a parent
31. Repeating what you understood that a parent said during a briefing with him/her in your own words
32. Repeating what you heard from the parent about his/her problem in your own words
VI. Sharing of Information
41. Hiding information from the parent if you think that such information will hurt him/her
42. Mentioning to the parent during your meeting all the information that relates to his/her child and which you think he/she must be aware of
45. Ending the meeting by asking the parent to recapitulate what was discussed

Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were calculated for the overall questionnaire as well as for the six factors. The results appear in Table 4; note that each item was assessed by the respondents once for its perceived usefulness and once for the frequency of its usage, both before and after the course. Hence, there are four reliability coefficients for each scale. The overall reliability of the questionnaire was high. Factors 1-3 had acceptable levels of reliability, although not high in all cases. Factors 4-6 had lower reliabilities, a likely reason being that they consisted of only a small number of items. Therefore the results for the latter group of factors should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 4. Reliability (Alpha) of the Questionnaire and of the Six Factors

Scale	# Items	Prior to the Course	Post Course Completion
Usefulness of skills	**48**	**0.79**	**0.72**
Factor 1	6	0.87	0.61
Factor 2	5	0.78	0.56
Factor 3	3	0.70	0.74
Factor 4	4	0.57	0.33
Factor 5	3	0.61	0.49
Factor 6	3	0.55	0.68
Usage of skills	**48**	**0.76**	**0.82**
Factor 1	6	0.83	0.64
Factor 2	5	0.79	0.66
Factor 3	3	0.67	0.65
Factor 4	4	0.52	0.33
Factor 5	3	0.70	0.54
Factor 6	3	0.58	0.62

The analysis of the questionnaire data showed a considerable impact of the training on participant teachers' perceptions as to the usefulness of the various communication skills and a positive appraisal of their competence in organizing and implementing briefing sessions with students' parents. These findings show that trainees' experience during the training course had an impact on their perceptions about the usefulness and the use they made of a number of communication skills for effective communication with their pupils' parents.

Paired *t*-tests were conducted to compare teachers' ratings before and after the completion of the training course. Table 5 presents the results of the tests for each factor. Considering the factor "reflection of feelings," for example, the teachers rated differently their perceived usefulness or need for the use of this communication skill before and after the course ($t = -4.038$, $p < 0.001$). Higher ratings were given after the completion of the course. Their ratings were also significantly higher on this dimension when they were referring to their usage of this skill ($t = -5.466$, $p < 0.001$). Similar significant results were obtained for the factors "verbal tips to encourage the parent to elaborate," "nonverbal communication," and "accurately paraphrasing the meaning of the discussion." Pre- and post- differences were not significant for "facial expressions during communication" and "sharing of information," although it should be repeated that the latter factors had low reliability and any results should be interpreted with caution. The lack of significant differences in these two factors may also reflect reluctance on behalf of the teachers to significantly alter their practice; these two skills relate to the professionalism of the teachers, and they may prefer to keep some distance from the parents.

Table 5. Perceived Usefulness and Self-Reported Usage of Communication Skills Comparisons Before and After the Course (Paired *t*-Tests)

Factor	Perceived Usefulness Pre and Post			Self-Reported Usage Pre and Post		
	t statistic	*df*	*p*	*t* statistic	*df*	*p*
1. Reflection of feelings	-4.038	77	.000	-5.466	79	.000
2. Verbal tips to encourage the parent to elaborate	-6.331	80	.000	-6.392	82	.000
3. Nonverbal communication	-4.142	80	.000	-2.191	83	.031
4. Facial expressions during communication	-.513	82	.610	.000	84	1.000
5. Accurately paraphrasing meaning of the discussion	-7.336	76	.000	-8.044	79	.000
6. Sharing of information	.574	76	.568	-1.000	78	.320

Finally, the ratings on the six factors with regard to perceived usefulness of communication skills and their self-reported actual usage were compared. The scatterplots (see Appendix) demonstrate this relationship between perceived usefulness and self-reported usage of each communication skill factor before and after the training course. In all cases, a strong positive relationship is evident: the higher teachers tended to perceive the usefulness of a skill, the higher they tended to report use of that skill. The dashed diagonal line in each graph represents the identity line (Y = X). The pattern replicates across almost all the cases: the majority of the responses lie at or below the identity line. This reflects a tendency of the respondents to rate the perceived usefulness or need to use the communication skills more than they rate usage of the same skills. The pattern appears both before and after the training course. The graphs also demonstrate noticeably that the ratings for four of the six factors (Factors 1, 2, 3, and 5) after the course were significantly higher than the corresponding ratings before the course, as was presented in Table 5.

Conclusions

If the aim of schools is to establish stronger connections with families and develop a partnership with parents in an attempt to better educate students, then the primary requirement is to achieve a mutual understanding between them. Training teachers in communication skills (Denessen, Bakker, Kloppenburg, & Kerkhof, 2009; Epstein & Sanders, 2006), and particularly active

listening skills (Walters, Garii, & Walters, 2009), thus becomes indispensable. The findings of the evaluation of the impact of the in-service training course in Cyprus presented in this article provide promising ideas for invigorating teacher approaches and skills during their communication with parents, both at the specific local context which we have described, as well as at an international level; aspects of the teaching profession and school life presented in this article will appear familiar to other settings internationally.

Despite Cypriot teachers' unfamiliarity with the area of counseling and communication skills and the absence of similar training during their initial teacher preparation, and despite their initial doubts about the value of these skills, they appeared convinced as to their usefulness and reported an increased use of some skills after the training. Consistent with their increased confidence in both the expressed usefulness as well as capacity for such skills following their training, the findings from this article show that teachers report increased usage of communications skills with parents, such as reflection of feelings, paraphrasing the meaning of the discussion, and adopting verbal and nonverbal tips to facilitate interaction. Overall, the training sessions strengthened teacher beliefs about the usefulness of the skills, thus revealing that communication skills might constitute a useful tool in the hands of teachers when aiming to strengthen teacher–parent communication. While acknowledging the limitations of the self-report nature of the data in a one-group pre-post procedure which does not use a control group, the results of the effectiveness of training teachers on communication skills do concur with similar studies in other domains (e.g., Duhamel & Tabot, 2004; Paukert et al., 2004).

Aiming at a pedagogical value of teacher–parent briefings and for all families to be guided to successfully intervene in their children's schooling, communication skills equip teachers to recognize the diversity of the parent body and thus address the ineffectiveness of using an undifferentiated approach with all parents. Communication skills can support teachers in adopting approaches which aim at communicating effectively with each parent and meeting different families' needs, even families described as "hard to reach" (Crozier, 2007). Teachers who participated in this training course realized that what happens during any contact with their students' parents is of critical importance and that the vast majority of parents come to the school with high expectations of cooperation with teachers in order to enhance their child's schoolwork. To this end, teachers aimed to set the context of their meetings with parents and tried to understand the centrality of children's backgrounds and to become more aware of their various abilities and needs according to their family background.

Another conclusion stemming from the evaluation of this particular course is that through their training on communication and counseling skills, teachers

become more conscious of their professional space and their professional boundaries, thus redefining their professional image. By prearranging their conferences with their pupils' parents, setting the context for meeting the parents, and being conscious as to what works and what does not when trying to effectively communicate a message to a particular parent, participant teachers were made to feel more professionally confident or even professionally secure. As King (1999) would have suggested, teachers' use of counseling skills takes them into a style of relating that is beyond and more demanding than a traditional teaching role.

Nonetheless, it appears that teachers' ambiguous attitudes towards parents was reflected in how they evaluated the communication skills in which they were trained. Even though deciding to participate voluntarily in this particular course could suggest their determination to innovate in order to attract parental cooperation, they appeared hesitant in adopting skills that might threaten or cast doubt on their professional expertise, power, and status, and thus maintained a distance from parents.

Recommendations

Teachers appear to get little information about school–family relations. Parent–teacher communication, family educational processes, parental perceptions of education and schools, school perceptions of parents, or promising approaches to encourage home–school collaboration or home learning activities are not yet a part of teachers' basic training in Cyprus. The implications stemming from these conclusions link to teachers' concerns about the outcomes of teacher–parent meetings and could be of significant importance if increased efforts for teacher–family communication are desirable, particularly since effective communication skills are indispensable for problem solving and decision making (Malikiosi-Loizou, 2000, 2001). Educators and policymakers, both in Cyprus and in school systems elsewhere, might seek to introduce significant developments not only in policy but also in teacher and parent training programs by including topics and courses on school–family communication. It is well-trained teachers' task to offer *all* families the proper types of information and to communicate this information in the most appropriate manner for each particular parent so that all parents depart from the school knowing what they need to do to support their child and how they can do it.

However, any change in communicating with students' parents cannot rely upon the teachers' personal sensitivity and own initiative. It will take more than good intentions and empathy on the part of the teachers to provide meaningful support for parents. As far as the Cypriot educational context is concerned,

what is needed is, rather, a national/state policy which would aim at training teachers on how to effectively communicate with all parents in order for all pupils to benefit equally. The aim should be for teachers to be able to talk *with* parents instead of only talking *to* parents in order to cooperate and be in true dialogue. Thus schools will facilitate parents in fully supporting the development of their child's academic, personal, and social skills; frustration and conflict between teachers and parents may also be diminished. Teachers' ability to communicate effectively, listen carefully when parents talk, end the conversation graciously, and summarize any agreements and understandings are crucial skills which need to be developed. What teachers and parents say to one another influences parental involvement in their children's school life and parental engagement in school affairs. Within such a national framework, teachers will become well-equipped and highly knowledgeable about effective communication with parents and will receive ongoing support. Policy stakeholders should take steps to integrate this training into teacher education programs.

Moreover, staff development activities could provide significant experiences from which novice teachers can begin building their relevant professional bases. Any staff development, professional development, professional renewal, or continuing or in-service education must be the most important school–family activity a school system or a particular school could launch.

It is not only teachers, however, who must be trained in order to obtain communication literacy; it is parents as well. The aim should be for both teachers and parents to become literate in this aspect of their lives, in order to maintain a critical stance towards the information they exchange by distinguishing important and useful information from unimportant informing. In the case of parents, local or national initiatives on parental training programs could promote the development of parental skills and parental capacity by capitalizing on conferences and other institutional opportunities.

In the case of the teachers, how these ideas could be implemented may relate to a prospective reconstruction of teachers' professionalism. Teachers in Cyprus and elsewhere are desperately seeking avenues that will limit their workload. A possible reconstruction of their professionalism should avoid the paths that have already been followed related to a conservative view of professionalism. It should rather be founded on the well established knowledge-base that families are predictors of school achievement and aim at directing teachers' professional practice to create collaborative school environments, where teachers, children, and parents communicate in a tight network. Through establishing connectedness and interdependent relationships, children will strengthen their capital and build on their funds of knowledge, thus gaining educational resources in order to fully develop their potential within the school system.

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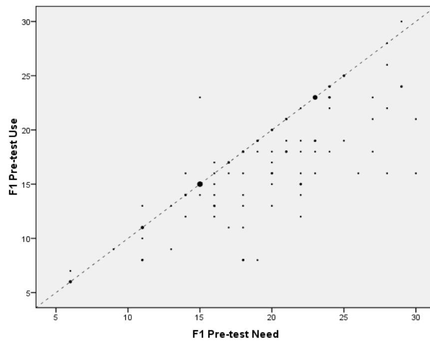
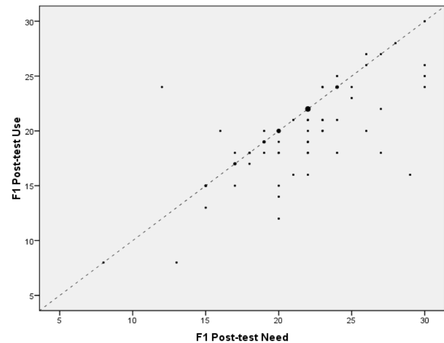
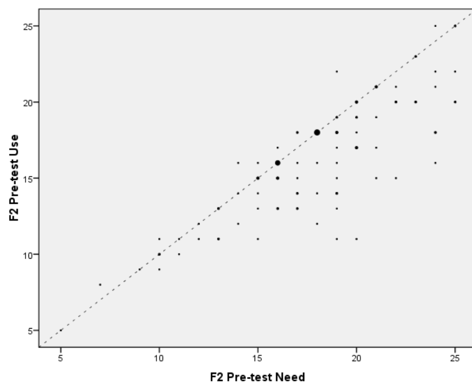
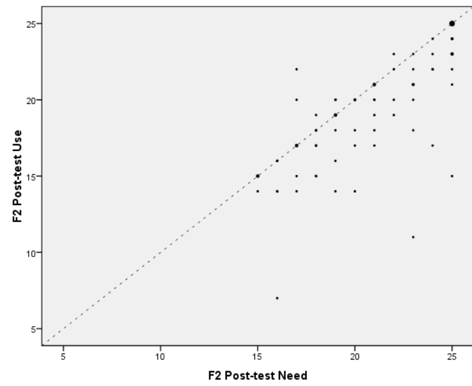
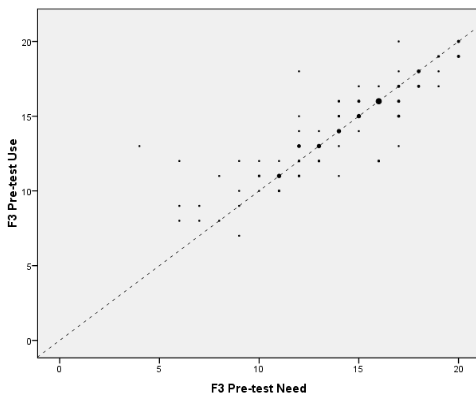
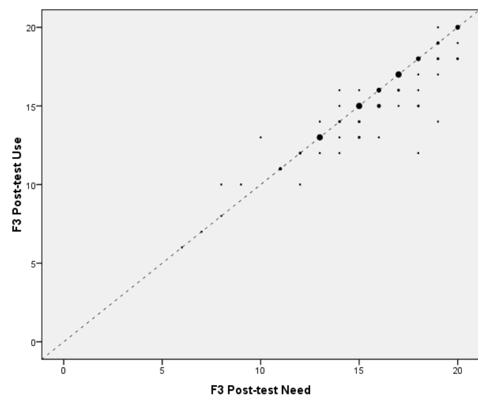
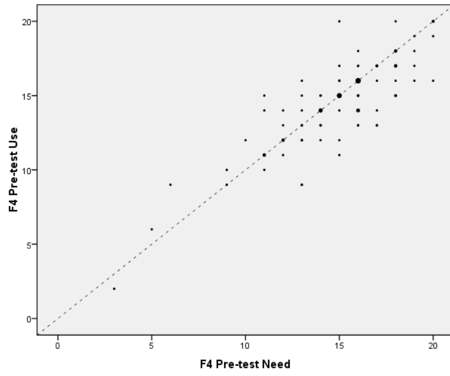
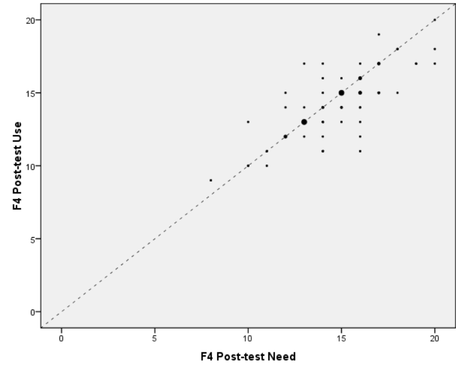
Appendix. Scatterplots Comparing Teachers' Perceived Usefulness/Need (Horizontal Axis) and Usage (Vertical Axis) of Communication Skills[1]

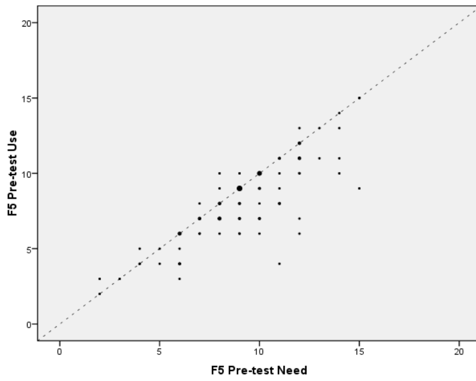
Prior to the course	After the course
Factor 1: Reflection of feelings	
	
Factor 2. Verbal tips to encourage the parent to elaborate	
	
Factor 3. Nonverbal communication	
	

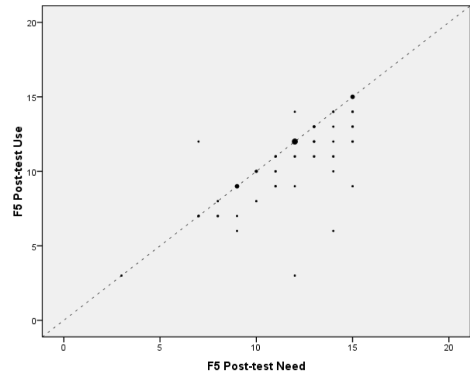
Appendix (continued)
Factor 4. Facial expressions during communication



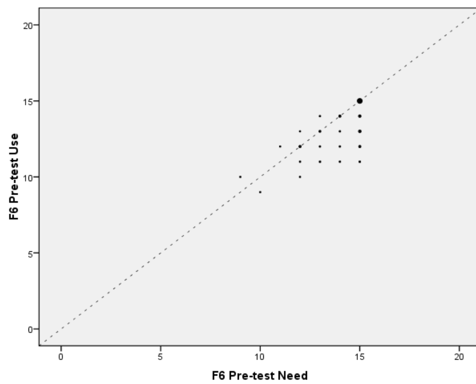


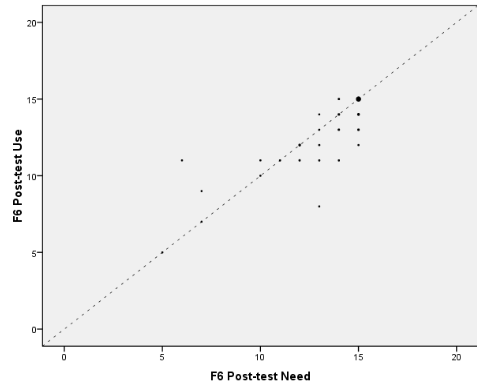
Factor 5. Accurately paraphrasing the meaning of the discussion





Factor 6. Sharing of information





[1]The size of the dots reflects the number of observations at that point.

Unpacking Parent Involvement: Korean American Parents' Collective Networking

Minjung Lim

Abstract

This study examines the ways in which a group of Korean American parents perceived and responded to institutional inequalities in a family–school partnership. In their school, which had a growing Asian population, the dominant group's middle-class perspective on parent involvement became normal and operated as an overarching structure. Drawing from critical inquiry and Ogbu's (1995) cultural ecological theory, this study unpacks the ethnic networks of a Korean meeting and the interactive relationships between the Korean group and the school. By focusing on the complex negotiations the Korean group constructed as they engaged in their children's schooling, this study reconsiders conventional avenues of parent involvement that often reinforce inequalities in building effective family–school partnerships across diverse families.

Key Words: community forces, family–school partnerships, Korean Americans, parental involvement, diverse families, parents, collective networking, ethnic groups, linguistic minority, languages, cultural barriers, Asian students

Introduction

Building partnerships with diverse families has been a pressing issue for teachers and administrators who serve increasingly diverse student populations. While parent involvement has been considered a crucial factor conducive to better educational achievement (Berger, 1991; Epstein, 1995; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005, 2007), evidence of the effectiveness of school-based involvement

is not conclusive. For instance, Mattingly and her colleagues' evaluation study (2002) found that parent involvement programs did not necessarily improve student learning or change teacher, parent, or student behavior. In contrast, Lee and Bowen (2006) reported a high level of association between parent involvement at school and their children's academic achievement, but noted significant group differences in levels of parent involvement at school. Parent involvement at school occurred most frequently among middle-class European Americans and those who had attained higher levels of education. In a research synthesis of 51 studies, Henderson and Mapp (2002) concluded that parent involvement at home more consistently promotes children's academic achievement than does parent involvement at school. Similarly, Kim (2002) noted that school-based parent involvement, such as school contact and PTA participation, had no significant impact on Korean immigrant children's achievement, whereas home-based involvement was positively related to their achievement.

To address this inconsistent effect of school-based parent involvement, many researchers have challenged its dominant definition, which is deeply rooted in a middle-class perspective of what parent involvement means and looks like (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Valdes, 1996). In the U.S., the dominant perspective on parenting and parent involvement tends to presuppose a universal model of child-rearing that positions White, middle-class women as ideal mothers (Coll & Pachter, 1995; Prins & Toso, 2008). According to this White, middle-class perspective, ideal parents demonstrate responsiveness by investing intensively in their children's education. Such a perspective imposes a moral logic on parents by emphasizing that "being successful as mothers meant being attentive to schools and teachers" (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 40).

In school contexts, this middle-class definition of parent involvement often privileges parent participation over other forms of involvement, such as home-based learning. Although schools continue to promote parent involvement by planning and implementing various programs in and outside of schools, these practices are likely to focus on what parents do to engage with their children's schooling (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). Parent involvement has been defined as parents focusing on classroom and school needs—and otherwise becoming invisible (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In this middle-class construction of parent involvement, minority groups of parents—such as those who are working-class, poor, racial/ethnic minorities, or speakers of English as their second language—tend to be constrained in active ownership within schools due to their lack of knowledge about the "legitimate" forms of parent involvement (Bernhard, Freire, Pacini-Ketchabaw, & Villanueva, 1998; Collignon, Men, & Tan, 2001).

These studies charge schools with redefining family–school partnerships in a professionally responsible manner, posing the question of what is meant by parental involvement. This requires a paradigm shift in defining avenues of parent involvement from a linear, unidirectional emphasis on the part of parents to a notion of "shared responsibility" within and across the contexts of school, family, and community (Epstein, 2001, p. 40). As a cultural representation of parent involvement, ethnic communities can generate distinct modes of reciprocal relationships with schools. Immigrant studies show that a close-knit community in which members maintain strong intragroup relationships and preserve cultural values can provide community-driven benefits conducive to better social adjustment and academic achievement (Portes, 1998; Zhou & Bankston, 1998; Zhou & Kim, 2006). For instance, in Lew's (2006) study, Korean American parents at an elite high school gained access to structural resources embedded in strong intragroup networks, such as information on schooling and the school system, as a means of compensating for their limited English skills and scant bilingual assistance.

Few studies, however, have examined the intragroup networking of ethnic parent groups in school settings, a factor that influences minority parents' access to institutional resources and relationships with schools. Although it is an oversimplification to assume that people of a particular ethnic group have one universal identity and all act in a similar way, a close examination of the interactions within ethnic intragroup networks nevertheless reveals the complex negotiations the members construct as they engage in parent involvement.

This article examines the ways in which a group of parents who had emigrated from the Republic of Korea perceived and responded to institutional inequalities in family–school partnership. In this study, inequalities in family–school partnership remained unchallenged, as the dominant group's perspective on parent involvement was normalized in the school. Critical inquiry and Ogbu's (1995) cultural ecological theory serve as the theoretical bases for describing how these Korean American parents negotiated the dominant perspective of parent involvement within the school community. I will show how the collective networking of these parents represented community forces that influenced the members' response to the dominant discourse. In conclusion, I will consider implications for educational practices and future research focusing on building effective family–school partnerships across diverse groups of families.

