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