Minority Parents' Involvement in Education

Family and school, two primary sources of child development, can positively influence children's learning by offering a synergistic partnership (Epstein,

2001). Research shows that, regardless of their ethnic background or socioeconomic status, students with involved parents are more likely to perform well academically, attend school regularly, and advance to postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Nonetheless, research shows that families with linguistic and cultural backgrounds different from that of the host culture are likely to be less actively involved in school activities compared to their "mainstream" counterparts (Edwards & Dandridge, 2001). The tendency toward "passive" participation among minority families has been largely conceived as a phenomenon rooted in structural and cultural barriers between home and school. Most minority families who lack knowledge about the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1988) within the mainstream schools encounter more obstacles in their access to institutional resources compared with native-born parents (Turney & Kao, 2009). In one study, even immigrant parents without language barriers reported challenges in understanding school culture and routines due to their lack of cultural knowledge and school-specific language (Isik-Ercan, 2010). Lee (2005) identified both structural and cultural barriers to participation among groups of Korean American parents in a Korean–English two-way immersion program: structural barriers included communicative competence issues such as lack of linguistic knowledge and confidence, time conflicts, and limited institutional support; cultural barriers involved different norms and values related to parental participation and respect for authority.

Parents whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds differ from those of the host culture often employ distinct patterns of involvement practices that may not fit with traditional forms of parent involvement. For example, in Siu's (2001) study, Chinese American families used a variety of community resources and informal networks to support their children's learning in and out of the home, while they did not participate actively in school functions such as volunteering or policymaking. In another study, immigrant Latino parents emphasized the social and moral development of their children, yet tended to consider academic instruction at home inappropriate, as they believed education should be the teachers' role (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). Li's (2006) study of Chinese parents' involvement in literacy and schooling illustrated the cultural conflicts occurring between Canadian teachers and Asian immigrant parents. Unlike the widely researched, lower SES minority families, the middle- and upper-class Chinese parents in this study actively resisted school practices that did not match their own views on education. Their interventions at home were intended to counterbalance their children's failure to acquire the literacy skills necessary for academic success. However, rather than creating the desired remedial effects, the cultural misunderstandings and miscommunications between the teachers and parents intensified the differences between school and home.

Moreover, schools often maintain and reproduce social inequalities in a broader society, since unequal power relations between minority families and schools reaffirm mainstream perspectives and practices (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Villenas, 2001). Carreón, Drake, and Barton (2005) challenged the deficit model regarding minority parents by arguing that parental engagement should be understood through parents' presence in schooling, regardless of the types of spaces they occupy. Research reveals how immigrant parents' limited knowledge and understanding of school practices prevent them from building collaborative family–school relationships (Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006; Ramirez, 2003) and problematize their cultural values and practices that differ from mainstream school culture (Chin & Phillips, 2004).

Theoretical Perspectives

Critical Inquiry

In this study, I adopt critical inquiry as a means for locating "the meaning of events within the context of asymmetrical power relations" (Thomas, 2003, p. 46). Critical research assumes that "all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations which are socially and historically constituted" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 139). It aims to "unmask hegemony and address oppressive forces" situated in meaning construction (Crotty, 1998, p. 12), thereby effectively disclosing the complexity and power asymmetry embedded in family–school relationships.

Accepting this critical perspective, I understand parent involvement as the process of negotiating contested meanings and actions among multiple social actors within schools. As a collective mode of social interaction, intragroup networking within a particular ethnic group affects the members' interplay with the school. Simultaneously, the dominant perspective valued and practiced by the school creates an overarching structure that influences actions and meanings among the group members. Thus, a critical examination of the workings of power relations between the school and a minority group can reveal "broader social processes of control, power imbalance, and the symbolic mechanisms that impose one set of preferred meanings or behaviors over others" (Thomas, 2003, p. 48).

Cultural Ecological Theory

According to Ogbu, cultural ecological theory postulates two sets of factors that affect minority school performance: "how society at large and the school treat minorities (the system) and how minority groups respond to those treatments and to schooling (community forces)" (1999, p. 156). Based on

this presupposition, two types of minority groups are distinguishable by the groups' orientations toward the host society and schooling: broadly speaking, voluntary minorities (whose migrations were voluntarily chosen) adopted an adaptive, instrumental approach toward the host society and its institutions; involuntary minorities (whose migrations were forced) developed an oppositional approach to the host society and its institutions (Ogbu, 1991).

Ogbu's notion of community forces is useful for examining the social interactions between an ethnic group and an institution. As products of sociocultural adaptation within a particular ethnic community, community forces entail a set of specific beliefs, values, behavioral patterns, and coping strategies in response to adverse societal treatment (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1995). Foster (2004) suggested that cultural ecological theory can unveil complexity embedded in minority groups' experiences by recognizing the dynamic interaction between community and system forces.

Specifically, the individualism and collectivism framework is appropriate for describing the way a group of Korean American parents operates community forces. While the dominant U.S. culture is undoubtedly individualistic, emphasizing individual fulfillment and choice, two-thirds of the world's cultures, including Korean culture, can be regarded as collectivistic (see Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). In collectivistic cultures, fitting in with others and fulfilling the obligations inherent in various interpersonal relationships is regarded as an ideal construal of self. To maintain harmonious relationships with others, a high degree of self-control and self-discipline is required; personal desires, goals, and emotions are subject to control (Shweder et al., 1998). Drawing from this collectivistic framework, this study examines community forces adopted by a group of Korean American parents as they interacted with their children's school.

Method

The Setting

This study took place at North Creek Elementary School, located in the city of Jackson, a southeastern, suburban, mainly middle- to upper-class, predominantly White community with a large Asian population including Chinese, Koreans, and Indians, with a smaller percentage of African Americans and Hispanics. (Note: Pseudonyms are used throughout for the school, all locations, participants, and individuals mentioned by participants.) North Creek Elementary School was selected because of its proportion of Korean student enrollment: approximately 11% of the student population was identified as first or second generation Korean American. The school is a one-story building

built in 1997, serving 828 preK–5th graders from mainly middle- and upper-class families (the free and reduced lunch rate was 3%). The community had "nice, stable" parents who were, according to the principal, "very supportive but…not demanding." There were 103 staff members working at the school, and the average class size was 20. The school was renowned for its academic excellence and active PTA, being ranked by parents as one of the top schools in the area.

At the time of this study, North Creek Elementary School was in transition. Beginning in 2003, the Asian influx and the declining number of White families in the neighborhood transformed the school's demographics. According to the 2007–2008 State of the School Address*,* 55% of the student population was categorized as "Other," a category consisting mainly of Asian (30%), Asian Indian (20%), Multicultural (3%), and Hispanic (2%) students. The White student population steadily and significantly decreased from 81% in 1997 to 38% in 2007. The Black student population increased from 2% in 1997 to 7% in 2007.

To cope with this demographic transformation, North Creek Elementary School organized several initiatives to reach out to Asian families: an International PTA committee (including 57 members from 15 different countries in 2008), a Get Smart About Culture program (parental presentations about world culture in classrooms), the North Creek 3.0 Committee (a task force to address demographic change), an Adult ESL course (a one hour per week conversation-focused program), and a foreign language translation service staffed by parent volunteers. Asian families joined these efforts to create strong family–school partnerships; one group of Korean parents voluntarily organized a Korean parents' meeting as a means of improving their efficacy in participation through intragroup networks.

Participants

The participants consisted of a group of Korean American parents whose children were enrolled in North Creek Elementary School. Access to a primary parent informant was granted through the principal's referral, and this parent linked me to other Korean parents who were acquainted with one another through the Korean parents' meeting. Along with this "snowball sampling" (Patten, 2002), advertisements recruiting research participants were posted in the school's newsletter. In all, 12 Korean parents—11 mothers and 1 father—participated in the study. All of the Korean parents had at least a Bachelor's degree, and six of them held Master's degrees earned in either Korea or the United States (one was enrolled in an American graduate school at the time of the study). Length of residence in the United States varied from 2–27 years.

In addition to the Korean participants, five school personnel (the principal, the assistant principal, and three teachers), three White parents who served on the PTA board, and one Taiwanese mother participated in the study. They were selected in an effort to gain a contextual understanding of North Creek Elementary School and to provide institutional perspectives in relation to parent involvement.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected was part of a critical ethnographic case study intended to examine issues in the general context of immigrant parents' involvement in schools. Fieldwork spanned Fall 2007 through Spring 2008 and included several methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews, observations, focus groups, and document analysis. Individual interviews lasted from 1–1½ hours and were audiotaped and transcribed. Interviews with Koreans were conducted and transcribed in Korean and later translated into English. Along with the interviews, I observed school events and parent meetings (including PTA meetings), the Adult ESL course, and family nights. I regularly attended Korean parents' meetings and participated in several Korean parents' volunteer activities, including presentations to classes and lunch for teachers. In the final phase of data collection, I also conducted a focus group interview with attendees of the Korean parent meeting.

In order to access comparable perspectives distributed throughout social groups, thematic coding as outlined by Flick (2002) was used for data analysis. First, a brief description of the participants and main themes was produced for each case and continuously modified as necessary. By using open and selective coding, I next developed a series of categories for the single cases that were representative of thematic domains. Then, I crosschecked successive cases based on the developed thematic structure for cross-case comparison. Negative cases were identified and preserved in order to avoid the "superficiality" that often results from aggregating or averaging multiple cases (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 435). Lastly, results of case comparisons were displayed in matrix form according to social group (Korean parents, non-Korean parents, and school personnel), thereby demonstrating the social distribution of perspectives on the issues.

Researcher Role

Indigenous ethnographers who study their own cultural groups need to be cautious about their presupposed insider status and their potential for distorting meaning construction (Jones, 1995). While I benefited from sharing an ethnic background with the Korean participants in terms of easy access and a

precise understanding of cultural meanings and demeanors, my insider "familiarity" also had the potential of leading to taken-for-granted and exaggerated interpretations (Mercer, 2007). I was somewhat careful to avoid sensitive topics in order to maintain positive relationships with my Korean participants, especially those associated with the Korean parent meeting. I consciously maintained a reserved demeanor and tried not to interrupt conversations while participating in the Korean meeting. My deliberate self-representation may have been ethically inappropriate, yet this presentation of self allowed me to be accepted into the collectivistic culture of the meeting.

Additionally, studying my own ethnic group offered both advantages and challenges in data generation. As a speaker of English as a second language, I could capture the subtle meanings and intentions between the lines of their words as I communicated with Korean participants in the Korean language. However, translating their words into idiomatic English language was a daunting task. Although I consulted on my translations with native English speakers, the precise meanings of words and sentences may be lost in the process of translation.

Findings

"We Want the Parents to Be Part of the Classroom."

North Creek Elementary School has been recognized as a National PTA School of Excellence and has received several awards for academic excellence. As Lareau (2002, 2003) points out, middle-class families coordinate intensive interactions with schools on behalf of their children's academic success. Middle- and upper-class families at North Creek are actively encouraged to volunteer for classroom and school activities and join PTA-organized fundraiser programs. According to the principal, more than 90% of the school's parents had joined the PTA, and through this organization, a substantial proportion of the school's activities (e.g., the Accelerated Reader program, Fall Carnival, Science Force, and Field Day) had been organized and implemented by parent volunteers. The school also operates the Foundation, a non-profit organization for parents, the public, and business community donors, along with a local school council consisting of the principal and representatives of parents, teachers, and business partners. All school staff and parents in this study revealed their pride in the school and considered family–school partnerships as the most influential factor in maintaining the school's tradition of academic excellence. As a White parent who was actively involved in classroom activities and served on the PTA board decisively concluded, "A strong school needs strong teachers, strong students, strong administrators, and strong parents."

The notion of parent involvement prevailing in the school reflected the middle-class mothering discourse of parental responsiveness to institutional needs. Despite a positive partnership between families and the school, there was a clear boundary preventing parents from accessing certain classroom practices. Families were frequently invited to volunteer for the school and within classrooms, yet classroom visits were strictly limited by a preappointment policy. The school website provided the following policy regarding classroom visits: "We value every minute of instructional time with our students. Unless you have an appointment or are volunteering in the classroom as scheduled by the teacher, please do not enter your child's classroom." Classroom volunteering was a legitimate opportunity for families to observe what was going on in the classroom, often fulfilling their hidden motive of monitoring teaching practices in order to protect their children from possible disadvantages. Another White parent explained her reasons for active involvement in volunteering:

> I don't want to turn my child over to someone.…They [teachers] are teaching book knowledge and raising my child just as much as I'm raising my child. That's why I can't just say, "OK, you do it, you teach them."

The teachers in this study considered middle-class parents' intensive support and high expectations beneficial, but also considered it "extra work" that placed them under scrutiny from families who constantly monitored the quality of the curriculum. In particular, the teachers perceived Asian parents as excessively academically oriented and believed that American parents appraised their children's achievement more objectively. A prekindergarten teacher explained, "American parents…want their children to do well, but more realize that sometimes their abilities are different.…International [Asian] parents…are not always disrespectful, but they just push, push."

Research shows that Asian families tend to engage in a variety of educational activities in and outside of the home in order to promote their children's learning but are less involved in volunteering or decision-making at schools (Kim, 2002; Siu, 2001). Similarly, Asian families at North Creek Elementary School tended to be less actively involved in school activities and volunteering compared to White families. Presumably, limited English proficiency and uncertainty about the school system contributed to Asian families' low levels of participation. However, culture-based beliefs about the appropriate role of parents also likely influenced their choices about how to be involved in their children's schooling (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Asian families' active involvement at home did not receive much recognition from the school, even as these families' strong academic focus was taken for granted due to the parents' high overall expectations.

Because North Creek Elementary School relied greatly on parental support in school functioning, the increase in the Asian school population and its tendency to participate less in school affairs resulted in frustration on the part of the school staff. The principal stated:

> Some Asian cultures, they generally tend to bring their children to the school, and they don't come in or help the teachers, like what we expect, what we want here. So there has just been a kind of difference in the role of parents playing out at school. Here in North Creek, we want the parents to be part of the classroom.

As revealed in the principal's statement, parent involvement in school, which consisted of coordinated institutional actions between the school and families, took priority over other forms of involvement at North Creek. The assumption underpinning this notion of parent involvement legitimates the middle-class mothering discourse of parental responsiveness to institutional needs. Even the outreach programs which aimed to promote Asian families' participation in the school (e.g., the international PTA committee, adult ESL class, and Get Smart About Culture program), relied exclusively on parent volunteers. The emphasis on parents serving classroom and school needs was taken for granted within the school context.

Asian families have often been labeled as "non-participating" or "less involved" by school personnel and White parents. White parents in this study viewed Asian mothers, not fathers, as needing to "build confidence that makes it easier for them to volunteer in the classroom" and "be part of their kid's education, because here we are part of our children's education." They insisted on Asian parents' further engagement in the school in order to maintain the tradition of a strong PTA. The chair of the international PTA committee expressed her disagreement with the stereotypical assumption of "passive" Asian families held by many Americans, including teachers and administrators at the school:

> We have many nuances in our culture that we just take for granted....We have culture, too. They [Asian families] are trying to adjust, and I think the hardest one is that teacher saying, "They're not trying." I haven't yet met *a* parent at this school who *isn't* trying to adapt to being in the United States. They are *all* trying.

Korean parents, whose children comprised approximately 11% of the total student population, had contributed to reinforcing this image of "passive" or "less involved" Asians. While several Korean parents actively participated in the classroom and school activities, only one Korean served on the PTA board, in contrast to the five Indian and six Chinese parents, respectively, among over 55 positions listed on the board. Historical cultural contexts provide a more

comprehensive understanding of what underlies Korean American parents' perceptions and actions in parent involvement. What follows illustrates how historical and cultural situations have influenced the ways in which Korean parents have viewed education and parental roles within the school.

Korean Americans' Perspectives on Parenting

The Korean American parents appeared to share the middle-class perspective on ideal parenting that emphasizes parental support for schooling. They coordinated daily schedules based on their children's needs and interests in order to provide extensive opportunities for educational development. They knew American schools expected parents to be involved in schools and participated in school activities tailored to the school's requirements as much as they could. Most of the Korean parents did research to select the best school for their children, perceiving North Creek Elementary as an ideal place for promoting their children's learning. One Korean parent described how her family decided to move to this city in search of a better educational environment: "Many Mexican families moved to my town. Among 18 students in my child's first grade class, seven kids went to the ESL class. Too many ESL students would not be good for my child's education. So, we moved." She regarded having a middle-class family background as a key component for academic excellence and fewer disciplinary issues at school.

The idea of parenting constructed by the Korean parents aligns with Korean historical and cultural contexts. Historically, Koreans view education as a means to success, power, and status (Sorensen, 1994). Kim (1993) found that Korean American immigrant parents regarded "prestige [as] synonymous with the academic achievement of their children" (p. 228). In addition, Park (1998) reported that Korean immigrant parents held very high educational and occupational aspirations. The Korean American parents in this study tended to reflect this Korean value of educational success, regardless of their length of residence in the United States. For example, Diane, who immigrated to the United States with her parents when she was in middle school, admitted her parenting perspective was similar to the traditional Korean one. While she had largely assimilated into American society and had a Caucasian husband, Diane put a great deal of pressure on her two children to get good grades: "I am quite similar to Korean parents in terms of pushing my children…I used to say to them, 'I did a good job even though I could not speak English when I came here. Why can't you do that?'"

Despite the high value Korean families placed on education, their cultural assumptions about proper family–school relationships differed from the perspective held by mainstream schools rooted in individualistic cultures. In the

collectivistic East Asian culture from which the parents came, a school tends to represent an authoritative, separate space demarcated from home by a clear boundary (Walsh, 2002). The collectivism-based perspective of respect for authority (Trumbull et al., 2001) influenced the ways in which the Korean families interacted with teachers and administrators at North Creek Elementary. The school staff generally portrayed Korean families as "respectful," "supportive," and "valuing education" while also identifying them as being reserved and self-conscious in their ways of interacting. One teacher, expressing her difficulty in communicating with Korean parents, stated "it's a very one-sided conversation." Another Korean parent, who was a music teacher in Korea before she immigrated to the United States, seldom attempted to influence her children's school experiences. Although she had taught professionally in the past, she rarely challenged teachers' pedagogy, instead showing them a great amount of respect: "I ask questions, but do not oppose their opinions. All of the teachers are very nice and give me a lot of advice. And the things they tell me really are my child's weaknesses." She had been surprised by American parents' overt demands for their children to be favored when she volunteered for a classroom party and came to realize cultural difference in defining parent involvement:

> This may be a kind of American way of parental involvement.…Volunteer mothers' children came forward and gave the teacher flowers and gifts one by one. "Thank you," the teacher hugged each of the volunteer mothers' children.…I've never seen anything like it before. Ah! American mothers make their children stand out very openly, and they may do this other times when I am not in the classroom.

In addition to these cultural differences in parent–teacher interaction, successful parent participation was challenging for the Korean parents in this study, as in similar findings reported in Korean immigrant studies (Kim & Greene, 2003; Sohn & Wang, 2006). Although the parents were highly educated and willing to be involved in their children's education, traditional American forms of participation such as attending parent–teacher conferences, volunteering in the classroom, and fundraising for the school tended to be difficult for immigrant parents. One Korean parent, who had two daughters in the 6th and 2nd grades, spoke of the difficulties that resulted from her limited knowledge about educational activities in the school:

> For example, when there was a Christmas party in the classroom.…We are not familiar with the kinds of games played at the party because we did not grow up in this culture. It's much easier for Americans to prepare a Christmas party because that's the way they live.

She said that in her second daughter's classroom, where 11 of the 17 students were Asian American, a White mother who worked full time had to perform the role of room mother (who hosts the classroom parties) because no Asian parents volunteered to do it. Another Korean parent, whose active participation had been acknowledged by the school staff, expressed her persistent anxiety about visiting the school even after 12 years of residence in the United States: "Once I plan to go to the school, I become nervous. What if I smell bad? I actually try not to cook before going to the school....Seriously, I'm worried that I might stink." While both parents spoke English well enough to communicate with the teachers and administrators, most of the Korean parents, except for those who were studying or had studied in the United States, often encountered language barriers in their interactions with Americans which contributed to their hesitation to participate.

Such commonly shared challenges to active involvement motivated some Korean parents to pursue intragroup collaboration. In spring 2006, a group of Korean parents who had become acquainted through an international school event voluntarily organized a Korean parent meeting. As a collective mode of parental participation, this intragroup network affected the members' perceptions and actions in response to the dominant perspective on parent involvement at North Creek.

Living Up to Being Voluntary Minorities: Community Forces Within the Korean Meeting

The primary function of the Korean parent meeting was to make it easier for its members to participate in the school. The meeting took place monthly or bimonthly, and on average 10–12 Korean mothers attended. The members were able to access information and support grounded in mutual relationships and shared cultural beliefs and values (Coleman, 1988). In particular, the meeting focused on helping new members adjust to the school system. New members were welcomed by parents with children in similar grades and were able to gain access to various information about the school system. A new member in her second year of living in the United States explained her motivation for attending the Korean parent meeting:

> Through the meeting, I get specific information about school volunteer opportunities and work that couldn't be done by me alone. Some mothers know more about the school because they've been in the school for years. They are very helpful to me. I like this meeting because we can volunteer and help each other.

In sum, the Korean parent meeting helped to fortify Korean families against the disadvantages they might encounter as a minority immigrant group. While to some extent the Korean parent meeting attempted to meet the school's call for reviving parental participation, ultimately it represented community forces that provided the members with useful coping strategies which helped to improve individual parents' efficacy in parent involvement.

As expected from its collaborative nature, the consolidation of community forces within the Korean parent meeting appeared to valorize collective harmony rather than individual conspicuousness. Opposition to this collectivistic, interdependent norm implies standing out from the group, immaturity, and selfishness (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). Members were likely to identify with the collective goals regulating the Korean parent meeting, and disagreements or conflicting ideas were seldom mentioned during the meetings themselves. One member described her acceptance of the collective norms: "If there are orders from the top, following the rules is a shortcut to peace. Well, you do feel bad sometimes, though."

The collectivistic community forces affected the ways in which the Korean parents perceived and responded to the dominant perspective on parent involvement at North Creek, which prioritized institutional goals over other forms of involvement. The parents who played active roles in the Korean parent meeting strove to fit the school's standard, explicitly emphasizing joint conformity to the school among their fellow members. During the meeting time, members were frequently instructed, "This meeting is not a separate Korean PTA; it is not appropriate for us to exert any control over the school." Supporting the school, specifically by active volunteering, was the ideal of good membership. Given their middle-class status and strong academic focus, it is possible that some Korean parents would have wanted to influence or control their child's school experience through the collective action of the meeting. However, opposition to a normalized perspective implies that one would stand out from the group, in this case both the larger school community and the Korean meeting. In individual interviews, some members revealed resentment against the derogatory labeling of Asian families as "non-participating," yet such criticisms were never shared at the meeting.

In many ways, the Korean American parents of the meeting appear to fit well into Ogbu's (1991) typology of voluntary minorities. They successfully provided their children with an enriched learning environment and initiated intragroup collaboration to ameliorate their challenges with school involvement. Moreover, they were eager to be part of the school community despite the school's insensitivity toward cultural differences. Even though their conformity to the dominant perspective within the school may maintain and

reinforce inequalities between Korean families and the school, they wanted to live up to being "model minorities" by supporting the school community as a whole. One Korean parent, who initiated and led the Korean parent meeting, expressed her desire for Koreans to be acknowledged as exemplary within the school community:

> Wouldn't it be great if Korean parents volunteered out of Korean pride?…If I were an American, I might not be involved as much as I am now. Because I'm a Korean, I hate people to think that Koreans do not volunteer, never attend the school events, and don't care.…Because of that, I do my best.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how Korean American parents as a group perceived and responded to inequalities in the dominant perspective on parent involvement in a public school in the southeastern United States. In a suburban elementary school with a growing Asian population, Asian families were perceived as a problem, since the school normalized the middle-class notion of parent involvement that prioritized parental responsiveness to school needs over other forms of involvement. At the school, parents played supplementary roles in operating school functions, and the recent increase in the Asian population and its tendency to participate less in school affairs made the school's tradition of strong parent involvement problematic. According to Ogbu's (1995) cultural ecological model, most of the Korean American parents were voluntary minorities who had voluntarily migrated to the United States and considered education a means to achieving social mobility. Despite the challenges they encountered while engaging in their children's schooling, historical and cultural beliefs on education lived in the Korean parents' minds as an ideal form of parenting. As a coping strategy against structural and cultural barriers to parent involvement, a group of Korean parents organized a Korean parent meeting as an avenue for collective participation through intragroup networking.

Collective intragroup networks within the Korean parent meeting unveil the complex negotiations the members constructed while engaging in the school. Strong ethnic solidarity and cultural bonds among this group activated community forces that influenced the members' relationships with the school both positively and negatively. On the one hand, the collaborative ethnic networks of the Korean parent meeting promoted the members' efficacy in parent involvement by compensating for their lack of familiarity with American schools. Immigrant studies (e.g., Lee, 2005) have identified structural barriers (e.g., the language barrier, time constraints, and lack of knowledge about school culture)

as major impediments to minority immigrant parents' participation in schools. These structural barriers were certainly present in this study. However, most participant parents involved themselves in intragroup collaboration to overcome these challenges and were acknowledged as "active participants." On the other hand, the community forces within the Korean parent meeting were likely to exacerbate asymmetric power relations between the Korean parents and the school which already exist in any school–parent dyad (Fine, 1993). Rather than amplify individual voices against the institutional status quo, the collectivistic orientation within the Korean parent meeting led its members to become quiet, obedient, and responsive to the school's needs for the sake of group solidarity.

The findings of this study offer several implications for schools. First, it is important for administrators and teachers to examine their "taken for granted" notions of parent involvement. The current definition of parent involvement prevailing in most schools is grounded in the middle-class, White perspective which focuses on parental participation in schooling. However, notions of parent involvement are socially and historically constructed. Cultural studies reveal how parenting is constructed by and evolves with constituents in a particular cultural and historical context (see Coll & Pachter, 1995; Rogoff, 2003). Different cultural communities may have different ideals of good parenting, and as such, no one "right" way of parent involvement exists. This study unpacked how the school privileged one certain notion of parent participation emphasizing parental responsiveness to institutional needs over other types of involvement. Although Asian families in general and Korean parents in particular did not usually actively engage in school activities in the same ways native-born American families did, making a judgment about parents based on the school's standards may reproduce the deficit model that already prevails in views on minority schooling.

Second, schools should initiate a genuine dialogue to connect effectively with families from diverse cultural backgrounds. The Korean American parents in this study rarely attempted to position themselves as teachers' equals due to their cultural value of respect for authority. Despite their strong educational backgrounds and middle-class status, they were unlikely to engage in discussions about the curricular, assessment, and instructional methods that most influence their children's learning. If schools utilize many methods of communication, such as informal contacts, dialogue journals, discussion groups, parent–teacher–student conferences, oral and written family stories, and classroom projects using family funds of knowledge, teachers and families will be able to learn from each other regardless of their differences (see strategies suggested in Allen, 2007; Kyle et al., 2002; Trumbull et al., 2001).

Finally, schools need to be aware of cultural differences among diverse families and build culturally relevant home–school partnerships. Families from cultures in which parental participation has not been emphasized as much as it is in the United States may be overwhelmed by teachers' demands for them to partner with the school. Asian families, for instance, tend to employ different avenues of parent involvement that are more accessible for them, such as home-based involvement. Even though home-based involvement has been considered a better predictor for academic success than school-based involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), the school staff in this study gave less recognition to Korean families' active involvement in their children's learning at home. Careful consideration of historical and cultural contexts will help schools gain a more culturally responsive understanding of family–school relations and provide multiple ways to partner with their students' families.

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Influence of a Parent Leadership Program on Participants' Leadership Capacity and Actions

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Abstract

This article investigates the influence of Parent Services Project's Vision and Voice Family Leadership Institute (VVFLI; formerly known as Parent Leadership Institute) on parent leadership capacity and action. Pre- and post-test data were collected from new VVFLI attendees during their first (*N* = 83) and last (*N* = 85) session, respectively. T-tests were used to test for significant differences between the pre- and post-test survey responses. Survey data were also collected from a subset of alumni (*N* = 100) who had completed at least one VVFLI between 2005 and 2008. Results indicate that VVFLI may positively influence parents' identities as leaders, general leadership and communication skills, and skills specific to school- and community-based settings, as well as promote increased parental involvement in a variety of school-based, advocacy, and wider constituency leadership activities. Schools and community-based organizations interested in strengthening the leadership capacity of parents should consider implementing parent leadership programs, such as VVFLI, with their constituents.

Key Words: parents, vision and voice family leadership institute, programs, capacity, parental involvement in education, engagement, schools, community-based organizations, communication skills, advocacy, training workshops

Introduction

Decades of research point to the many benefits of family engagement in children's learning on student academic achievement (Henderson & Mapp,

2002). Greater family engagement is also associated with improved social skills and behavior (e.g., decreased alcohol use, violence, and antisocial behavior; National PTA, 1998). The benefits of family engagement are true regardless of students' socioeconomic status or ethnic/racial background or the parents' education level (Mapp, 2004). The more extensive the family engagement, the greater the student benefits (National PTA, 1998).

Parent leadership in education represents one important subtype of family engagement. It can take the form of either individual or collective action (HFRP, 2002; Levine & Trickett, 2000), including: communication and advocacy on behalf of one's own child (HFRP, 2000); authentic input, participation and leadership in parent associations or local school councils (Lopez & Kreider, 2003); and participation in community organizing for education reform (Warren, 2005). Research on parent leadership suggests that parent leaders become role models of school and community involvement not only for their own children, but for other families as well. Higher participation in school leadership councils by immigrant parents, in particular, is associated with greater teacher awareness of students' cultural and community issues and higher family engagement at the school (Marschall, 2008).

Today's educational context and policies present many structural opportunities for parent leadership in education through site-based management councils, English language advisory councils, community-organizing groups, and parent–teacher organizations. Oftentimes, however, parents may need training to acquire the leadership knowledge, self-efficacy, and skills to take on and be truly effective in such roles (Corbett & Wilson, 2000, 2001; Gertler, Rubio-Codina, & Patrinos, 2006). Studies on community leadership programs demonstrate the potential positive influence of parent leadership programs. Specifically, a review of community leadership programs concluded that such programs increase participants' leadership skills, including their ability to interact with others and their level of confidence (Earnest, 1996). Although few evaluations of parent leadership programs have been published in the scientific literature or elsewhere, the available evidence from those that have suggest that they may sustain and increase parents' involvement in their children's education; develop parents' skills in communicating with other parents and with school personnel about educational issues and school improvement efforts; create a community of parents committed to better schools; and even shift involvement from school-based to community- and systems-based reform efforts (Corbett & Wilson, 2008; Kroll, Sexton, Raimondo, Corbett, & Wilson, 2001; Lopez & Kreider, 2003).

Despite the potential benefits of parent leadership training, challenges may still exist to enacting the leadership skills gained. For example, trained parent

leaders often encounter difficulty changing school organizations and directly impacting student achievement (Corbett & Wilson, 2000). Schools and districts that provide forums and decision-making structures with authentic parent participation can result in more responsive schools and increased parent power to influence school reform (Lopez & Kreider, 2003; McConnell, 1991). Structural, pedagogical, and curricular features of effective and well attended parent leadership training programs include highly interactive training sessions, time for parent socialization, and curricula informed by parent interests (McConnell, 1991). Given the power issues that individual change agents are likely to encounter in school settings, it may also be necessary to invest in training and supporting school leaders and teachers to partner with parents (Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe, 2005).

As interest in identifying effective strategies to promote family engagement grows, many questions remain about parent leadership programs relating to their influence on parent leadership capacities and later actions in schools and communities. This article extends our understanding of parent leadership programs by investigating the influence of a unique parent leadership institute on two interconnected types of outcomes: leadership capacity and leadership action. First, we report on immediate, short-term outcomes related to parents' leadership capacity in five domains including leadership identity, general leadership, general communication, school-based skills, and community-based skills. Second, we report on long-term outcomes related to leadership action among parents, specifically networking efforts with diverse groups of parents and participation in school and community leadership roles.

Methods

Program Overview

Parent Services Project (PSP) is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to integrating family support, engagement, and leadership into early childhood settings, schools, and family-serving organizations through training and technical assistance. PSP offers the Vision and Voice Family Leadership Institute (VVFLI), a series of 6–8 workshops designed to train and support emerging parent leaders, in a variety of settings. It draws on the universals of family support and community organizing, using an approach that is based on mutual respect, equity, shared power, and recognition of strengths. The agenda for each VVFLI varies based on local strengths, needs, and concerns; however, core topics covered include understanding family support principles and strategies, leadership qualities and goal setting, understanding and influencing systems, relational meetings, and organizing for change. Table 1 shows a sample six-session agenda.

Table 1. Sample Six–Session VVFLI Agenda

Session	Agenda
1. A Leadership Legacy: Our History and Our Stories	• Welcome and orientation • Stories of local parent leaders • Why get involved in leadership? What happens as a consequence of family engagement and leadership? • Introduce the practice of relational meetings • Homework
2. Families Accessing and Engaging the Education System	• State, county, and district structures • School structure and culture • Parent organizations • What are the possibilities that exist to build real communities in childcare centers and schools? • Homework
3. Parents As Equal Partners in Their Child's Education	• What is your individual experience navigating your child's school? • How do various tests impact our children's education? • What can one do to make parent–teacher communication (including parent–teacher conferences) more productive and beneficial for children? • Develop strategies for individual parents and leadership groups • Homework
4. Parents as Leaders in Their Child's School Community	• Why have a meeting? How do you develop the agenda? Who is involved in the development of the agenda? • Mediation, negotiation, arbitration, and facilitation • Group dynamics: managing interaction, generating ideas, and making decisions • From meeting agenda to community building • Homework
5. Family Pressures, Family Engagement, and Community Organizing	• Participants learn to name what interests and concerns they have and the role that the market, government, schools, and service organizations play in the generation or elimination of pressures that families deal with daily • Participants will understand the value of researching information they need to have success in changing systems • Participants will dialogue about how community leadership intentionally brings different community groups together for common goals and actions • Participants will explore the process to organize a winnable action around a given issue; this will include a dialogue about various community organizing strategies • Homework
6. Evaluation, Wrap-Up, and Next Steps	• What worked? What should be changed? • Key lessons from the Institute • How parents and the community will use knowledge, skills, and relationships gained through the Institute to further their goals • Personal and/or group next steps • Celebration

VVFLI sessions not only provide a space for learning, but also for reflection, networking, and action planning with other parents, as well as with school and program staff representing local partner agencies. The primary participants are parents with children ages 0-18 who have an interest in developing their capacity to engage on an equal playing field with the systems and staff who serve their children. The workshops are taught by PSP staff and local service providers who work with families.

In the seven years since its inception, VVFLI has served over 400 parents, first in PSP's local community in San Rafael, California and surrounding areas and later expanding to other sites across the country, including Atlanta, Georgia and Kansas City, Missouri. In the first year that VVFLI is offered at a new location, parent participants are recruited by the staff of local early childhood programs, schools, or community-based partner organizations. Many parent participants in subsequent years are recruited by VVFLI alumni.

Study Design

In Fall 2008, PSP engaged researchers from Sociometrics Corporation to conduct an evaluation of VVFLI. The evaluation, which took place from November 2008 to August 2009, entailed an empowerment approach in that PSP staff and VVFLI alumni were involved in numerous aspects of the research study. Specifically, PSP staff provided input on the specific aims of and measures used for the evaluation, translated survey instruments into Spanish, facilitated survey data collection, entered this data into a database, and helped to interpret and disseminate study findings. In addition, four VVFLI alumni participated in a focus group to identify themes for investigation prior to the start of the evaluation and assisted with data collection.

Data Collection

All parents attending VVFLI institutes in Fall 2008 in Atlanta, Georgia and Novato, Santa Clara, and San Rafael, California were asked to complete a written pre- and post-test survey during their first and final workshop session, respectively. Both surveys included questions about participants' demographics such as their role in VVFLI, education level, race/ethnicity, most commonly spoken language at home, and immigration status. Seventeen items assessed participants' leadership capacity including their perceptions of themselves as leaders; self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in one's ability) to set goals, develop and execute action plans, communicate, and work with others; school-based advocacy skills; and community change skills. Most items were carried over from an earlier evaluation instrument designed by PSP, with a few new items

added at the request of PSP staff to reflect other topics covered by the VVFLI curriculum. Participants' rated their level of agreement with each item from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The pre-test survey also inquired about participants' desired outcomes from VVFLI; additional post-test survey items assessed participant satisfaction, lessons learned from VVFLI, and future goals.

Survey data were also collected by phone from a subset of alumni who had completed at least one VVFLI institute between 2005 and 2008. PSP staff and alumni volunteers attempted to contact all 196 VVFLI alumni by phone, with at least two follow-up calls to each person. Those involved in data collection only reached out to parents they did not know in communities different than their own. The alumni survey included demographic questions identical to those collected in the pre- and post-test surveys. It also included items on participants' involvement in a variety of leadership activities, attendance at other trainings following their experience at VVFLI, and perceptions of the impact that VVFLI had on their lives. Participants were given the option to complete the pre-test, post-test, and alumni surveys in either English or Spanish.

Analyses

Analyses were conducted using SPSS (version 17.0). Univariate statistics were used to examine the frequency and distributions of all study variables in the pre-test, post-test, and alumni surveys. Bivariate tests (e.g., *t*-tests) were used to test for significant differences between pre- and post-test survey responses. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Eighty-three and 85 new VVFLI attendees during the study period completed a pre- and post-test survey, respectively. Table 2 provides an overview of the pre- and post-test participants' characteristics. The majority of participants attended a VVFLI institute in California (88% pre-test; 79% post-test), had obtained a minimum of a high school education (73% pre-test; 75% post-test), self-identified as Latino/a (71%, pre-test; 64% post-test), primarily spoke Spanish at home (68% pre-test; 55% post-test), and had immigrated to the United States (75% pre-test; 65% post-test). Twenty-eight percent of pre-test participants had at least one young child age 0–5 years and no older children, 72% had at least one school-age child. Twenty-one percent of post-test participants had at least one young child and no older children, 79% had at least one school-age child. There were no significant differences between the pre- and post-test groups for any demographic variables.

Table 2. Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	N (%)[a]		
	Recent Participants 2008-2009		VVFLI Alumni 2005-2008 (N=92)
	Pre-test (N=83)	Post-test (N=85)	
Institute location			
Fairfield, CA	0 (0)	0 (0)	9 (10)
Novato, CA	16 (19)	19 (22)	0 (0)
Santa Clara, CA	35 (42)	31 (37)	0 (0)
San Rafael, CA	22 (27)	17 (20)	47 (51)
Atlanta, GA	10 (12)	17 (20)	16 (17)
Kansas City, MO	0 (0)	0 (0)	20 (22)
Highest level of formal education			
Less than high school	23 (28)	21 (25)	45 (49)
High school diploma or GED equivalent	20 (24)	24 (28)	22 (24)
2-yr associate degree or technical certificate	14 (17)	6 (7)	5 (5)
Some college	13 (16)	19 (22)	11 (12)
4-yr undergraduate degree or more	13 (16)	15 (18)	7 (8)
Race/Ethnicity			
White	6 (7)	8 (9)	2 (2)
Black	9 (1)	14 (17)	9 (10)
Latino/a	59 (71)	54 (64)	78 (85)
Other	2 (2)	3 (4)	0 (0)
Language spoken most often at home			
Spanish	56 (68)	47 (55)	78 (85)
English (or English and Spanish together)	20 (24)	34 (40)	6 (7)
Other	5 (6)	3 (4)	6 (7)
Immigrated to the United States			
Yes	62 (75)	55 (65)	83 (90)
No	20 (24)	27 (32)	6 (7)
Role at time of participation in VVFLI			
Parent of young child(ren) (age 0–5) only	23 (28)	18 (21)	16 (17)
Parent of at least one school-age child	60 (72)	67 (79)	76 (83)

[a] Some totals do not add up to 100% due to missing data.

Ninety-two (47%) parents who had previously attended VVFLI completed an alumni survey. The majority of those who completed the survey had attended a VVFLI institute in California (61%), self-identified as Latino/a (85%), primarily spoke Spanish at home (85%), and had immigrated to the U.S. (83%). Approximately half (49%) had obtained a minimum of a high school education. At the time of their VVFLI attendance, 17% had at least one young child age 0–5 years and no older children, while 83% had at least one school-age child.

Pre- and Post-Test Survey Results

Influence of VVFLI Participation on Parent Leadership Capacity

Table 3 shows the individual item scores for new VVFLI participants' perceptions of their leadership capacity before (pre-test) and immediately after (post-test) having been through the program. VVFLI attendees who had completed the program were significantly more likely than those who were just starting the program to self-identify as a leader (4.3 versus 3.9, $p = 0.00$) and to feel a sense of belonging (4.3 versus 3.8, $p = 0.00$).

Table 3. Parent Leadership Capacity

Item	Mean (SD)[a]	
	Pre-test (N=83)	Post-test (N=85)
Leadership identity		
Consider myself leader in most areas of life*	3.9 (.10)	4.3 (.08)
Sense of belonging in leadership groups*	3.8 (.12)	4.3 (.08)
General leadership skills		
Know how to set realistic goals*	3.7 (.10)	4.2 (.08)
Able to effectively develop/follow through on an action plan*	3.9 (.11)	4.2 (.07)
General communication skills		
Know how to effectively gain support from family/friends	4.0 (.10)	4.1 (.10)
Able to communicate effectively with others*	4.0 (.11)	4.3 (.07)
Feel comfortable with teamwork and cooperation*	4.2 (.09)	4.5 (.07)
Able to confidently interact with different backgrounds*	4.0 (.10)	4.3 (.08)
Able to recruit parents in efforts to make change*	3.7 (.10)	4.0 (.08)
School-based skills		
Aware of resources to help advocate for child*	3.7 (.11)	4.3 (.09)
Know a lot of families at child's school/program*	3.6 (.12)	4.0 (.10)
Feel comfortable talking with child's teachers	4.2 (.11)	4.4 (.08)
Feel comfortable talking with child's school administrators*	4.0 (.11)	4.3 (.09)
Understand the school system and the role parents play in the system*	3.6 (.12)	4.1 (.08)
Community-based skills		
Have capacity to make change in the community*	3.6 (.11)	4.2 (.08)
Understand ways to build power in the community*	3.5 (.11)	4.0 (.07)
Aware of community organizing efforts*	3.8 (.12)	4.1 (.09)

*$p < 0.05$ for mean difference between groups among all parents.

Compared to participants who were just starting VVFLI, those who had completed the program also reported significantly greater general leadership and communication skills, including: knowledge about how to set realistic goals (4.2 versus 3.7, $p = 0.00$); an ability to effectively develop and follow through on an action plan (4.2 versus 3.9. $p = 0.01$); an ability to communicate effectively with others (4.3 versus 4.0, $p = 0.01$); comfort with teamwork and

cooperation (4.5 versus 4.2, $p = 0.02$); an ability to confidently interact with parents from backgrounds different than their own (4.3 versus 4.0, $p = 0.02$); and an ability to recruit other parents in efforts to make change within education or community settings (4.0 versus 3.7, $p = 0.01$).

VVFLI attendees who had completed the program also reported significantly higher levels of agreement than those who were just starting out that they possess the following school-based capacities and skills: are knowledgeable about resources to help advocate for their children (4.3 versus 3.7, $p = 0.00$); have relationships with a lot of other families at their child's school/program (4.0 versus 3.6, $p = 0.03$); are comfortable talking with their child's school administrators (4.3 versus 4.0, $p = 0.02$); and understand the school system and the role parents play in the system (4.1 versus 3.6, $p = 0.00$). Finally, compared to those just beginning the program, graduates reported significantly more capacity to make change in the community (4.2 versus 3.6, $p = 0.00$); understanding of ways to build power in the community (4.0 versus 3.5, $p = 0.00$); and awareness of community organizing efforts (4.1 versus 3.8, $p = 0.04$).

Although the mean score changes described above are seemingly small, ranging from 0.3 to 0.6, they represent an absolute change of 6–12% per item assessed. The pre-test means were negatively skewed (i.e., more responses were at the positive end of the scale) and standard deviations were small (i.e., responses were centered close to the mean), thus the absolute change is likely to be even greater.

Alumni Survey Results

Influence of VVFLI Participation on Parent Leadership Action

Table 4 details the extent to which VVFLI alumni are involved in various school or community activities and when this involvement first occurred. Half (50%) of the alumni surveyed had been involved in at least one school or community activity listed in Table 4 prior to their participation in VVFLI. Prior to their participation in VVFLI, respondents were most commonly involved in school-based activities such as being a volunteer in their children's schools (36%) and regularly participating with a school advisory group (i.e., PTA, PTO, ELAC, PAC, etc.; 22%). Activities that VVFLI alumni most commonly became involved in for the first time during or after their participation in VVFLI included these school-based activities (49% and 46%, respectively) and also advocacy activities such as building alliances with parents whose backgrounds are different than their own (68%) and recruiting other parents to make change in education or community settings (57%). Fewer VVFLI alumni reported having ever been a member of a community group or organization (33%), a school advisory group officer (31%), an officer/leader of a community

group or community organization (29%), a local school board member (17%), having informed a local elected official or policymaker of a community issue (13%), or been selected for regional and/or state committees and/or advisory groups (11%). Nonetheless, the majority of those who engaged in such activities did so for the first time during or after having completed VVFLI. Only 3% of alumni reported having never been involved in any of the activities listed prior to, during, or after their participation in VVFLI.

Table 4. Alumni Involvement in School or Community Activities

Activity	*N* (%) [a] (*N* = 92)		
	Never done	Started before VVFLI	Started during or after VVFLI
Advocacy			
Recruiting other parents to make change in education or community settings	27 (29)	11 (12)	52 (57)
Building alliances with parents whose backgrounds are different than own	17 (19)	11 (12)	63 (68)
School-Based			
Regularly participating with a school advisory group (i.e., PTA, PTO, ELAC, PAC, etc.)	28 (30)	20 (22)	42 (46)
Being a school advisory group officer	62 (67)	10 (11)	18 (20)
Being a volunteer in child's school	11 (12)	33 (36)	45 (49)
Wider Constituency Involvement			
Being a local school board member	74 (80)	7 (8)	8 (9)
Being selected for regional and/or state committees and/or advisory groups	81 (88)	1 (1)	9 (10)
Being a member of a community group or community organization	61 (66)	6 (7)	24 (26)
Being an officer/leader of a community group or community organization	64 (70)	3 (3)	24 (26)
Informing local elected official/policymaker of a community issue	79 (86)	2 (2)	10 (11)

[a] Some totals do not add up to 100% due to missing data.

Influence of VVFLI on Parents' Participation in Other Training Programs

Since completing VVFLI, the majority of alumni (64%) report having been involved in at least one type of other formal training; 34 (37%) had been involved in two or more. Types of additional training obtained by VVFLI alumni included leadership training offered by another organization (38%); training through another PSP initiative (34%); community agency trainings (32%); school, district, or state level education classes (29%); and college and

university classes (17%). The majority of alumni who pursued additional training reported that their experience at VVFLI had an impact on their decision to do so (90%-100%, depending on the type of training).

Alumni's Perceptions of the Impact of VVFLI Training on Their Lives

Ninety-eight percent of VVFLI alumni reported that VVFLI had an impact on six or more of the following aspects of their lives (between 91%–98% for each): level of support from people and groups; communication with child's teacher and school leaders; network of other parents; network of others whose cultural backgrounds are different from own; participation as a leader in school and community groups; own education and professional development; self-esteem and confidence; sense of power to make change in the community; and level of knowledge about leadership. The remaining 2% did not respond to this series of questions.

Discussion

Results of the evaluation reveal that VVFLI may have a positive influence on parents' leadership capacity in terms of their identity as a leader, their general leadership and communication skills, and their skills specific to school- and community-based settings. Although a positive trend was observed, VVFLI participation was not significantly associated with improvement in two areas of parental leadership capacity measured: knowing how to effectively gain support from family/friends, and feeling comfortable talking with their child's teachers. It may be that seeking support from and feeling comfort around certain stakeholders depends heavily on variables outside the reach of a parent leadership institute, for example, the disposition and openness of these other stakeholders.

The majority of VVFLI alumni report having carried out a variety of leadership actions since attending the program. In addition to school-based activities that parents might be expected to become involved in on their own, a subset of VVFLI alumni also became involved in advocacy activities and wider constituency involvement, for example, actively recruiting other parents to make change or serving on a regional advisory committee. These results are consistent with those from another parent leadership evaluation study which found that with training, parents' involvement in educational activities expanded from being school-based (e.g., PTA membership and participation on school-based decision-making councils) to also include community- and educational system-based efforts (e.g., advocacy and joining policy and advisory groups with broader constituencies; Corbett & Wilson, 2008). Alumni survey findings

related to parent actions also align with the areas of leadership knowledge demonstrated through the pre-post VVFLI survey, warranting further research. For example, are perceptions of school-based communication skills gained through VVFLI directly related to school-based actions reported later, including classroom volunteering and participation in school groups, and are perceptions of increased skills in making community-based change predictive of greater participation and leadership in community organizations down the road?

Limitations of the evaluation include the small sample size, lack of a control group, and cross-sectional nature of the study. Survey questions also relied on self-report from a self-selected group of participants, thus may be subject to social desirability or selection bias. Having had PSP staff and alumni conduct the alumni surveys may have likewise led to some response bias. To better address issues of generalizability, causality, and persistence of outcomes, future evaluation research on VVFLI and other parent leadership programs might include an increased sample size, a random controlled trial design, and a pre-, post-, and six-month follow-up design with identical knowledge and action constructs, including observational measures of leadership abilities, assessed at each time point. In addition, a larger and stratified sample may allow for investigation of the differential influence of VVFLI on subgroups of participants. For example, future research might examine whether first-time parents and new immigrants, for whom engagement with schools or U.S. schools, respectively, is an unfamiliar endeavor, benefit more from VVFLI than other parent subgroups in outcome areas such as parent–teacher and parent–administrator communication.

Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that the Vision and Voice Family Leadership Institute may influence many areas of parent leadership capacity and action targeted by the initiative. Given that VVFLI holds potential for increasing parents' leadership knowledge and skills, and, at least by retrospective account, appears to influence parents' later leadership actions, schools and community-based organizations interested in strengthening the leadership capacity of parents might consider implementing VVFLI with their constituents. VVFLI may be especially appropriate for contexts and populations with a demonstrated need for leadership training, such as schools with relatively low levels of family engagement, parent populations historically marginalized from educational systems, or parent representatives on school-based leadership and advisory councils.

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The Impact of a Junior High School Community Intervention Project: Moving Beyond the Testing Juggernaut and Into a Community of Creative Learners

Larry P. Nelson, Sarah K. McMahan, and Tacia Torres

Abstract

Involvement by the adult community in schools and students' lives is an effective way to increase student attendance, boost morale, and improve students' perceptions about their school experience. This study examined a two-year comprehensive community intervention initiative within a high-risk junior high school, measuring its impact on student attendance, as well as student, staff, and faculty perceptions of school climate. Findings of the study show that community partnerships and programs can increase student attendance rates and significantly improve perceptions of school conditions. Findings also show that when the pressures of raising standardized test scores impede these kinds of community intervention efforts, a significant and dramatic decline in the perceptions of school climate may result. Thus, the authors of this study make an argument for sustainable, collaborative, and organic community-based mentoring programs that focus on the development of students' creativity as a means to improve school practices.

Key Words: junior high, community involvement, school climate, high stakes testing, intervention project, creativity, creative learners, perceptions, attendance, middle schools, students, youth, development, mentoring, afterschool programs, after-school

Introduction

U.S. junior high school students report the most negative views about the climate of their schools and peer culture (Grills & Ollendick, 2002). This stems from a range of problems that overwhelm many adolescents such as: (1) learned helplessness in school (Holt, 1996); (2) not having a healthy family and community support structure (Olender, Elias, & Mastroleo, 2010); (3) a reduction in student interest due to high-stakes testing and test anxiety (Kohn, 2011); and (4) not being attracted, challenged, and/or engaged in real-world educational issues and experiences (Fertman, White, & White, 1996; Spring, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006). Crime rates also soar during these middle school years; in one study 74% of junior high schools reported one or more incidents to the police compared to 45% of public elementary schools (Wilcox, Augustine, Bryan, & Roberts, 2005). Furthermore, the same study reported that one in four students do not feel safe walking home alone in their neighborhoods, and 84% of middle school students agree on the need and importance of having a safe place to go after school. According to Strong, Silver, and Robertson (1995), 95% of students affirm having goals they wish to reach and accomplish in school, although 42% are not optimistic about achieving those outcomes. Thus, it is no wonder why middle school dropout rates are among the highest, and more than half of all eighth graders fail to achieve expected levels of proficiency in reading, math, and science.

Many of the challenges associated with learning and development in junior high schools have been linked to poor school climate, which can broadly be defined as an environment not conducive to meeting the psychological and developmental needs of children (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001). In order for students to steer clear of risky behaviors and better thrive in junior high school environments, the climate needs to be prone to: (1) the building of positive adult relationships, (2) the development of individual creativity, and (3) the offering and support of wide-ranging opportunities and activities that engage students in constructive and personally meaningful ways (Robinson, 2011). For many schools, these elements of climate construction are oftentimes difficult to achieve due to factors such as harmful environments surrounding the school, poor leadership, an overemphasis on high-stakes testing, and/or a lack of sustainable resources (Grills & Ollendick, 2002).

Several research studies have also focused on the importance of family and community involvement during the adolescent years of development as a means of increasing academic achievement, improving attendance rates, and promoting better attitudes and behaviors in school (Epstein, 2001; Gonzales, 2002; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Researchers have found when parents and

other adults are actively involved in their child's education there is a significant increase in students' attendance, homework, and positive sense of self (Berger, 2008; Fan & Chen, 2001). Simon (2002) suggested that teenagers with active parents and adults in their lives will attend school more steadily than those with parents who do not participate in school activities. For years, the literature has articulated a need for establishing community partnerships with the schools, although "few schools have successfully implemented comprehensive school partnership programs" (Manning & Buchner, 2009, p. 18). Effective schools have also engaged local businesses and community partners to help direct and support school activities and projects (Fan & Chen, 2001).

The phenomenon of engaging community partners, the business community, and parents in junior high school education is not a new concept. Since the 1970s there have been many attempts by educational reformers to devise innovative ways to connect community organizations with young adults. Research has suggested that family and community involvement in adolescent education is strongly linked to improvements in academic achievement, better school attendance, and improved school programs (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Shields (1994) argued that schools have no chance of fundamentally changing school environments without the direct support and engagement of the larger community. Epstein (1995) suggested that "with frequent interactions between school, families, and communities, more students are likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, working hard, thinking creatively, helping one another, and staying in school" (p. 702). Dryfoos (1998) argued the need for quality case studies of successful and effective school and community partnerships in order to assist other struggling schools who are at the beginning stages of developing these kinds of relationships. Therefore, the results of this study will demonstrate: (1) how attendance, dropout rates, and attitudes of students involved in a junior high school community intervention project changed as a result of collaboration efforts, (2) which of the project programs were most successful at creating a positive change in perceptions of school climate; and (3) what factors should be considered when initiating and sustaining new community–school partnerships and projects.

Methods

Participants of the Study

Participants of this study (*N* = 758) were 7th and 8th grade students from an urban, economically disadvantaged (87.5%) and high minority (90.5%) junior high school located in the southwest region of the United States. Overall,

there were slightly more males (52.5%) than females (47.5%). Hispanics made up the majority of the population (51%), followed by African Americans (32.2%), Caucasians (11.4%), Asian/Pacific Islanders (4.8%), and American Indian/Alaska Natives (.3%). Daily attendance rates for the baseline 2006–2007 measurement were 94.6% with a dropout rate of 2.9%.

Students used in the control group (*N* = 428) were taken from a demographically similar junior high school—urban, economically disadvantaged (74%), high minority students (87.7%), and a 95% attendance rate. This school reported a 1.1% dropout rate in 2006–2007. This school was also chosen as a control group because of its record of having few administrative changes in the recent past as well as a low likelihood of experiencing major changes during the projected intervention timeline. An internal review board for research as well as the participating school districts' administration approved protocols for both populations in the study.

Community Characteristics

The community which surrounds the junior high school chosen for this project included characteristics such as: (1) a high population density; (2) low-performing schools; and (3) high gang-related activity and recruitment around the school grounds. The majority of community residents were Hispanic/Latino, and 66% of foreign-born residents were from Mexico. Forty-four percent of households spoke another language (other than English) at home, and 36% of adults did not hold a high school diploma. The estimated median household income in the surrounding community was $32,000, and roughly 60% of families earned less than $30,000 annually. Thirty-four percent of residents were situated below the poverty level threshold, and 12% were situated below 50% of the poverty level threshold. Even though the community at large is considered middle class and affluent in terms of city revenue, it is important to note that the specific area targeted in this study did not resemble the larger levels of city prosperity.

The Intervention Program

Research on high-risk urban environments indicates that a positive, supportive, and culturally conscious school climate can significantly shape the degree of academic success experienced by students (Macneil & Maclin, 2005). Furthermore, researchers have found that positive perceptions of school environment are key protective factors that lead to the prevention of antisocial and maladaptive behavior (Stover, 2005). According to Delisio (2005), the climate factors of a school that are most inhibiting for student achievement and healthy development are: (1) a widespread lack of hope about school; (2) a

diminished sense of self-worth while at school; and (3) having few supportive adults around who care about the future of students.

The purpose of this intervention project was to generate an immediate and profound change in student perceptions of how the adults in students' lives care about them on a day-to-day basis. This was done by bringing in a fresh, motivated, and cohesive team of adults from the community who were likely to generate individual relationships with students and take an interest in their lives and learning. This group of adults (i.e., steering committee) were charged with developing and implementing a range of strategic activities (e.g., mentoring programs, afterschool clubs, community events, etc.) that would improve the learning environment and increase morale for students, faculty, and staff. The goal of the two-year project was to pilot new projects and programs that would enhance perceptions about the school, as well as to find new ways to support the most successful programs into the future.

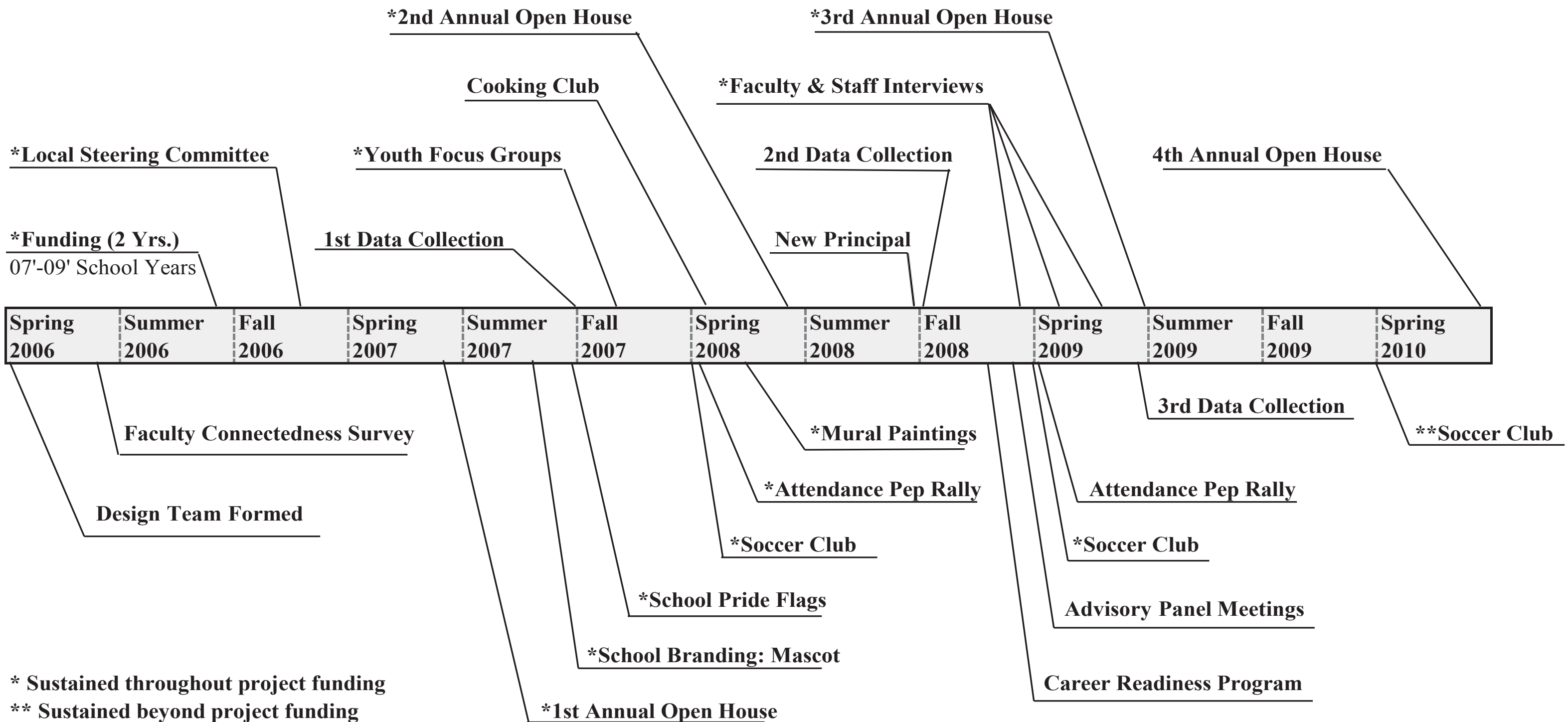
The steering committee was composed of 20 community partners (including representatives from school faculty, parents, students, nonprofit agencies, university students and faculty, city council members, local churches, city officials, law enforcement, and the business community), all focused on working with school administrators to build purposeful activities that would benefit the learning community. Specific goals of the program were to: (1) decrease school absenteeism; (2) increase academic performance; and (3) generate positive relationships that increase students' engagement and excitement about their school and community.

Specific activities and programs that resulted from the project included a school branding initiative (e.g., school pride flags/banners, t-shirts, and mascot development), pep rallies, mural painting projects on school grounds, attendance contests, open house/field days for incoming 7th graders, afterschool cooking club, afterschool soccer club, and a career readiness program (e.g., an aerospace engineer came to the math and science classes to discuss the relevance of what students are learning in school and how it applies to his particular profession). Many programs were initiated during year one of the project and sustained throughout year two. Other programs were initiated during year two. A timeline of project activities and progressions are outlined in Figure 1.

Sources of Data: Quantitative

The first of two sources of data used for analysis in this study was a school climate survey developed by the program's steering committee. These questions were based on the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets (1996), which were grounded in elements of the human experience that have long-lasting and positive consequences for adolescents, such as youth development, resiliency,

Figure 1. Community Intervention Project Timeline



and risk prevention. Research on these 40 developmental assets has shown that the more assets young people acquire, the less likely they are to engage in risky behaviors and ultimately become more successful in school, regardless of their gender, economic status, or ethnicity. Questions selected for the survey were largely related to factors such as adult support, school effectiveness, peer influence, values clarification and development, and social skills. The self-report instrument allowed five response choices ranging from "Never" to "Almost Always." Factor analysis of the 53 initial survey questions yielded five overall scale constructs, explaining 89.2% of the common variance. Forty-four of the questions loaded at .40 or higher and were retained for further analysis. The first scale construct, Optimism (Opt), had an average factor loading of .485 and included question items such as "I am hopeful about my future" and "People have a lot of confidence in me." The second scale, School Climate (SC), had an average factor loading of .548 and included questions like "School makes me feel good about myself" and "My community encourages me to stay in school." Personal Responsibility (PR) was the third scale construct (with an average factor loading of .552) which included questions such as "I am responsible for my own learning" and "People expect me to do the right thing." The fourth construct was Social Support (SS), which had an average factor loading of .552 and included questions like "I feel like I belong to something good" and "There are adults who are trying to help me become successful." The last construct, Self-Efficacy (SE), included questions like "I am good at doing many things" and "At school I try as hard as I can to do my best work" and retained an average factor loading of .622. Reliability computations for each scale were considered good and computed as follows: Optimism ($\alpha = .736$); School Climate ($\alpha = .887$); Personal Responsibility ($\alpha = .856$); Social Support ($\alpha = .856$); and Self Efficacy ($\alpha = .796$).

Three separate times the data from this questionnaire were collected and recorded for analysis. This included an initial baseline measure (at the beginning of 2007–2008 school year), a second measure (at the beginning of 2008–2009 school year), and a final measure (at the end of 2008–2009 school year). Table 1 (p. 133) shows how many useable sets of data were valid for each scale construct. Due to absenteeism on days of data collection, students no longer attending the school(s), or incomplete reporting, the attrition rates from scale asset measures ranged from 80% to 84% for the intervention school and 73% to 75% for the control school. Although incentives for completing the survey accurately were put into place (i.e., raffle tickets for prizes such as an "iPod"), it was noticed that the length of the survey was sometimes too long for some students to complete consistently. Other reasons for the high attrition rate could have been related to inconsistent settings for data collection (i.e., 15

minutes at the beginning of 1st period did not always work for some students, and therefore, they were tracked down at other events such as pep rallies, after-school programs, etc.). It is also likely that the majority of useable data sets for analysis came largely from those students who were most engaged and serious about school.

Quantitative Data Analyses

A quasi-experimental design using a mixed model repeated measures analysis was used to analyze data for this study. In order to account for some of the initial variance between experimental and control group scores, a three factor ANCOVA (gender x ethnicity x time) was applied to the design in order to increase the ratio of variance explained by the other independent factors used in the model (i.e., Opt, SC, PR, SS, and SE). The between-subjects factors included gender and ethnicity, and the within-subject factors were the three independent time measures. Covariates used in the model were initial baseline scores. This made it possible to more accurately consider changes within each scale over time, regardless of differing levels of "scale value" each student had upon taking the survey. Tukey (HSD) post-hoc tests further explored where specific differences existed in terms of gender and ethnicity groupings.

Sources of Data: Qualitative

The second source of data used in the study was collected in the form of individual interviews, student focus groups, and individual student reflections that were compiled over the course of the two-year intervention cycle. Third year follow-up interviews were also conducted with key students ($N = 2$), staff ($N = 4$), and faculty ($N = 3$) after the project was completed. Using a qualitative approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the data was analyzed and coded noting all salient and recurring units of meaning that were reported. In other words, the analysis entailed a recursive process of reading, interpreting, and re-reading interview transcripts in an effort to recognize patterns and themes that emerged from the data. These themes not only helped explain and clarify the quantitative findings, they also served to address some of the quantitative limitations and provide a more complete and in-depth description of phenomenon happening during the course of the intervention project.

Results and Findings

Survey results showed significantly strong ($p < .001$) positive changes in student climate reporting across all five scale assets after receiving the intervention for one year. Conversely, results showed significantly strong ($p < .001$) negative

changes in student reporting across all five scale assets after year two of the intervention, dropping slightly below initial baseline measurements (Table 1 & Figure 2). Intervention school post-hoc tests showed no significant gender or ethnicity differences in reporting. Dropout rates did improve from 2.9% to .2% after year one, and slipped back to .6% after the intervention project ended. Similarly, attendance rates increased slightly after year one from 94.6% to 96.6% and decreased to 93.9% by the end of the project.

In comparison, variability in student reporting at the control school was found to be much more flat across all scales. The only measure (out of 10 total) to exhibit the same level of significant change in student reporting ($p < .001$) was within the social support construct, where measure 2 significantly differed from measures 1 and 3 (Table 2 & Figure 3). There were no other significant differences in control school asset reporting. Dropout rates associated with control school data also remained much more consistent across measures (1.1%, 1.1%, and 1.2% respectively). Likewise, attendance rates showed little variance over the three year period (95%, 94%, and 94%, respectively).

Table 1. Measures for Junior High School Scale Asset Reporting (Intervention School)

Scale	***N***	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**Type III Sum of Squares**	***df***	***F***
Optimism ‘07	151	20.28	5.10			
Optimism ‘08	151	26.57	4.36	3570.48	1	157.32*
Optimism ‘09	151	17.47	5.08	7716.64	1	338.14*
School Climate ‘07	135	22.92	7.47			
School Climate ‘08	135	31.36	6.47	7423.71	1	140.48*
School Climate ‘09	135	19.96	6.96	10779.30	1	257.26*
Responsibility ‘07	153	25.16	6.65			
Responsibility ‘08	153	32.76	6.08	6051.27	1	139.69*
Responsibility ‘09	153	22.49	6.50	9189.80	1	255.30*
Social Support ‘07	122	27.20	7.71			
Social Support ‘08	122	35.89	6.73	5962.53	1	107.92*
Social Support ‘09	122	23.43	7.43	11679.01	1	221.91*
Self Efficacy ‘07	142	22.39	5.46			
Self Efficacy ‘08	142	28.90	5.48	4743.70	1	156.54*
Self Efficacy ‘09	142	19.99	5.45	5908.45	1	191.68*

* Significant at the $p < .001$ level

Figure 2. Measures of Scale Assets Over Time (Intervention School)

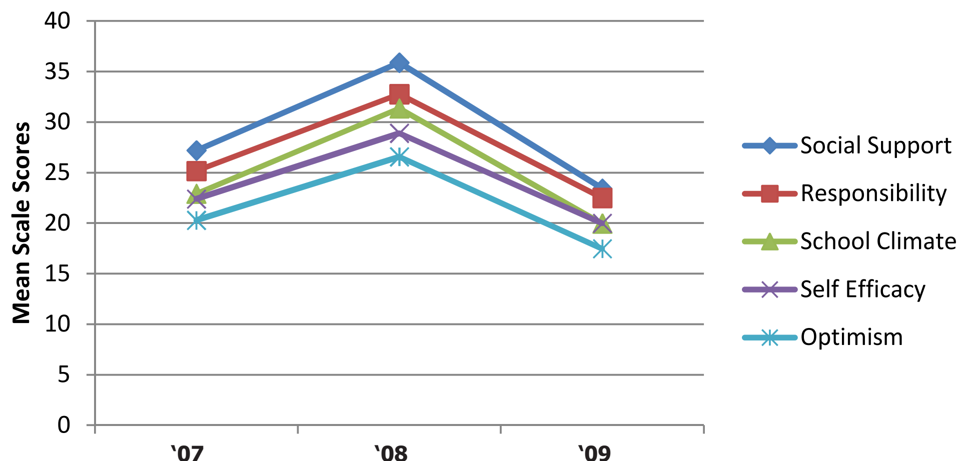
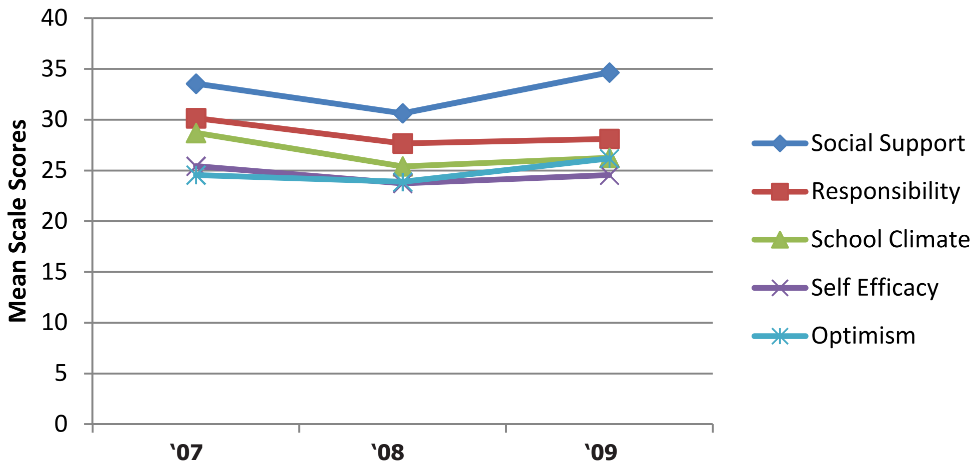


Table 2. Measures for Junior High School Scale Asset Reporting (Control School)

Scale	*N*	Mean	Std. Dev.	Type III Sum of Squares	*df*	*F*
Optimism '07	106	25.20	5.56			
Optimism '08	106	24.73	5.84	10.56	1	.643
Optimism '09	106	25.92	7.89	67.69	1	1.90
School Climate '07	109	27.48	7.79			
School Climate '08	109	26.64	6.90	39.31	1	1.52
School Climate '09	109	27.46	7.59	37.64	1	1.99
Responsibility '07	110	28.61	7.31			
Responsibility '08	110	27.74	5.12	41.89	1	1.33
Responsibility '09	110	26.34	7.32	102.27	1	3.02
Social Support '07	105	33.20	7.35			
Social Support '08	105	30.99	7.47	236.56	1	12.07*
Social Support '09	105	32.95	7.08	188.01	1	11.42*
Self Efficacy '07	114	24.54	6.00			
Self Efficacy '08	114	23.73	5.00	37.93	1	1.43
Self Efficacy '09	114	24.61	5.66	43.86	1	1.72

* Significant at the $p < .001$ level
** Significant at the $p < .05$ level

Figure 3. Measures of Scale Assets Over Time (Control School)



Findings after year one of the project support related research findings that have demonstrated a significant improvement in school climate when community intervention and external programming have been present (e.g., Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Simon, 2002). Unfortunately, this upward trend in perceptions of school climate was not sustained throughout year two. The most compelling reason for this was a dramatic change in leadership at the start of year two. A new principal stepped in with a focused goal of improving test scores in order to get the campus at a level that would aid the district in obtaining funds based on standardized test performance. It is important to note here that it was not the goal nor focus of the new leadership to work with and/or support the community intervention projects that were already established after year one or gearing up for year two.

Four basic themes emerged from the data which help explain the results and describe the changing climate within the school over the course of the intervention project. These themes included: (1) general findings of the study; (2) individual programs having the most impact on improving school climate; (3) critical influence of high-stakes testing; and (4) the value of intervention sustainability and long-term support.

General Findings of the Study

The majority of reasons (58%) given by students for not attending school (and/or valuing their school experiences) were related to disapproval factors of existing school rules and routines (i.e., strict dress code, no leniency for tardiness, constant surveillance, etc.), followed by a dislike of teachers (12%), and dislike of peers (8%). Conversely, the top reasons staff and faculty believed

students did not attend school were more related to perceptions of students' personal and social issues (e.g., fighting/bullying, responsibilities with the family at home, gang-related pressures and activity, etc.). During focus group interviews, the students believed that these factors (e.g., fighting/bullying, home issues, etc.) were only a smaller part of a larger picture involving the day-to-day operations of the school itself, where students had no input in shaping their education or directing their learning environment. For example, one student stated it this way,

> Very few students don't come to school because there is a fight once in a while, or there is gang activity going on around the school…that might affect one or two students, but the majority of students who skip class do it because they find more personal meaning and freedom outside of school.

Another student put it this way,

> When you are nickel and dimed to death with being a minute late to class in a 5-minute passing period, which by the way the punishment is harsh and the tardy system keeps getting more and more strict every year, or you see the dress code getting narrowed down with less and less flexibility, or you have to conform to a new system of having to wear school I.D.'s around your neck, you tend to then focus on these little day-to-day changes that stand in the way of your individual freedoms, discovering who you are, and enjoying your overall school experience.

Individual Programs Having the Most Impact on Improving School Climate

Three programs in particular were talked about most by students, faculty, staff, and community partners as having the most impact on increasing student attendance and improving perceptions of school climate. These programs were (1) the incoming 7th graders open house/field day, (2) the afterschool soccer program, and (3) the school grounds mural painting project. The incoming 7th graders open house/field day, which was generated to create excitement about entering into junior high school, received much praise for improving school climate. One school faculty member put it this way,

> With the first open house/field day, we had more parents attend school that night than probably the whole year combined. Yeah, they came for the free food, but who cares…they came and saw what was going on, and they liked it. It was a positive step in the right direction.

Another faculty member stated, "It was a fun event for everyone, and the parents got to come in and see some of the positive things going on at the school."

One particular student spoke of the attendance and involvement at the open house evening: "My mom and grandma came that night. It was cool because I got to show my mom some of my teachers." Administrative staff also echoed this by saying, "The program encouraged parents and students to be involved in school…feel ownership, showcase pride, and even come to school during the evening hours."

The afterschool soccer club was another program that generated a great amount of student interest and most likely impacted daily attendance (especially with those particular students who were considered most at-risk for attending school). This was largely due to the program's requirement that in order to play on the soccer teams, attendance in all classes was mandatory, as well as grades maintained at an acceptable level. The school's security officer had this to say about the program:

> Soccer mostly changed the mentality of those particular students who were most resistant to come to school in the first place. Many of us saw a real transformation with the soccer kids, as they were definitely more motivated to come to school and at least try a little more than they ever did before.

A student on one of the soccer teams put it this way, "If we get into trouble or miss class, the consequence would be we wouldn't be able to play on the soccer team…so its motivation for us to go to class and get good grades." An additional aspect of the soccer program that seemed to play a meaningful role in its success was the community partnership established with local university physical education teacher education candidates. These college seniors volunteered to come in after school for practices twice per week and to coach Saturday games. One seventh grader had this to say about the university student teachers, "It's a good thing coach comes out and supports us…coach is a good role model and keeps us away from drugs and all the bad stuff." School officials also commented numerous times on the importance of the soccer program. For example, one staff member stated, "These students have been waiting for school soccer to become a reality for some time. This is their game, and they can easily relate and transfer what they are learning in the soccer program to their home life and the world around them." Finally, it is worth noting here that the soccer initiative was the only program to endure long after the two-year intervention project ended. Ultimately, it was funded for an additional five years and expanded into seven other junior high schools via a district-wide grant.

Another project that received mention during the interviews was the school pride mural painting project. This project was selected to cover an area outside of the school that was continuously "tagged" with inappropriate graffiti. The

full artwork and materials were donated by a local artist who outlined the mural while over 30 students assisted in the painting. The idea was to have each 8th grade class add/expand a section to represent their years at the school. As one key staff put it, "Since the artwork has been marked as 'student work' it has not received any tagging since…indicating the community has shown much respect for the student work. The overall graffiti in the area has now decreased tremendously." The school had also indicated that it was the largest turnout for a Saturday morning student volunteer project in the history of the school.

Critical Influence of High-Stakes Testing

The drop in school climate scores by the third year measure can largely be attributed to a change in leadership that began during the 2008–2009 school year (year 2 of the project). The change was primarily focused on initiatives that improved test scores; everything else was viewed as a distraction from that single administrative goal. Follow-up interviews with key faculty and staff one year after the intervention project brought these factors to light with statements such as, "The new leadership at the school has been more focused on improving test scores than working on the critical social and moral issues that are at the root of the whole problem." Another faculty member put it this way,

> Now that the open house/field day is gone, the administration doesn't seem interested in outside people helping our school anymore…morale has dropped. When the programs were in full swing, we had more and more parents participating and even coming to school. Now we never see parents come to school anymore…they felt unwelcome.

The issues of high-stakes testing becoming the sole focus of school was also echoed amongst other auxiliary school personnel:

> The leadership does not care about student involvement and interests like the soccer club. Leadership is now pushing students to have to go to tutoring and focus on academics instead of other activities that they enjoyed participating in, which were activities that got them to express an interest in school and take pride in the first place.…While the push for academics is important, it is also very important for our students to like coming to school, feeling connected and balanced in school, and motivated to achieve success in more ways than just a test.

Finally, consider this quote by a very involved and caring faculty member:

> If we cannot get students to school and excited about what they are learning, then life in schools has become nothing more than test score numbers. The previous leadership team cared about everyone and individuals…the programs, the students, the faculty, the staff, and just plain

> ol' pride in the school…the new leadership does not really care about making this place engaging and involving with the people in place. It goes back to the old idea that the environment is shaped by the people who are in place.

Pressures related to high-stakes testing were also commented on by students at the end of the project. For example, one student said,

> There is so much emphasis on testing, and it gets really old. There is constant nagging about passing the test. The teachers say that if you do well then we will have this or that reward for you…but it is only a carrot on a stick, and the students see right through it.

Another student commented, "You may think that if you do a good job on the test then teachers will eventually get off your back…but they never really do…it never ends, and it is so boring." Compulsory testing was clearly playing a role in how students perceived their schooling experience. Consider this quote by another student, "Most of us realize that if we don't pass the test the first time, the pressure to pass will just keep building and building." There appeared to be plenty of affirmation about an overemphasis on testing after year two of the project. This was highlighted by a previous school administrator:

> Good test scores are important to us, but they are not everything that is needed to sustain an engaging and responsive learning environment. Students at this age are already experiencing so many psychological, social, and physical changes in their lives, that compulsory testing may be backfiring on educating students for the real world and the future, possibly missing a developmental mark that many students need to receive and practice during their schooling experience. Students are smart and oftentimes see a genuine disconnect between what they know to be true and what we have them doing and learning in school. There is a tremendous strain on students to pass the test at all costs, and many of them get turned off to school and learning because of it.

Finally, another faculty vocalized their concern with this to say:

> …too much focus on testing—all that drilling and killing…when it becomes all they do every day, all day, it is not effective, and the kids don't care about the testing subject and content—they care even less about the activities going on inside school when it is all about passing the test.

The Value of Intervention Sustainability and Long-Term Support

The intention of the community intervention project from the onset was to continue successful programs long after the initial organization. It would

have been interesting to see what the results of this study would have showed if there were no changes in school leadership midway through the project, allowing for a more longitudinal examination of the programs that were most likely to continue on into year three and beyond. This would have also allowed for a better assessment and understanding of how to support these key programs. Unfortunately, there was a general observation amongst those at the school that the community partnerships were steadily withdrawing from the school environment. Interviews from school personnel supported this with statements such as,

> Attendance and morale have gone downhill since the intervention project is no longer strong. The students are constantly asking where Mr. or Mrs. so and so is, and/or what happened to this or that program. I think, in part, they feel like the adults—along with the excitement of the new programs—have abandoned the school.

This idea was also echoed by two students at the school: "Last year, there was so much excitement at our school, and I don't know what happened to it," and, "Last year, there were many opportunities to learn about different things that we found to be interesting. I have been asking my teachers what happened to the afterschool cooking program, but they don't have any good answers."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to measure the effects of a comprehensive two-year community intervention partnership inside an urban high-risk junior high school. The goal of the intervention was to mobilize and build a sustainable civic partnership and infrastructure that better ensured that junior high school students would "grow up" better connected to the community and become more resilient when facing the undesirable influences that pervaded the school's atmosphere. Efforts of implementing new and innovative community-based programs were exceedingly promising in a very short period of time, as those from the community were feeling very satisfied with the school's progress after year one of the intervention. However, with the change of administrative leadership to refocus all school efforts towards improving test scores exclusively (i.e., year two of the project), the data serendipitously showed a clear and sharp decline in the perceptions of school conditions within the school's bionetwork. In other words, this unexpected shift of school focus to raise test scores ultimately reversed all positive effects and progress made by the community's intervention efforts.

> *"There is little incentive to replace standardized tests with more meaningful forms of assessment that require human beings to evaluate the quality of students' accomplishments."*
>
> -Alfie Kohn (2000; p. 3)

Many lessons were learned as a result of this project. Foremost, the authors recognized that a narrow focus on raising standardized test scores alone, at the sacrifice of paying attention to other enrichment activities and creative programs, can be devastating to the school's climate and the morale of students, faculty, and staff. We agree that accountability has an important role in education, although high-stakes testing should not be the sole benchmark for measuring learning, development, and/or success in school. School climate is a vast and multifaceted human affair, and normative-based tests fail to take any of this organic complexity into account. The authors of this study would then argue that standardized tests are an insular measure of what is actually happening within a diverse and dynamic learning community. The teachers, staff, and administrators we spoke with agreed that standardized tests offered a quick and easy way to show some measure of accountability, although the message was clear that it was by no means an accurate way to chart student development. To expand this point further, we distinctly got the impression that some demoralized faculty were no longer looking at low-performing students as "challenging opportunities for making improvements." Rather, for the first time, they were seeing these kinds of students as "liabilities" which precluded any chance of building a trusting and nurturing relationship.

Ways of employing a more comprehensive assessment model at a local level may include: (1) identifying and defining local issues and establishing strategic priorities; (2) piloting new intervention(s) and/or program(s) that could help address local issues; (3) taking systematic measurements of successes and failures; (4) analyzing data and committing to evidence-based improvement and action; and (5) selecting an indicator that signals whether the intervention or strategy has been effective or not. Bringing more forms of authentic assessment to school programs may make it easier for administrators, teachers, community members, and parents to fight for what is essentially important for students.

The other part of the equation comes in the form of adequate funding so that new community partnerships that are working stay focused and on task. This study has shown that a few targeted programs aimed at connecting students with adults can have an extraordinary effect. Strategies and efforts to increase parental and community involvement is a realistic goal; what is critical is a committed group of community leaders (e.g., businesses, nonprofits, education partners, faith-based organizations, parents, and other civic organizations) who seek to change the prevailing mindset about the nature of schools,

as well as the role adults need to play within it. Furthermore, effective school administrators realize that their students are more than just test results, rather people with unique developmental needs who desire a circle of committed adults and role models.

Conclusion

The junior high school age is oftentimes viewed as a transition time from childhood to adulthood, yet many junior high school students are increasingly finding themselves disconnected from the world around them. This study has shown that it is very possible for a committed community of adult leaders to come together and positively change a school's climate for the better in a very short period of time. Some of the projects represented in this study immediately made an impact on student attendance, increased family involvement with the school, and resulted in significant gains in student perceptions about their school. This was possible due to all parties (i.e., community members, principal, teachers, and students) working together to support the implementation of new (and somewhat externally driven) school programs that connected positive adult role models from the community with students.

This study has also shown that efforts to sustain these kinds of positive school climate changes without the cooperation of school leadership are entirely ineffective. This study demonstrated that once central administration focused solely on improving state-mandated test scores, at the expense of adequately supporting other comprehensive school programs already in place, it took very little time to adversely change the community of learners' perceptions of school, ultimately harming morale and other learning-related assets known to improve students' learning, motivation, and experiences. The authors of this study argue that policymakers and educational leaders need to pay close attention to more than just test scores and merely teaching to the test by finding innovative and creative ways of supporting collaborative criterion-based programs that demonstrate a value-added impact on student motivation, school climate, and meaningful learning.

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School Counselors' Partnerships With Linguistically Diverse Families: An Exploratory Study

Nadire Gülçin Aydın, Julia A. Bryan, and David K. Duys

Abstract

Little research to date has investigated the involvement of school counselors in partnerships with linguistically diverse families. This article reviews the results of a study with school counselors (*N* = 95) in a Midwestern state on their involvement in school, family, and community partnerships with linguistically diverse families. The results indicated that school principal expectations, school counselor role perceptions about partnerships, time constraints, and training in partnership implementation were positively related to school counselor involvement in SFC partnerships with linguistically diverse families.

Key Words: School Counselor Involvement in Partnerships Survey, linguistically diverse families, students, English language learners, ELLs, parent involvement, school–family–community collaboration, counselors, diversity

Introduction

The number of linguistically diverse students in the U.S. public school system has increased significantly in recent years (Araujo, 2009). In 2018, primary and secondary public school enrollment is projected to grow to 54 million (Planty et al., 2009). In the 2004–2005 school year, 10.5% of students (5.1 million) were linguistically diverse (Payan & Nettles, 2008). In 2007, 20% of children ages 5–17 (10.8 million) spoke a language at home other than

English, and 5% (2.7 million) spoke English with difficulty; 75% of those who had difficulty in speaking English spoke Spanish (Planty et al., 2009). By the year 2026 the number of linguistically diverse students in American schools will rise to 25% (Garcia, 2002).

As a result of increasing numbers of linguistically diverse students, many schools face the challenge of building partnerships with linguistically diverse families. Studies have documented that students from diverse cultural backgrounds score lower on achievement tests than their White peers (Bali & Alvarez, 2004); such academic issues may be due to language difficulties (Schwallie-Giddis, Anstrom, Sánchez, Sardi, & Granato, 2004). Linguistically diverse students are at risk academically (Park-Taylor, Walsh, & Ventura, 2007), and learning a new language can also create anxiety and social isolation (Spomer & Cowen, 2001). In addition, these students may experience post-traumatic stress disorder, racial labeling, different learning styles, inadequate social support networks, and lack of social acceptance (Williams & Butler, 2003).

Due to the multifaceted issues linguistically diverse students experience, they need an advocate within the school to help them negotiate the system and to engage their families. School professionals are in a position to strengthen rapport with linguistically diverse families to promote school, family, and community partnerships for the social, emotional, and academic welfare of every student (Bryan, 2005; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). School counselors are in the best position to promote partnerships with families due to their expertise in human development, collaboration, and systems change (Davis & Lambie, 2005). School counselors have the skills required to partner with students, school staff, and families to identify perceptions, procedures, and policies that obstruct the academic experiences of culturally diverse students (ASCA, 2004). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2005) supports school counselors as leaders, advocates, collaborative team members, and agents of systemic change. As the number of linguistically diverse students and family members increases, so does school counselors' challenge to meet the personal, social, and academic needs of linguistically diverse students and to provide services that utilize effective communication between schools and families (Davis & Lambie, 2005). Therefore, school counselors cannot meet the needs of students and families alone (Bryan & Henry, 2008). To help school children develop and learn optimally, school counselors must be prepared to partner with families and community members to meet children's developmental, cultural, linguistic, and educational needs. However, existing literature on the role of school counselors' work with linguistically diverse families is limited. Few studies have examined school counselors' beliefs and

perceptions of school–family–community partnership roles and whether or not their training prepares them for such partnerships (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004, 2007; Bryan & Griffin, 2010). School counselors' beliefs, knowledge, and skill competencies for working with linguistically diverse families should be examined to ensure all students' needs are met. It is crucial that schools and families work together for students to reach educational success.

In this article, the term *linguistically diverse* refers to those students and families who speak languages other than English. Linguistically diverse students are also classified as English Language Learners (ELL). For the purpose of this article, the following definition will be used to identify a linguistically diverse student: According to the U.S. Department of Education (2007), *linguistically diverse* refers to school children who are either non-English proficient or limited English proficient; a *linguistically diverse* student is

> (a) 3 to 21 years of age, (b) enrolled or preparing to enroll in elementary or secondary school, (c) either not born in the United States or have a native language other than English, and (d) owing to difficulty in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English, not able to meet the State's proficient level of achievement to successfully achieve in English-only classrooms or not able to participate fully in society. (p. 2)

School, Family, and Community Partnerships With Linguistically Diverse Families

School–family–community partnerships are "collaborative relationships and initiatives in which school counselors, school personnel, students, families, community members, and other stakeholders work jointly and mutually to develop and implement school and community-based prevention and intervention programs and activities to improve children's chances of academic, personal/social, career, and college success" (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2010, p. ii). Collaborative partnerships with community agencies when planning prevention and intervention programs are fundamental to assisting students and families (Keys & Lockhart, 1999). It is important to identify and make use of the resources which exist in the community (e.g., health, social services, substance abuse services, juvenile justice, recreation, service clubs, and other organizations) to strengthen school counseling programs (Thompson, 2002). School counselors serve as liaisons between the school and the community; thus, partnership practices are fundamental functions of school counseling programs (Davis, 2005). Bemak (2000) advised three ways to work with community organizations: (a) connecting students and their families to the community resources to meet their unique needs (i.e., summer and/

or enrichment programs, alternative education, employment, mental health, health care); (b) making collaborative arrangements with the community to bring in services (e.g., substance abuse counselors working with students in the school); and (c) partnering to develop and implement prevention and intervention services to be offered in or outside of the school. Such collaborations are vital to promote good public relations and support for school projects and activities that demand community participation. After reviewing 51 studies with sound methodological standards, Henderson and Mapp (2002) outlined nine recommendations on how to turn these research findings related to school–family–community partnerships into action, some of which included: (a) increasing the competence of school staff as they work with families and community members; (b) enhancing a philosophy of partnership which underlines sharing power; (c) connecting family and community partnerships to student learning; (d) working with families to build social and political relationships; and (e) building strong connections between schools and community associations. Partnerships among school stakeholders are especially relevant for school counselors who find themselves in the position to implement wide-ranging solutions to various issues (e.g., homelessness, poverty, academic failure, school alienation) that many students encounter (Bryan, 2005). School counselors reported that partnerships with multiple stakeholders often result in innovative solutions to complex student problems (Bryan & Henry, 2008).

There are concerns about whether or not school counselor training prepares school counselors for school–family–community partnerships (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004, 2007), especially with linguistically diverse families. School counselors revealed feeling more uncomfortable working with these families than with linguistically diverse students, since they believe working with linguistically diverse families requires cross-cultural understanding of family dynamics (Schwallie-Giddis et al., 2004). Schools with high percentages of racially and ethnically diverse students and with students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds had a smaller number of school counselors and had higher student-to-counselor ratios in comparison to schools with lower percentages of students of color and students experiencing economic disadvantages (Lapan, Gysbers, Cook, Bragg, & Robbins, 2006). Translators are often not available to help, which intensifies school counselors' frustrations in communication when working with these students and families (Schwallie-Giddis et al., 2004). Linguistically diverse students tend to not seek help compared to the English-speaking students (Montgomery, Roberts, & Growe, 2003). In fact, these students may need more guidance, since they often do not have family members helping them navigate the school system (McCall-Perez, 2000) due to language barriers and lack of access to academic preparation in their

home language (Schwallie-Giddis et al., 2004). Such challenges highlight the importance of school–family–community partnerships for school counselors in meeting the needs of diverse students.

To understand school professionals' attitudes regarding connections with families and community, further research is necessary to explore their perceptions (Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001). The following factors are documented in the literature as conducive to or prohibitive of school professionals' involvement in school–family–community partnerships: training in partnerships (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004, 2007; Clark & Amatea, 2004; Hiatt-Michael, 2006); caseload (McCarthy, Van Horn Kerne, Calfa, Lambert, & Guzman, 2010); collaborative school climate (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Janson, Militello, & Kosine, 2008; Hernández & Seem, 2004; Littrell, Peterson, & Sunde, 2001); principal and school support (Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, 2009; Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004; Sanders & Harvey, 2002); self-efficacy about partnerships (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, Harris, Hines, & Johnston, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002), barriers to partnerships (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007); attitudes about partnerships and families (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007); role perceptions about partnerships (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004, 2007); attitudes about school (Hernández & Seem, 2004; Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006); and commitment to advocacy (Baker et al., 2009; McCall-Perez, 2000; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007).

Specifically regarding school counselors, an examination of the existing literature revealed several school and school counselor factors that may promote or hinder school counselors' partnerships with linguistically diverse families. In an exploratory study of school counselor involvement in partnerships, collaborative school climate, confidence in their ability to build partnerships, role perceptions about partnerships, and attitudes about partnerships were significantly related to school counselors' involvement in partnerships (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). In a later study, collaborative school climate, principal expectations, self-efficacy about partnerships, role perceptions about partnerships, time constraints (or lack of time), and training related to partnerships were significantly related to school counselors' involvement in partnerships (Bryan & Griffin, 2010). In the current exploratory study of school counselor school–family–community partnerships with linguistically diverse families, we used a parsimonious model that included only variables significant in the two previous studies (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Bryan & Griffin, 2010). These variables are collaborative school climate, principal expectations, role perceptions about partnerships, self-efficacy about partnerships, time constraints,

and partnership-related training. While the variables principal expectations, time constraints, and partnership-related training are single item indicators, other independent variables were factor scores derived from the factor scales.

The following research questions were examined regarding school counselors' perceptions of their involvement in school–family–community partnerships with linguistically diverse families:

Research Question 1: Will the intended factor structure of the survey be the same as that in Bryan and Griffin's (2010) previous study using the revised School Counselor Involvement in Partnerships Survey (SCIPS)?

Research Question 2: What school and school counselor factors are related to school counselor perceived involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families (i.e., collaborative school climate, principal expectations, self-efficacy about partnerships, role perceptions about partnerships, time constraints, and partnership-related training)?

Methods

Participants

Among the 330 school counselors invited to take part in the study, 95 of them self-selected to complete the survey. Seventy-two (77%) of the participants were female, 22 (23%) were male, and one school counselor chose not to report his/her gender. While 91 school counselors (97%) classified themselves as White/European, one school counselor was African American/Black, one Hispanic/Latino, and one Asian/Pacific Islander ethnicity. The high percentage (77%) of female and White/European ethnicity (97%) of the study sample is representative of the general school counselor population, which is mostly White and female. Thirty-six school counselors (38%) reported working in an elementary school setting, 29 (31%) in a middle/junior high school setting, 40 (42%) in a high school setting, and 16 in joint appointments. Three school counselors (3%) reported working in private schools and 92 (97%) in public school settings. In the Midwestern state in which the study was conducted, for the school year 1998–1999, the total K–12 enrollment was 545,292 and by 2008–2009 decreased to 521,456. For school year 1999–2000, the total K–12 ELL enrollment was 10,310; for 2004–2005, the ELL enrollment increased to 14,834, and by 2008–2009 jumped to 20,774. While the overall student enrollment is decreasing, the ELL student enrollment is increasing.

The majority of the participants (74%) reported having received 10 or fewer total training hours in developing and implementing school–family–community partnerships, while only 19% of the participants had received 10 or more total training hours. Many (42) school counselors did not have any training for partnerships at all.

Procedures

The primary researcher obtained a list of school counselors from the state's department of education. This list contained the names and addresses of 1,326 school counselors employed in PreK–12 school settings in this Midwestern state. From this population, the study sample was selected by using a systematic one-in-four sampling method (Levy & Lemeshow, 1999), and 330 school counselors were invited to participate. The email addresses of 330 school counselors were obtained by utilizing a thorough web search (i.e., using counselor/school/district names); 95 of them (29%) agreed to participate in the study. Initially, the researchers expected to achieve a 30% response rate; however, achieving a 29% response rate was viewed as satisfactory. Web surveys often have a lower response rate in comparison to mail surveys (Couper, 2000; Solomon, 2001). Kittleson stated, "One can expect between a 25–30% response rate from an email survey when no follow-up takes place. Follow-up reminders will approximately double the response rate for email surveys" (1997, p. 196).

Participants completed the study survey via WebSurveyor. First, counselors in the sample group received a recruitment email indicating they would receive the SCIPS (Bryan & Griffin, 2010) within the next few days. A subsequent email sent to participants included an informed consent letter explaining the purpose of the survey, its voluntary nature, confidentiality, and a hyperlink to the WebSurveyor. Completing the survey verified agreement to the informed consent. Third, 10 days after the informed consent email, the researchers sent a follow-up email, since the response rate was less than 30%. The follow-up email reminded the school counselors that the survey would be closing within a week, and if they had not participated yet and planned on participating, they should do so soon. The survey took about 20 minutes; data was collected through WebSurveyor and coded in an Excel file to be analyzed by SPSS.

Instrumentation

The School Counselor Involvement in Partnerships Survey (SCIPS; Bryan, 2003; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004) was designed to examine the relationships among school factors, school counselor factors, partnership-related training, and school counselor perceived involvement in partnerships. The SCIPS was recently revised and tested (see Bryan & Griffin, 2010). After Principal Factor Analysis (PFA; also known as principal axis factor analysis) with an oblique rotation and item analyses were conducted, the revised SCIPS yielded several school and school counselor factors (i.e., collaborative school climate, principal support, role perceptions, self-efficacy about partnerships, commitment to advocacy, attitudes about partnerships, attitudes about families, and

lack of resources) with high Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients (.79 to .94) and moderate to high factor loadings (.41 to .90) on all scales. Items with low communalities less than .30 and factor loadings (pattern coefficients) less than .40 were excluded from the final survey.

We have chosen to use the revised SCIPS (Bryan & Griffin, 2010) because an extensive search yielded no other measures of counselors' perceived involvement in school–family–community partnerships. Since the revised SCIPS was not specifically developed to assess school counselors' involvement with linguistically diverse families, we modified the survey to incorporate the *Linguistically Diverse* phrase throughout as a way to remind the participants to answer questions with respect to these families in particular (e.g., Training *Linguistically Diverse* families and students to access services in the school and community—words in italics added). We also added one item to the items intended to measure perceived involvement in partnerships: "training staff to work collaboratively with linguistically diverse families." However, the researchers did not modify the demographic section or the structure of the survey.

The modified SCIPS in the current study consisted of four sections: (a) an introduction page that described the purpose of the survey and definitions of school–family–community partnership and of linguistically diverse families and students; (b) 15 demographic items (e.g., gender, race, years of experience, caseload, hours of training received in developing and implementing partnerships); (c) 17 items intended to measure school counselors' perceived involvement in school–family–community partnerships with linguistically diverse families (see Table 1) measured on a five point Likert Scale: 1 (*not at all)* to 5 (*very frequently*); (d) 52 items intended to measure the school and school counselor factors measured on a six point Likert Scale: 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), plus two additional items used to measure time constraints (i.e., "I do not have the time to get involved in partnerships") and principal expectations (i.e., "I believe that the principal expects me to be involved in partnerships"). The 52 items retained for the final factor scales in the previous study were used (Bryan & Griffin, 2010). See Bryan and Griffin (2010) for detailed information on each of the scales.

Data Analyses

Although factor analysis is generally not recommended with sample sizes under 200 (Barlett, Kotrlik, & Higgins, 2001; Gorsuch, 1983), some researchers emphasize that the harsh rules concerning adequate sample size for exploratory factor analysis have generally vanished and suggest that small sample sizes (from $N = 75$ to $N = 100$) can provide accurate analysis especially when the factor loadings are strong. In factor analysis, "strong data" refers to

"uniformly high communalities without cross loadings, plus several variables loading strongly on each factor" (Costello & Osborne, 2005, p. 4). Factor loadings above .30 are considered strong (Floyd & Widaman, 1995).

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of School Counselors' Involvement in School–Family–Community (SFC) Partnerships

School–Family–Community Partnership Involvement	*M*	*SD*
Collaborating to organize student support programs (e.g., mentoring)	3.19	1.003
Collaborating to deliver services to students (e.g., parent volunteers)	2.95	1.081
Collaborating with community agency professionals	2.98	1.109
Collaborating with local businesses/industries (e.g., job shadowing)	2.66	1.032
Collaborating with community members on committees (e.g., task force)	2.64	.956
Coordinating school–community outreach efforts	2.80	.934
Coordinating the integration of community services into the school	3.23	1.031
Coordinating programs to help school staff understand LDF	2.84	.976
Coordinating programs to help family/community understand the school	2.96	.966
Coordinating parent education workshops	2.70	1.046
Teaming with school staff, family, and/or community professionals	3.15	1.026
Teaming with SFC to increase parent involvement	3.08	.958
Teaming with school staff or a parent liaison to conduct home visits	2.84	.987
Training staff to build school–family–community partnerships	2.68	1.034
Training parents to access services in the school and community	2.77	.968
Training staff to work collaboratively with LDF	2.70	.982
Locating community resources and services for needy students	2.62	1.030

Note: Items were measured on a Likert scale: 1 (not at all), 2 (rarely), 3 (moderately), 4 (frequently), and 5 (very frequently); LDF = linguistically diverse families

Therefore, we conducted one principal factor analysis (PFA) with oblique rotation on the 17 involvement items (see Table 1) and another on the 52 items intended to measure the school and school counselor factors (see Appendix). We conducted principal factor analysis (also called principal axis factor analysis) because PFA represents the common variance in a set of items and does not require multivariate normality as opposed to Maximum Likelihood Estimation, which requires multivariate normality (Miller & Sheu, 2008). Further, we used an oblique rotation because we expected the factors to be interrelated.

Factor analysis of the survey items allowed us to determine whether the factor structure of the survey was the same as that found in Bryan and Griffin's (2010) study. Items subjected to a PFA were found to be apt for factor analysis according to the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (i.e., > .80) and the Bartlett's test of sphericity, which was significant. The criteria used to decide how many factors to retain were Kaiser's criterion (eigenvalues > 1.0), Catell's scree test, the factor loadings, and the conceptual meaning of the factor solution (Pett, Lackey, & Sullivan, 2003). Items with factor loadings > .30 on the same factor were grouped together to create factor scores (i.e., factor scores are a linear grouping of the items that load on a specific factor). Cronbach's alphas were also run for items within each factor to provide reliability information (i.e., whether the groups of items within a factor were reliably measuring that factor). Finally, a three-step hierarchical regression analysis was used to examine which factors significantly contributed to predicting the dependent variable. The school and school counselor factors were the independent variables, and the factor derived from the involvement items was the dependent variable for the regression analysis. We used a parsimonious model that included only significant variables in the two previous studies (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Bryan & Griffin, 2010).

Results

Factor Analysis

Research Question 1. Will the intended factor structure of the survey be the same as that in Bryan and Griffin's (2010) previous study using the revised School Counselor Involvement in Partnerships Survey (SCIPS)**?** After examining one, two, and three factor solutions for the involvement items, we retained one factor, *school counselor involvement in partnerships* with factor loadings ranging from .86 to .67, and a Cronbach alpha of .96.

The PFA of the 52 items intended to measure the school and school counselor factors yielded an eight-factor solution. Items "I lack the training necessary to build effective partnerships with the community for linguistically diverse families" and "I lack the training necessary to build effective partnerships with linguistically diverse families" were reverse scored before conducting the factor analysis. We dropped five items on the longest scale (see Appendix), for example, "Parents are active volunteers in this school," and "In this school, family involvement is a regular practice." Given the sample size, we felt that dropping these items reduced the number of items entered into the PFA, with the likelihood of increasing the reliability of the results. Re-running the PFA on the remaining 47 items yielded an eight-factor solution that explained 69% of the

variance in the items. Factor scores resulted in the following school variables: (a) *collaborative school climate* (6 items with pattern coefficients ranging from .69 to .37, 6.7% of the variance and $\alpha = .91$); and (b) *principal support* (9 items with pattern coefficients ranging from .91 to .70, 10.7% of the variance and $\alpha = .97$); and the following school counselor variables: (a) *self-efficacy about partnerships* (6 items with pattern coefficients ranging from .81 to -.37, 3.9% of the variance and $\alpha = .85$); (b) *role perceptions about partnerships* (6 items with pattern coefficients ranging from .67 to .47, 5.7% of the variance and $\alpha = .90$); (c) *attitudes about SFC partnerships* (6 items with pattern coefficients ranging from .91 to .74, 7.7% of the variance and $\alpha = .97$); (d) *commitment to advocacy* (5 items with pattern coefficients ranging from .86 to .35, 4.5% of the variance and $\alpha = .83$); (e) *attitudes about families* (5 items with pattern coefficients ranging from -.84 to .33, 4.1% of the variance and $\alpha = .76$); and (f) *barriers to partnerships* (2 items with pattern coefficients ranging from .60 to .57, 3.3% of the variance and $\alpha = .88$). The results of the factor analysis were very similar to the factor structure of the revised SCIPS with the same eight factors emerging. We dropped five items and another four items loaded on different factors than they did in Bryan and Griffin's study (see Appendix).

Hierarchical Regression Model

Research Question 2. What school and school counselor factors are related to school counselor perceived involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families (i.e., collaborative school climate, principal expectations, self-efficacy about partnerships, role perceptions about partnerships, time constraints, and training related to partnerships)? We wanted to use a parsimonious regression model; therefore, although the factor analysis identified eight factors, we utilized only four factors in the hierarchical regression analysis predicting school counselor perceived involvement in school–family–community partnerships with linguistically diverse families. We used predictor variables that were significant in previous studies utilizing the SCIPS (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Bryan & Griffin, 2010). Therefore, collaborative climate, self-efficacy about partnerships, role perceptions about partnerships, and attitudes about partnerships were predictor variables in the model. In addition, we entered three single item variables—principal expectations, time constraints, and training related to partnerships—into the model as predictor variables. All variables were standardized for entry into the analysis. In the first step, we entered the school variables, collaborative climate, and principal expectations. In the second step, we entered the school counselor variables, self-efficacy about partnerships, role perceptions, attitudes about partnerships, and time constraints. In the last step, we entered training related to partnerships.

In Step 1, collaborative climate and principal expectations accounted for a significant proportion of variance in school counselor perceived involvement in school–family–community partnerships with linguistically diverse families, $R^2 = .331$, $F(2, 61) = 15.091$, $p < .05$, Adjusted $R^2 = .309$. Principal expectations significantly predicted school counselor perceived involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families, $\beta = .545$, $t = 4.734$, $p = .000$. In the second step (after controlling for the school variables), self-efficacy about partnerships, role perceptions, attitudes about partnerships, and time constraints contributed significantly to explaining the variance in school counselor perceived involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families, $R^2 = .492$, $F(4, 57) = 4.533$, $p < .05$), Adjusted $R^2 = .439$. Role perceptions, $\beta = .311$, $t = 2.461$, $p = .017$, was a significant predictor of school counselor perceived involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families. Principal expectations also remained significant at Step 2, $\beta = .287$, $t = 2.270$, $p = .027$.

After controlling for the school and school counselor variables in Steps 1 and 2, training related to partnerships explained a significant proportion of the variance in school counselor perceived involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families, $R^2 = .537$, $F(1, 56) = 5.402$, $p < .05$, Adjusted $R^2 = .479$. In the final step, training was significantly related to school counselor perceived involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families, $\beta = .235$, $t = 2.324$, $p = .024$. At this step of the model, principal expectations, $\beta = .319$, $t = 2.604$, $p = .012$, and role perceptions, $\beta = .297$, $t = 2.438$, $p = .018$, were also significant predictors of school counselor perceived involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families. Interestingly, time constraints (i.e., lack of time) was significant, but positively related to school counselor perceived involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families at this step of the model, $\beta = .239$, $t = 2.493$, $p = .016$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether the factor structure of the revised SCIPS was the same as that in Bryan & Griffin's (2010) study and to examine which factors predict school counselor involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families. Given the scarcity of the research to guide school counselor practice with such families, this study supports the need for school counselors and school counselor educators to focus on four factors as they seek to build partnerships with linguistically diverse families: school principal expectations, school counselor role perceptions about partnerships, time constraints, and partnership-related training. As a result of the changing demographics of American schools, school–family–community partnerships are

a crucial topic of interest, debate, and research to meet the needs of all (i.e., minority and majority) students (Jordan et al., 2001). Rapidly changing demographics across the country require school counselors to reexamine their role and role perceptions about partnerships and preparation as they relate to working with linguistically diverse families in order to establish and facilitate effective school–family–community partnerships.

Despite the limitations of the current study's small sample size, using the revised SCIPS to assess school counselor involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families yielded a similar factor structure as that in Bryan & Griffin's (2010) study. The same eight school and school counselor factors emerged in response to the factor analysis of school counselors' responses. In this study, with the exception of four items, the survey items loaded on the same factors as those found in Bryan & Griffin's (2010) study (see Appendix for a comparison of loadings in both studies). This suggests that the factor structure may be stable across independent samples of school counselors and that the survey may be applicable to various types of partnership activities. It would be interesting to examine whether the factor structure holds for different types of mental health professionals (e.g., community or mental health counselors, school psychologists, school social workers), or various partnership activities (e.g., partnerships with homeless, migrant, low-income, or African American families).

In the current study, school principal expectations, school counselor role perceptions about partnerships, and partnership-related training were all positively related to school counselor involvement in school–family–community partnerships. School counselors are more likely to build partnerships with linguistically diverse families when their principal expects them to, when they perceive it as their role to do so, and when they have had training related to developing and implementing partnerships. These findings are corroborated by findings from previous studies (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004, 2007; Bryan & Griffin, 2010). In addition, it is interesting to note that in this study, time constraints (i.e., lack of time) is positively related to school counselor involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families, which may indicate that the time constraints school counselors face may not be a deterrent when it comes to building partnerships with these families This may be because school counselors see the importance of reaching out to families whose first language is not English, regardless of the time constraints they face due to numerous daily demands in their jobs. It is also surprising that self-efficacy about partnerships was not significantly related to school counselor perceived involvement in partnerships with linguistically diverse families given that it was a significant predictor in previous studies (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Bryan &

Griffin, 2010). These relationships warrant further investigation with a larger nationally representative study. Findings support that partnership-related training was an influential factor for various partnership behaviors and perceptions. Finally, the positive relationship between partnership-related training and school counselor perceived involvement in school–family–community partnerships with linguistically diverse families underscores the importance of infusing training on partnerships into counselor education programs and ongoing professional development.

This study supports the conceptual model based on empirical evidence to facilitate the implementation of distinctive techniques for developing partnerships with linguistically diverse families (e.g., Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007), offering vital information critical for school counselors and counselor educators on how achievement gaps can be narrowed. There are a multitude of challenges that linguistically diverse students and their families experience (e.g., limited resources for bilingual students, limited number of bilingual school staff, availability of bilingual education). In Aydın (2011), a national study with 916 school counselors, an additional factor, race and ethnicity, emerged as an important aspect related to involvement in school–family–community partnerships. School counselors who were non-White had statistically significant higher involvement scores compared to school counselors from White backgrounds. Knowing that race and ethnicity and bilingual status were negatively correlated, White school counselors who speak only English may have experienced limitations to building partnerships with linguistically diverse families. In addition, the use of translators was related to the percentage of linguistically diverse students served. School counselors more frequently utilized translators as enrollment of linguistically diverse students increased at their schools. Percentages of linguistically diverse students served were significantly correlated with free and reduced-priced lunch status and caseload; bilingual status and race and ethnicity also related to percentages of such students. Whenever school counselors had higher percentages of linguistically diverse students, they were more likely to have a higher number of students as part of their caseload, and to serve more students speaking another language, from diverse backgrounds, and receiving free or reduced-priced lunches. These findings illuminate the complex interplay of challenges that linguistically diverse students and families experience. It may be necessary for counselors and other school staff to further understand these factors related to involvement and the unique ways in which school staff and families' sociocultural factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) influence interpersonal interactions and relationships, helping or hindering partnerships with linguistically diverse families (Aydın, 2011).

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations that one must consider when interpreting the results of this study. The primary limitation is the self-selection nature of the study, which introduces sampling bias, since not everyone invited took part in the study. Also, those who decided to participate may have presented themselves in a professionally desirable way. Hence, attempts to generalize the results nationally should be done with caution. However, one must also keep in mind that the moderate sample size was viewed to be appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study.

Another limitation is that the participants were drawn only from one Midwestern state; only one state was selected due to time and monetary constraints. There may be differences among the survey participants' perceptions in comparison to the larger group of counselors' perceptions in the state and the nation. The participants were chosen via systematic sampling method; they self-selected and the sample size is small (N = 95), posing limitations for the interpretation of the findings. We acknowledge that school counselors' perceptions in one state may not be representative of all school counselors. A national sample of participants is necessary to examine the findings further. Also, one must also keep in mind that the nature of factor analysis was not confirmatory, but exploratory due to the modest sample size. Replication of the study with a larger sample size is necessary before generalizing the results.

Implications for Practice and Training

The results of this study suggested several implications for school counseling practice and training related to school–family–community partnerships. The findings indicated that school counselors' role performance concerning partnering with linguistically diverse families is influenced by school principals' expectations. School counselors should play an active role in increasing the sensitivity of their school administration on issues regarding partnership with all families. School counselors need to become proactive in educating principals as well as the public about their role and need for collaboration with other stakeholders. Counselors need to clarify their professional identity in school so that they do not have to give up their essential roles (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). Also, setting appropriate and professional boundaries with school administrators to efficiently meet the academic, career, and personal/social needs of students has been an ongoing problem for school counselors. School principals play a significant role in defining school counselors' roles in schools. However, many school administrators lack an accurate view of the role and

skills of school counselors, while making many decisions for them (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Therefore, it is necessary to educate school administrators, be proactive in programming, and set clearly defined professional boundaries to assert professional status (Paisley & McMahon, 2001).

As proactive leaders and advocates in their schools, in addition to setting clear professional boundaries, school counselors need to know how to work with boards of education, how to influence power, how to use the impact of accountability, how to use data for marketing, and how to market their school counseling program. When working with the administration and local boards of education, ASCA (2010) recommends similar strategies to show how school counseling programs affect student achievement through graphical and statistical data. Given the relationship of partnership-related training to school counselor perceived involvement in school–family–community partnerships with linguistically diverse families and the importance of collaboration and partnerships in the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards (2009), counselor educators will need to consider how to best train school counseling candidates for partnerships with linguistically diverse families. School counselors should be trained in systems theories to understand dynamics in partnerships. A systems perspective draws upon both general systems and ecological theories, which is consistent with a comprehensive school counseling program's multisystemic focus. In order to help students (i.e., promote behavior change), school counselors need to be attentive to the existing interrelated subsystems (e.g., family, peer group, the school, and the community) and their influence on students' lives (Keys & Lockhart, 1999), and remain proactive in defining their roles as collaborators and educational advocates. In addition to training school counselors in building partnerships to increase their participation, counselor education programs should also train them to be advocates for partnership programs, to formulate strategies to overcome obstacles, and to be change agents in the school system, in order to overcome the barriers that school counselors experience in their involvement with school–family–community partnership programs (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004).

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Appendix. Comparing the Pattern Coefficients from the Principal Factor Analysis of Items Retained on the Revised SCIPS in the Previous and Current Study

Items on the SCIPS	P_a	P_b
School Factors		
Collaborative School Climate (CC; 7 items)		
This school has a friendly atmosphere	.759	.418
Parents feel welcome in this school	.638	.368
This school values SFC partnerships	.598	.638
This school has a climate that is conducive to fostering partnerships with families	.563	.694
This school has a climate that is conducive to fostering partnerships with the community	.495	.678
Parents visit our school often	.412	[b]AF
In this school, there is clear communication between families and staff	.409	[b]PS
Principal Support (PS; 9 items)		
The principal supports those who lead partnership activities	.821	.836
The principal supports community involvement in the school	.819	.909
The principal supports me in building partnerships with community members	.792	.731

The principal actively networks with the community	.784	.759
The principal supports me in building partnerships with families	.763	.914
The principal is skillful at building relationships with community members	.748	.878
The principal encourages teacher participation in planning partnerships	.744	.703
The principal supports family involvement in the school	.646	.879
School Counselor Factors		
Role Perceptions (RP; 6 items)		
I enjoy building SFC partnerships	.647	.470
I think that counselor involvement in community partnerships is important	.625	.666
I am capable of developing SFC partnerships	.532	.502
I must build partnerships to advocate for students effectively	.512	.549
I find it necessary to build partnerships to obtain services for students	.512	.674
I think that counselor involvement in partnerships with families is important	.423	.602
Self-Efficacy About Partnerships (SE; 6 items)		
I lack the training necessary to build effective partnerships with the community*	.897	.814
I lack the training necessary to build effective partnerships with families*	.742	.709
I am confident in my ability to initiate SFC partnerships	-.562	-.540
I have received sufficient training to implement SFC partnerships	-.557	-.365
I have the skills to build partnership programs with communities	-.552	-.472
I have the skills to build partnership programs with families	-.480	-.588
Commitment to Advocacy (CA; 5 items)		
I feel a need to advocate for disadvantaged families	-.751	.652
I am a voice for children to ensure that the school meets their needs	-.651	.530
I would actively advocate for children even if I did not consider it part of my role	-.643	.864
I want children and parents to believe that I am their advocate	-.509	.350
I make special efforts to advocate for racially and ethnically diverse students	-.414	.431
Attitudes About Partnerships (AP; 6 items)		
SFC partnerships are important for an effective school	.852	.886
SFC partnerships help counselors/school psychologists to be more effective in meeting the needs of children	.848	.904
SFC partnerships are very important for helping children succeed	.813	.891
SFC partnerships are beneficial to the counseling/psychological services program	.764	.743
SFC partnerships provide support for the counseling program/school psychologists	.726	.778

SFC partnerships enhance the school's climate	.703	.913
Lack of Resources/Perceived Barriers (LR; 2 items)		
In this school, there are insufficient resources for building partnerships	.868	.595
In this school, there are insufficient funds for implementing partnerships	.827	.576
Attitudes About Families (AF; 6 items in this study)		
Parents become involved in their children's education when teachers invite them to	-.717	-.842
In this school, it is difficult to get families involved in partnerships*	.680	[b]LR
Parents are hard to reach*	.667	.328
Parents become involved in their children's education when counselors/ school psychologists invite them to	-.664	-.695
Parents are interested in their children's education	-.648	-.459
Parents do not know how to help their children succeed academically*	.611	[b] LR
In this school, many students face severe economic, social, and emotional needs*	.564	*d*
Parents are active volunteers in this school	-.514	*d*
In this school, family involvement is a regular practice	-.497	*d*
Parents play many different partnership roles in this school	-.485	*d*
Parents are not regularly involved in this school*	.472	*d*
[a]**Single Item Indicators Included on the SCIPS**		
Time Constraints/Lack of Time		
I do not have the time to get involved in partnerships	-	-
Principal Expectations		
I believe that the principal expects me to be involved in partnerships	-	-

Note: All items were measured on a 6-point Likert Scale: 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

P_a = pattern coefficient for previous study (Bryan & Griffin, 2010).

P_b = pattern coefficient for current study.

[a] In Bryan & Griffin's (2010) study, 52 items measuring the school and school counselor items were retained plus two additional single items used to measure time constraints and principal expectations.

[b] In the current study this item loaded on another factor indicated by the following abbreviations - AF = Attitudes About Families; PS = Principal Support; LR = Lack of Resources.

d = item dropped.

SCIPS = School Counselor Involvement in Partnerships Survey

SFC = school–family–community

*Reverse scored items

Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement With Parents, Families, and Communities in New Zealand

Carol Mutch and Sandra Collins

Abstract

The Education Review Office (ERO) conducted an external evaluation in over two hundred New Zealand schools to find out more about the engagement between schools and the parents and *whānau* (families and extended families) of their students. This paper provides some historical background and key findings from the relevant literature before expanding on the six key factors which the evaluation found were critical to enhancing and strengthening this engagement: leadership, relationships, school culture, partnerships, community networks, and communication. The paper concludes with recommendations for ways in which all parties can strengthen this vital relationship.

Key words: New Zealand, partnerships, learning, schools, engagement, parents, families, community, family involvement, students, leadership, relationships, school culture, climate, networks, communication, primary, secondary

Introduction

The Education Review Office is the agency, independent of the Ministry of Education, charged with evaluating the quality of education in New Zealand schools and early childhood centers. As well as reviewing all schools and centers on a three-year cycle, it gathers data on areas of national interest—as broad as career guidance, boys' education, and assessment practices. Many of the areas

of national interest lead to published reports, which are often supported by case studies of best practice in that topic area.

Research evidence from a wide range of studies and syntheses (e.g., Alton-Lee, 2003; Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Caspe, 2003; Cooper, 2006; Epstein et al., 2002; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2006) shows that effective partnerships between parents, families, and schools can result in better outcomes for students. The better the engagement between parents, families, and schools, the greater the positive impact on student learning. When discussing the concept of family in New Zealand, the Māori word *whānau* is often used as it gives a broader perspective of the nature and role of the family. Whānau is generally translated as "wider" or "extended" family and acknowledges that family members beyond a child's parents often have a role as a child's caregiver. It also acknowledges that there are a range of family configurations in modern day society. It is used in this article to cover both of those meanings. The use of the word or concept in this way is not limited to Māori families but is in general usage across many cultural groups.

As identified in the Education Review Office's (ERO) Statement of Intent and the Ministry of Education's schooling and early childhood strategies, parents, whānau, and communities need to take an active part in the life of schools and early childhood services and to be well informed about what constitutes high quality education and good practice. ERO evaluations have shown that not all schools have positive relationships with *all* their parents, whānau, or communities. Some parents do not feel well informed about their child's learning or about how they could work more closely with the school to benefit their child. Some schools, especially secondary schools, report that low levels of parental response hamper their efforts to consult with parents, whānau, and communities or involve them more in school life.

In 2007, ERO undertook an evaluation to investigate three areas:

- The extent to which school practices contributed to meaningful and respectful partnerships with parents, whānau, and communities;
- The benefits to, and the challenges facing, these partnerships; and
- How partnerships could be strengthened.

In 2008, ERO published three reports based on this evaluation—*Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau, and Communities* (ERO, 2008a); *Partners in Learning: Good Practice* (ERO, 2008b); and *Partners in Learning: Parent Voices* (ERO, 2008c).

This article draws on those reports. The first part outlines the historical background to the current situation, themes from relevant research, and the methodology used in the ERO evaluations. The second part focuses on the

findings of the evaluations, including examples of how some schools were overcoming challenges and successfully engaging their parents, whānau, and communities in ways that supported the functioning of the school and the learning of its students.

The History and Current Status of Parental Engagement in Schooling in New Zealand

While schools and families have always been informal collaborators in the education of young people, as both groups have had the interests of these learners at heart, the history of parental engagement in schooling in New Zealand has also included a range of more formal collaborations. This section discusses in more depth three ways that parents, whānau, and schools in New Zealand have interacted for the benefit of students' overall educational experiences. The first is for decision-making purposes, the second is through participation in and collaboration towards common goals, and the third for sharing information. While these categories tend to overlap in some instances, the activities they contain are distinct and varied in nature, depending on whether they are formally or informally organized, voluntary or paid, require vetting or training, and arise spontaneously or are mandated by government.

The Role of Parents and Whānau in School Administration and Decision-Making

The history of the administration of schooling in New Zealand has shown tensions between central, regional, and local control over decision-making in schools. There has always been a willingness to engage parents and communities at each level but with varying degrees of success. The 1877 Education Act established the first national system of "free, compulsory, and secular" primary education. Structurally, twelve regional education boards reported to the Department of Education. School-based decision-making was undertaken by school committees, elected by ballot from local householders. In reality, the power became entrenched in the hands of the education boards and, by the early 1900s, school committees were reduced to making decisions about the maintenance of school property. With the establishment of wider access to secondary schooling, a different system of school-based decision-making evolved at this level as individual secondary schools or school districts set up boards of governors. A move to dissolve education boards in the 1930s was overturned, and better relationships between education boards and the Department of Education strengthened the position of boards through the middle of the 20th century. Economic downturn and social agitation in the 1970s was to lead to

the biggest upheaval in the New Zealand education system since its inception. Riding on a wave of international economic reform, the Labour Government of the 1980s set about restructuring the economy and some of its more expensive operations, including the education system. The regional education boards were abolished, the Department of Education was reduced in size to a smaller, more policy-focused Ministry of Education, and schools were given more decision-making autonomy through the election of individual boards of trustees. Reducing expenditure was not the only motive for change. The desire to extend parental choice, to increase home–school partnerships, and to improve educational outcomes for Māori and for students from low-income families were also cited as reasons.

A Board of Trustees including the principal, a teacher representative, elected parents or community members, and a student (in the case of secondary schools), would be responsible for the governance of the school, that is, making decisions about operational matters, while the principal and his/her team of staff would make management, educational, and professional decisions. It took some time for the roles to be clearly defined and ways of collaborating to become embedded. The *National Education Guidelines* (NEGs) and the *National Administration Guidelines* (NAGs), issued in 1993, helped clarify the goals and purposes of each partner. The importance of clear and accurate communication and consultation with parents, whānau, and communities became a mandated expectation of schools.

Participation and Collaboration by Parents, Whānau, and Communities in School Life

Recognition of the need for schools, parents, whānau, and their communities to work together on common goals has been a strong feature of the New Zealand schooling system. The first formal "home and school" association was formed in 1906. Today a range of similar groups continues to exist under the umbrella of the New Zealand Parent Teacher Association (NZPTA). Such organizations play a role in organizing parental involvement in schools from fundraising drives to uniform sales, information evenings, and working bees. They also take an advocacy role, whether it is keeping parents informed of relevant educational issues or lobbying on local and national issues.

Fundraising is one of the shared activities undertaken by schools and their communities. Not only does this provide funds for specific projects, it helps build a shared identity and sense of purpose. Teachers and parents collaborate for the good of the school and the ultimate benefit of their students.

Parent volunteers play a major role in many aspects of school life. On the educational side, they may act as trained or untrained teacher-aides supporting

teachers, groups, or individual students as required. Class trips, school camps, and other "education outside the classroom" activities require parent and whānau participation to meet health and safety compliance and adult–student ratios. Parents with particular areas of expertise or access to relevant sites can support activities as wide-ranging as enrichment programs or transition-to-work experiences. Schools would be unable to offer the depth and variety of sporting, cultural, and club activities without the long-term commitment of many parent, whānau, or community volunteers.

With increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in New Zealand schools, community links need to be fostered with local *iwi* (tribal groups), Pacific groups, minority language speakers, migrant, and refugee communities. Many schools use parents, whānau, or community groups to help with community consultation, induction of new students, and the translation of school documents and newsletters.

There are many other reasons for schools and parents and whānau to work towards common goals. Students with special learning or behavioral needs, non-attending or disengaged students, students at risk, or students with differing abilities all benefit from enhanced collaboration between schools and parents—and, indeed, other groups and agencies within the wider community. Different school settings (for example, isolated, rural, lower decile, inner city, multicultural, or newly constituted schools) or those with different philosophies (special character, Māori-medium, or alternative schools) also provide opportunities and challenges in ensuring there is shared understanding and collaboration between all members of the school community for the benefit of all students.

Many initiatives have been undertaken to encourage and sustain the involvement of parents, whānau, and communities in schools. Engagement with parents and whānau is one of the Ministry of Education's priorities across the sectors. To this end, they have implemented a range of initiatives, for example, the Team Up program which uses strategies to increase meaningful partnerships between schools and parents and whānau. *Te Kauhua*, *Te Kotahitanga*, *Te Mana Korero* and *Te Hiringa i te Mahara* are examples of projects that work with whānau and communities to improve the achievement of Māori students.[1] Evaluations of these projects have shown that productive partnerships are resulting in better attendance, behavior, and academic results (see, e.g., Hohepa & Jenkins, 2004). *The Home-School Partnership* strategy and the *Pacific Island School Community Parent Liaison Project* focus on schools with significant Pacific populations. Parents whose first language is other than English are supported by the *Families Learning Together* booklets published in nine different languages. *Better Outcomes for Children* aims to raise achievement and improve

services for children who need special assistance through Group Special Education. Developmental programs such as *Family Start* and *Parents as First Teachers* aim to give parents confidence in supporting their children's learning in the early years. *The Parent Mentoring Initiative* is a project that focuses on building partnerships between teachers and parents, parents and students, and schools and communities. The schools in this project all made progress in reframing home–school relationships and in enhancing parent involvement, collaboration, and teamwork (Gorinski, 2005).

Not all initiatives are initiated by the Ministry of Education. Schools or regions themselves set up projects to enhance student achievement or become involved in established projects; there are many examples of these, especially in areas where schools have struggled with student achievement, engagement, and retention. Other agencies or groups also play their part, for example, the NZPTA[2] which has implemented the *Give Me 5* campaign to inform parents how they can become more involved in their children's learning and the life of the school. The School Trustees Association (NZSTA)[3] also works to improve communication with and participation by parents and whānau in school activities.

Information Sharing Between Schools and Parents, Whānau, and Communities

Traditionally, information sharing between schools and parents and whānau has been a one-way flow from schools as they report on student progress, school business, or changes to policy and curriculum. In more recent times, there has been recognition of the importance of reciprocal two-way communication to enhance the understanding of student backgrounds and learning needs; to consult with parents, whānau, and communities on school priorities; and to engage in collaborative goal setting. The changes resulting from the reforms and more recent developments have provided ample opportunity for schools and their communities to engage in fruitful dialogue, whether designing school charters and logos in the 1990s or contributing to school-based and national curriculum priorities in the curriculum consultation rounds in the 2000s.

Schools are still charged with reporting on student progress through the 2001 Education Standards Act and the introduction of clearer planning and reporting targets. In many schools, reporting on student achievement has become more formative and participatory. Schools and centers use strategies such as learning stories, electronic portfolios, school open days, or three-way teacher–parent–student conferences to enhance more formal summative reporting. Such moves have required a greater understanding of learning strategies and assessment practices. Recording and reporting has moved beyond focusing just on individual students to reporting on school-wide patterns and trends and

making better use of data to plan for student learning needs, teaching strategies and resources, and relevant teacher professional development. Schools are also required to gather and interpret data relating to Māori and Pacific student achievement and other determined priorities as requested by agencies such as the Ministry of Education or Education Review Office.

Although throughout New Zealand's history there have been sporadic opportunities for parents, whānau, and communities to express their views on education, such as to the Currie Commission in the 1960s, consultation is now a regular part of everyday school life. Schools conduct surveys, hold focus group interviews, attend *hui* (meetings) on *marae* (tribal meeting places), and canvass opinion from a wide range of stakeholders including, but often going beyond, their immediate communities. Other stakeholders might include the business community, local government, teacher unions, and related educational and social agencies. At a national level, several rounds of consultation usually accompany policy changes. The 1987 curriculum review set this expectation in place and, recently, a further review and subsequent consultation rounds gathered wide-ranging feedback before producing the latest national curriculum.

Technological advances have enabled a swifter flow of communication between schools and homes. Schools have developed websites that provide detailed information and visual representations of a wide range of activities. Schools use their websites for publicity and recruitment; to inform parents and whānau of school policies, events, or achievements; for family and community news; or to engage parent or whānau opinion. Newsletters can be emailed to home computers, and information can be returned to schools, depending on the resources or policies a school has in place. A developing trend is for parents to be able to log on to secure websites to access student scores and information.

Research Context

Literature Review

It can be seen that positive relationships between schools, parents, whānau, and communities have a high priority in both policy and practice in New Zealand. The impact of these relationships both on school improvement and student achievement has also been a strong focus of research. Some key findings that are relevant to this project from both New Zealand and overseas research are briefly outlined below.

Research shows that the majority of parents care about their children's education and, with encouragement, will enter into productive partnerships with schools to lift achievement levels (Caspe, 2003; Cooper, 2006; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein et al., 2002; ERO, 2007b, 2008a; Gorinski &

Fraser, 2006). Effective partnerships between parents, whānau, communities, and schools lead to improved educational, social, and behavioral outcomes (Alton-Lee, 2003; Biddulph et al., 2003; Caspe, 2003; Cooper, 2006; de Bonnaire, Fryer, & Simpson-Edwards, 2005a, 2005b; Epstein et al., 2002; ERO, 2007a, 2007b, 2008d, 2008e; Gorinski, 2005; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Hohepa & Jenkins, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2006; Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004). Programs that engage parents and whānau in supporting learning at home are linked to higher student achievement (Biddulph et al., 2003; Caspe, 2003; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; ERO, 2008e; Fullarton, 2002; Redding et al., 2004).

The most effective partnerships are those in which all parties construct and share common visions and goals (Bevan-Brown, 2003; Biddulph et al., 2003; Caspe, 2003; Cooper, 2006; de Bonnaire et al., 2005a, 2005b; ERO, 2007b; Fischer & O'Neill, 2007; Redding et al., 2004). Where parents, whānau, and communities are fully engaged, schools are more likely to be effectively managed (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; ERO, 2007b; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendich, 1999).

Ethnicity, culture, home language, home resources, and maternal education levels are all factors that are linked to student achievement (Epstein et al., 2002; Fullarton, 2002; Gorinski, 2005; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Parents from economically disadvantaged and/or ethnic minority groups are the least likely to become involved in school activities (Gorinski, 2005; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Humpage, 1998; Izzo et al., 1999). Parents with low involvement are typically from single-parent or large family settings, have low educational attainment, have high mobility rates, lack time and resources, may be young parents, and are most often male (Gorinski, 2005; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Hipkins, 2004; Humpage, 1998; Izzo et al., 1999).

Parents and whānau initially become involved in activities that directly affect their own children but can be drawn into wider school activities (Gorinski, 2005; ERO, 2008d; Marjoribanks, 2002; Ramsay, Hawk, Harold, Marriot, & Poskitt, 1993). The extent to which parents become involved is influenced by their own schooling experiences and their perception of the school's culture and willingness to accept their contributions nonjudgementally (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Humpage, 1998; Izzo et al., 1999; Ramsay et al., 1993). Parental involvement in school activities lessens as students progress through the system with formal parent–teacher interviews/conferences still the main form of contact between parents and secondary schools (Beothel, 2004; Ball, 1998; ERO, 2007a; Hipkins, 2004; Wylie, 1999).

School leadership is a strong factor in enabling schools to develop a strong cohesive vision which is central to parent–school partnerships (ERO, 2007a, 2008d, 2008e). Schools that set goals that focus on student achievement and regularly share student data with students, parents, and the wider community are more successful in achieving their goals (Alton-Lee, 2003; ERO, 2007c). Teachers and parents who set high but attainable expectations in a supportive, reflective learning environment increase student success, regardless of students' socioeconomic status or ethnicity (Alton-Lee, 2003; de Bonnaire et al., 2005a, 2005b; ERO, 2007b, 2008a).

Whānau and communities that engage in and support children's learning profoundly shape children's aspirations and expectations (Bevan-Brown, 2003; Cooper, 2006; de Bonnaire et al., 2005a, 2005b; ERO, 2007d, 2008a; Hohepa & Jenkins, 2004; Marjoribanks, 2002). Whānau and communities with strong social networks who make use of community facilities and social agencies increase children's chances of success (Biddulph et al., 2003; ERO, 2007a, 2008e). Parental and whānau involvement also strengthens adult and family literacy and ongoing participation in education and work (Ball, 1998; Ministry of Education, 2006).

Thus, it can be seen how important it is for schools to build relationships with the parents and whānau of their students and for parents, whānau, and communities to engage in the activities of their local schools. Not only does it influence student performance and well-being, it enhances family and community cohesiveness and identity.

Contextual Factors

However, many historical, cultural, social, educational, and political factors influence the ability of schools to develop sound relationships with their communities and vice versa. Historically, parental, whānau, and community involvement in schools has been well embedded in the New Zealand education system, and a broad range of contributions has been made to school life and student learning by parent volunteers, parent–teacher organizations, and community groups. The focus of these contributions has altered over time as the role of parents, whānau, and communities in school administration and decision-making has increased.

Culturally, commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi and the rights of Māori, increasing multiculturalism, and changes in migration patterns have all influenced the type and manner of school engagement. One factor, for example, is the increasing number of parents whose own schooling experiences were outside the New Zealand system.

Socially, changes in family structures; the impacts of social and economic reforms; dislocation from parent, whānau, and community support; and changes in communication due to technological advances have all impacted the ways schools interact with their communities. These days, for example, not all students live in the community in which their school is located.

Educationally, changes to curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment practices have required schools to communicate in different ways and about things that are not always familiar to parents. In order for the best decisions to be made about students' learning needs, there needs to be a reciprocal flow of information between schools and parents and whānau. As a result of the education reforms, parents and whānau have also developed the expectation of having a strong voice in both the education system as a whole and the school that their child attends.

Finally, the political environment and resulting legislative changes impact the relationships between schools and parents and whānau. The role of Boards of Trustees and their obligations as outlined in the *National Education Guidelines*, for example, mandate particular consultation and reporting activities.

As the practice in New Zealand shows, there is a commitment to increasing school–parent/whānau/community partnerships, and there have been many attempts to foster this; however, ERO evaluations and other research findings highlight that there is still some way to go to get consistent, fruitful engagement across the full range of school and community settings.

The Engaging With Parents, Whānau, and Communities Project

Methodology

When this project was conceived, the term "engagement" was defined as meaningful, respectful partnerships between families and schools that focused on improving the educational experiences and successes for the child. This included regular, meaningful contact between schools and their students' parents and whānau resulting in increased parental participation in school activities, enhanced well-being of students, and improved student learning and achievement. Thus, the overarching evaluation question was: To what extent do school practices contribute to meaningful, respectful partnerships with parents, whānau, and the wider school community that have a positive impact on student learning, achievement, and well-being?

In order to answer this question, 233 schools undergoing their regular review cycles in the chosen time period were used as evaluation sites. These schools (180 primary; 53 secondary) represented a mixture of school types and sizes, both urban and rural, and ranged across the decile (socioeconomic) levels.

Four main data gathering strategies were used. The first revolved around using the school as a data source. This included meetings with school personnel, parents, and students; in-class observations; and analysis of school documentation. Over 4,000 parents contributed to school-based meetings or individual face-to-face, phone, or email interviews. The second strategy employed written questionnaires, open to all parents, in both English and *te reo Māori* (the Māori language), available electronically or in hard copy. The 500 parents who completed the questionnaire provided information on their experiences of involvement in school activities and their children's learning; the usefulness, timeliness, and value of information provided to them by the school; and the barriers they perceived to improved parental involvement in their school. In order to tap into groups that are traditionally harder to access, a third strategy of facilitated discussion groups was used; 235 parents from Māori, Pacific, special needs, refugee, migrant, remote, and/or transient families attended 34 discussion groups. The final strategy was to look in more depth at schools that were engaging successfully with their communities. From an initial identification of 52 schools, eight were selected as best practice case studies.

Findings

The evaluation found that it was not just what the school *did* but the spirit in which it was done that led to successful engagement. The overall conclusions, which resonate with many of the themes in the literature, (such as shared values and beliefs, mutual respect, collaborative approaches, and effective communication) were summarized as:

> Engagement between schools and parents, whānau, and communities is strongly influenced by the extent to which school personnel and parents believe in and value partnerships that share responsibility for children's learning and well-being. Developing common understanding and expectations of the benefits of engagement and the challenges involved is integral to successful partnerships.
>
> Engagement worked well when schools had a commitment to working collaboratively with parents, whānau, and communities. Collaborative practices underpinned the development of mutually respectful relationships. Partnerships were developed and extended in a climate of openness and trust and supported by appropriate communication strategies. (ERO, 2008a, p. 14)

The evaluation isolated six factors that are crucial to effective engagement. These are: leadership, relationships, school culture, partnerships, community networks, and communication.

Leadership

The executive summary (ERO, 2008a, p.1) states:

> Leadership is crucial in creating meaningful and respectful partnerships. Engagement between schools and their communities works well when there is a vision and commitment from school leaders to working in partnership with all parents.

While the term "leadership" can encompass a range of positions in a school community, the ERO evaluation found that it was most often the principal's leadership that had the greatest impact on how the school engaged with its parents, whānau, and communities. Here is a description from the best practice report of one principal from a lower decile urban secondary school:

> The knowledgeable, committed principal continues to lead by example as he effectively manages a range of initiatives designed to promote and maximise learning outcomes. A feature of his leadership is his ability to foster trusting relationships within the school community. The senior management team is united in support for the school vision and actively promote and model agreed expectations. Leadership roles are available at all levels of the school, with student, staff, and parents having meaningful opportunities to participate in decision making. (ERO, 2008b, p. 19)

The factors that were associated with a successful principal's engagement echo those in the description above. They included the valuing of respectful communication and engagement, prioritizing engagement as part of the school's strategic vision and goals, promoting a collaborative and consultative approach to leadership, and providing opportunities for others to take on leadership roles.

In order to achieve a shared set of values, schools needed to undertake broad consultation, engage in culturally appropriate ways, and put effort into drawing in traditionally reticent families and groups. The evaluation found that schools with the most diverse communities had some of the most successful practices for engaging families:

> These schools engaged with parents, whānau, and families in ways that bridged cultural, language, and socioeconomic diversity. The strategies they used built relationships, broke down barriers, and gave parents the confidence to become involved in their child's learning. (ERO, 2008a, p. 3)

It was important for schools to take account of parents' aspirations for their children and incorporate these into their strategic planning. Schools needed to actively plan to increase engagement through explicit activities. A primary school parent describes one activity, and a secondary school parent another:

I went to a reading evening held by the school. We were shown some good skills and able to buy some learning games—a very friendly, welcoming family-oriented school. From the first day my child started school visits, all the children knew her name and said hello before we even got to the classroom.

Parents of third formers are invited to a picnic tea followed by a chance to meet each of their child's teachers in an informal way in the classroom. This happens early in the year and avoids the situation of getting to mid-year interviews not knowing who the teacher is. (ERO, 2008a, p. 26)

Relationships

Successful schools invested time and energy in providing a range of interactive opportunities to build relationships. This included recruiting suitable staff, identifying where the school was not engaging with particular families or groups well, and providing staff with professional learning to enhance their skills in engaging with different communities.

Transition-to-school processes were pivotal in establishing positive relationships. As discussed in the best practice report:

In some schools, the early development of relationships occurred through open days, visits to contributing schools, performances, and community events. Meeting teachers informally at school events, activities, and sports provided opportunities for parents to talk, ask questions, and connect with their children's school lives. Parents enjoyed being involved in non-threatening, social, and student-focused activities, making it easier for relationships to be developed and nurtured. (ERO, 2008b; p. 20)

An example of how one particular urban primary school develops relationships is described below:

Opportunities for parents to be involved socially with the school include coffee mornings held for an hour once a month. The school supports this activity by having activities for the younger children while parents are involved in discussions. Parents come from a wide area. Parents network with each other, getting to know other parents of children in their class in an informal setting. This is particularly good for immigrant parents who are new to the area. (ERO, 2008b, p. 21)

School Culture

The evaluation found that the key factors associated with a positive school culture were a genuine openness to parent and community involvement, accessibility of school personnel, and practices that were inclusive of diversity. Two

parents outline how this openness, approachability, and respect for diversity is played out in practice:

> Our child's teacher is very approachable and knows him well. It is easy to converse over a wide range of topics. His interest in him as a whole person helps identify positive ways to engage him in his learning.
>
> Last term the junior school explored each child's ancestry, history, and culture. The children brought family treasures to school. This created a lot of discussion in our family. Our daughter wrote a story about our family culture. This was displayed on the "excellent work" board outside the school—she was very proud. (ERO, 2008a, p. 26)

Diverse community groups were asked about the factors that enabled them to feel confident in participating in school life. They identified the relationship with their child's teachers as the key factor. When teachers displayed a willingness to learn about the child's background and showed an interest in the child's particular needs and interests, parents became more confident in becoming engaged with the school. As one Māori parent explained, "I used to walk my children to the gate, but now I come in."

Where there were cultural or language differences, a trusted interpreter, liaison person, or mentor helped overcome barriers to involvement. A group of refugee parents explained their difficulties:

> Parents are unsure what schools expect; "there a big gap." It's often very difficult for parents to know who is the right person for them to talk to at a school. It's especially confusing for parents if they have children of different ages and at different schools as each school has different procedures and expectations. (ERO, 2008c, p. 17)

Relationships

In schools where there was positive engagement, there was a clear expectation that parents and the school worked in partnership to benefit all aspects of a child's development. Parents appreciated timely information about students' learning and achievement and being involved in decisions that might affect their child's learning and well-being. Here two parents of Year 1 students at two different schools outline their very different experiences:

> I find the portfolios very helpful so I can see how well he did with each topic. I can then help revise topics that have been difficult for him. Just me showing an interest in what he's been doing at school encourages him to talk and practice things that he really enjoys. (ERO, 2008a, p. 25)

> My child has been attending school since November last year (six months), and I have not received any information regarding my child's progress. I have tried approaching teachers, but I just get very brief comments, for example, "she is going good." Other than that I regularly look through her exercise books to see her progress. So I am now at the point that I don't hear anything, so I have to assume she is going well. (ERO, 2008a, p. 43)

Celebrations of student success were important in increasing student pride and motivation especially when parents and whānau were involved. Such celebrations included "achievement breakfasts, award ceremonies, cultural events and performances, festivals of learning, whānau hui, class presentations, art exhibitions, curriculum evenings, and daily communication books" (ERO, 2008a p. 18). Restorative justice (an approach to dealing with serious behavioral issues) was also mentioned as an example of a process that reflected the ideals of a real partnership where the parties worked together for a solution without attributing blame.

Community Networks

Schools that knew their communities well were able to strengthen links with community groups and agencies to benefit students and their families. This was particularly important for building the confidence of parents whose own schooling had not been a positive experience. Activities ranged from seeking the perspectives of their communities to networking with key agencies to promoting formal networks. Here is an example from a low decile rural primary school:

> At this school, consultation and feedback to the community about school matters are ongoing. At fortnightly marae hui, the principal shares information, and questions from the community are responded to directly. Teachers are responsive to requests and concerns from parents. The strong links with local kaumatua are a key factor in nurturing the well-being of students and their sense of who they are as young Māori learners. As a result of community cooperation, students readily access comprehensive medical services at a local clinic and through regular school visits from health professionals. (ERO, 2008b, p. 27)

Communication

Good communication strategies and practices play an important part in developing and maintaining relationships. Effective communication needs to be personalized and regular. Parents want honest and easy-to-understand

information, sooner rather than later, that involves them in decision making, is culturally inclusive, and opens up opportunities for them to support their child's learning and development. Here parents talk of differing experiences:

> My son was placed in a reading recovery programme without my knowledge last year. A letter came home to inform me of the placement several weeks after he had started the program. I felt left out of the loop about this. (ERO, 2008a, p. 41)

> We had some concerns with our child's difficulty comprehending what he was reading. His teacher gave us some wonderful suggestions on what type of questions to ask to encourage him to take in what he reads. This has really helped him improve to the level he is at now. This was a very positive result. (ERO, 2008a, p. 26)

Homework was a topic that was commonly raised. Parents expected homework to be meaningful, marked promptly, and to contribute to their child's learning. They saw it as a way to support their child to develop an appropriate work ethic. Homework was of concern to many of the parents who attended the discussion groups, particularly Pacific, refugee, and migrant forums—for some it was their inability to help and for others it was dissatisfaction with the amount of homework given. A parent of a transient family explains:

> I can help with homework when I know what is expected of my child and me. It helps me to know about what my child is learning and where they are at, and others in the family can get involved and help. (ERO, 2008a, p. 26)

Conclusion

Thus, the six key factors critical to enhancing and strengthening engagement as discussed in this article are school leadership, school–parent/whānau/community relationships, school culture, learning partnerships, strengthened community networks, and effective communication. They were summarized in the introduction to the best practice report (ERO, 2008b, p. 1) and are provided here in table form (Table 1) as a concise synthesis of the key findings from this evaluation.

Table 1. Key Factors Critical to Strengthening School–Parent Relationships

Leadership: Engagement between schools and their communities works well when there is vision and commitment from school leaders to working in partnership with all parents.
Relationships: Mutual trust and respect are critical to relationships in which staff and parents share responsibility for children's learning and well-being.
School Culture: A school's culture reflects the values and attributes that underpin home–school relationships. Schools that are committed to being inclusive enable all parents to be actively involved in decisions affecting their child and respond to parents' concerns and questions promptly.
Partnerships: Learning partnerships strengthen parents' understanding and involvement in their child's education. Parents feel that their contributions are valued. Effective learning partnerships have positive impacts on student outcomes.
Community Networks: Schools are an integral part of their communities. Parents and community expertise contributes to school programs and activities. Networks are built through effective consultation, and there is a shared understanding about priorities for student achievement.
Communication: Timely, useful, and easily understood communication with parents provides opportunities for exchange of information, appropriate for those involved. Barriers to effective communication are actively identified and understood.

As well as the benefit to students, the evaluation was able to determine the benefit to parents, whānau, and communities of well-developed partnerships. These included:

- Being well informed about their child's learning and about the curriculum, assessment, and teaching programs;
- Having shared expectations for learning and achievement;
- Strengthening relationships with their children and changing their conversations about learning at home;
- Enjoying and celebrating their children's talents and skills;
- Feeling that they were making a valuable contribution to their children's learning and to the school;
- Being more confident about coming into the school and approaching the child's teacher;
- Having opportunities to meet other parents and talking together in a trusting and safe environment;
- Receiving support in their role as parents, families, and whānau; and
- Having a sense of pride and achievement in their child. (ERO 2008a, p. 47)

Where partnerships between schools and the parents, whānau, and communities of their students were working well there was a positive tone to the school and learning time was maximized. The strategic direction of the school benefited from explicit parent, whānau, and community input. There was strong support for learning programs—particularly activities outside the classroom—from parents and whānau, and the school was visible in and connected to the wider community. Teachers felt supported and appreciated, and relationships with a variety of individuals, groups, and organizations were strengthened.

Where the partnerships needed strengthening, parents suggested that schools could start by:

- Improving the timeliness and regularity of feedback and information, especially in relation to children's progress and achievement;
- Providing more opportunities for participation and involvement;
- Supporting and promoting the culture of students through dance, music, sports, and language programs and activities;
- Providing information about how to become involved in the school;
- Offering sufficient time for interviews/conferences;
- Reporting on children's progress in language that can be easily understood;
- Being open and listening to parents' views;
- Finding ways for parents, families, and whānau to lead activities and events, especially for other parents and their children; and
- Having high expectations for all children.

These findings have implications at many levels. At the policy or system level, it is important that rhetoric about family and community engagement is supported by funding to trial programs with potential or to further implement those with successful track records. Resources and personnel are needed to build these important understandings, skills, strategies, and cultural sensitivities into principal preparation programs, teacher professional development, and community relationship-building initiatives. At the community level, schools, education agencies, community organizations, and various configurations of parent/whānau groupings need the time, space, and appropriate support to shape their commitment to genuine partnership into practical and sustainable practices. At the individual family/whānau to school level, greater recognition and valuing of the part that each has to play in this important exercise of nurturing the aspirations and talents of the next generation needs also to be supported by practical, culturally appropriate, effective strategies for reciprocal engagement.

At the time of conducting this evaluation, the schools involved were also undergoing their regular ERO reviews. In these reviews, three quarters of the

individual school reports included recommendations for improving engagement. Some recommendations focused on improving learning partnerships, some focused on improving communication, and others on catering to the diverse nature of their communities, especially Māori and Pacific, or to engage with other groups that might not always be actively involved in school life. This shows that there is still some way to go for partnerships between schools and their parents and whānau to be as strong as possible and for all members of the school's community to become actively engaged in school life. By participating in this national study, however, these 233 schools and their communities have allowed us to gain insights into how to make these relationships more effective in a manner that will lead to enhanced student learning and strengthened community cohesiveness.

Endnotes

[1]The programs mentioned here can be found on various Ministry websites: www.minedu.govt.nz; http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/; www.tki.org.nz

[2]See www.nzpta.org.nz

[3]See www.nzsta.org.nz

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Authors' Note: The Education Review Office conducts individual school, *kura* (Māori-medium schools), and early childhood reviews in all state-funded pre-tertiary institutions. Review Officers are also asked to gather data to contribute to broader evaluations on topics of national interest. Many Review Officers would have contributed to the data gathering for the reports that were summarized for this article, and the authors would like to thank them for their contributions and the Education Review Office for its support.

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A Historic Model for Teaching and Learning Perspectives

Joy M. Thomas

Key Words: schools, leadership, family, parents, community, partnerships, involvement, engagement, authentic, diverse families, administrators, principals

School Leadership for Authentic Family and Community Partnerships: Research Perspectives for Transforming Practice makes an important contribution to understanding how social justice leadership requires broader understanding of the intricacy of schools and the blueprint needed for fair and impartial improvement. The editor *of School Leadership for Authentic Family and Community Partnerships*, Susan Auerbach, has made a substantial contribution in the area of parent/family engagement in education, school–community partnerships, and leadership for partnerships. She has compiled a volume that examines the role of educational leaders in promoting partnerships as a dimension of leadership for social justice. The book proposes a model for addressing tensions embedded in home–school relations and leading schools toward more authentic relationships with stakeholders.

Auerbach defines the term authentic partnerships in this book as "respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups that value relationship building, dialogue across difference, and sharing power in pursuit of common purpose in socially just, democratic schools" (p. 5). Auerbach makes it clear in the opening chapter of this book that authentic partnerships are most urgently needed in low-income communities of color that have been poorly served by urban schools and the shrinking social safety net. In most of the chapters, the terms authentic partnerships, leadership for social justice, and family–community engagement are used interchangeably. The parents represented in this book possess various backgrounds which vary by race, class,

culture, and power. As a result, multiple chapters illustrate a unique process by which they connect in their respective school communities. The book reveals practices in schools and communities that have traditionally marginalized low-income parents, but this book presents noteworthy perspectives and research studies that describe low-income parents as actively involved members of school communities. Distinctively, the book offers practices and thoughts that can be utilized by teachers, school leaders, and communities to overcome socioeconomic and cultural barriers in schools in the process assisting parents and shaping them to be more effective and efficient leaders and advocates.

Many school districts are dealing with high populations of low-income students. The National School Lunch Program, operated by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is a federally assisted meal program operating in over 101,000 public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. To qualify for free or reduced lunch meals, children from families with incomes at or below 130% of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Additionally, according to USDA reports, those with incomes between 130%–185% of the poverty level are eligible for reduced priced meals, for which students can be charged no more than 40 cents. For fiscal year 2010, more than 31.7 million children got their lunch each day through the National School Lunch Program (USDA, 2011).

The need to examine the current realities of low-income parents and authentic school–family partnerships is of great importance. As Auerbach and her colleagues point out, "low-income parents and parents of color are keenly sensitive to signs of disrespect and rebuff. They feel dismissed and devalued by overly bureaucratic procedures; front office staff who ignore them or do not speak their language; teachers who expect little of their children; parenting classes that aim to 'fix' their childrearing; governance councils that expect rubber-stamp approval; and other oppressive practices" (p. 34). *School Leadership for Authentic Family and Community Partnerships* describes the multiple dimensions of low-income parents and parents of color in urban school settings who are attempting to be actively engaged in their children's education and offers useful tools for educators to greatly enhance current partnerships.

The editor, Susan Auerbach, has selected highly qualified scholars and researchers who have dedicated their careers to understanding educational leadership, family engagement, school–community partnerships, and education for social justice. The authors, including doctoral students, offer a mix of empirical, conceptual, and reflective chapters with research representing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches in urban, suburban, and rural schools. This well organized 262-page book is divided into four sections. Part One includes three chapters that focus on leadership for partnership, ending

with a rationale for more authentic school–family–community connections. Part Two has three chapters which highlight perspectives on diversity and leading partnerships across differences in race, class, culture, and ability/disability. Part Three includes four chapters which examine the dynamics of developing policy and programs in varied contexts in the United States and Canada. Part Four has four chapters which cover controversial contexts for leadership for partnerships in community organizing initiatives, charter schools, and district-level reform initiatives.

Part One: Introduction and Leadership for Partnerships: Delineating the Field

Chapter 1 is the Introduction and is written by the editor, Susan Auerbach. It sets the context for the book and provides the framework that serves as the lens for examining issues within the field of leadership for authentic partnerships. The editor explains why it is very important to focus on this area, because "administrators have tended to buffet the school from outside influence, but in the past 25 years they have been expected to serve as bridges to, and most recently, partners with the community" (p. 3). Auerbach explains that there have been repeated calls for schools to pursue meaningful partnerships with families and community groups and for school leaders to take the initiative in such efforts. A thorough review of the school leadership and school partnership literature is included. In describing the concept of involving families in partnerships, terms like educational leadership, parent participation, school–community partnerships, and parent collaboration each carry associations and presumptions about how the position of parents and schools are defined.

Part One, "Leadership for Partnerships," contains two more chapters. Chapter 2 by Carolyn Riehl focuses on school–family–community partnerships within the scholarship of educational leadership. She does an excellent job of intersecting research on leadership for organizational effectiveness and student learning and research on leadership for social justice. She offers ideas to draw traditional and transformative leadership theories closer together. In Chapter 3, the editor, Susan Auerbach, describes how authentic partnerships differ from more limited approaches to collaboration and outlines the role of school leaders in the process. Also included is a powerful model of leadership for partnerships that illustrates four stages along a continuum.

Part Two: Leading Partnerships Across Difference: Navigating Race, Class, Culture, and Power

Chapter 4 by Rogers, Freelon, and Terriquez focuses on schools' conceptions of parental involvement and presents strategies for building better relations between African American and bicultural families and schools. The authors do an excellent job of addressing the complexities of parent involvement through a survey study of principals' views of parent involvement. In Chapter 5, Ruffin-Adams and Wilson draw upon their collective experiences as educators to help "educational leaders understand how authentic partnerships encompass a distinct and complex web of cultural, social, and political contexts that affect families' knowledge, power, and ability to advocate for their children" (p. 79). The authors offer a compelling illustrative case example of the special education referral process and the politics of containment for one African American family. Chapter 6 introduces transformative parent involvement within the Latino community. Olivos offers examples from his work in California and Oregon schools regarding the tensions between Latino parents and school officials.

Part Three: Leading Partnerships Through Policy and Program Development

Chapter 7 by Flessa and Gregoire explores the assumptions that underlie policy aspirations and the dilemmas of implementing them in Ontario, Canada. They call for "large scale policy research targeting studies of implementation describing why, how, under what conditions, and with what leadership partnerships have been established and sustained" (p. 131). In Chapter 8, Gordon documents the challenges of creating organizational cultures of engagement at both the district and school level. She used a comparative case study design to illustrate variables impacting school leadership. Chapter 9 by Chrispeels evaluates the work of two intermediary organizations that offer parent education. In Chapter 10, Hands examines the influence of teachers and principals on the development of partnerships with businesses and community organizations.

Part Four: New Contexts and Challenges in Leadership for Partnerships

According to the book, among the newer, more controversial contexts for leadership for partnerships are community organizing initiatives, charter

schools, and district-level reform initiatives. Chapter 11 is an essay by McAlister, Mintrop, Chong, and Renee which investigates the strain between community organizers and school leaders. Using data from charter schools in Indianapolis, the authors of Chapter 12, Stein, Goldring, and Smrekar, analyze parents' perceptions, principals' expectations, and student achievement. In Chapter 13, the editor, Auerbach, brings the voices of educational leaders directly into the conversation using excerpts from telephone interviews on their views of leadership for partnerships. Presented with 12 thoughtful questions, five U.S. school and district leaders from urban, suburban, and rural communities offer powerful insights from their perspectives on education.

Conclusion

The editor asks the question in Chapter 1, "Why leadership for partnership?" (p. 3). She has succeeded in answering that question vividly. One of the strengths of the book is that each chapter raises familiar, significant questions as well as distinctive questions posed by the diverse authors. Even though each chapter can stand on its own, a larger impact is made when readers digest all the information dealing with family–school–community involvement in this collection. Books such as this one can be the catalyst for dialogue followed by action. Parents and concerned community members can use this book as a tool to effect change in their schools. Its language is user friendly and not hampered by educational jargon. Being empowered is something that all stakeholders in children's education should experience. Granted, professional teacher organizations could also use this book to stimulate its members to better understand their students and the community in which they teach. Several of the chapters provide quantitative data and specific ideas for improving school–community partnerships. However, a nice addition would have been a chapter in Part Two on the ethics of care by teachers and school leaders, as it would have addressed an issue that is prevalent in current educational theory and relevant to building beneficial relationships among stakeholders.

This book is also valuable as a textbook for teacher education courses. The rich use of scholarly research studies on parental engagement is ideal for undergraduate or graduate courses examining issues of cultural diversity, family and school interconnectness, and educational policy. *School Leadership for Authentic Family and Community Partnerships* should be read by all who are interested in effecting change and mobilizing their school community for more effective and authentic school partnerships.

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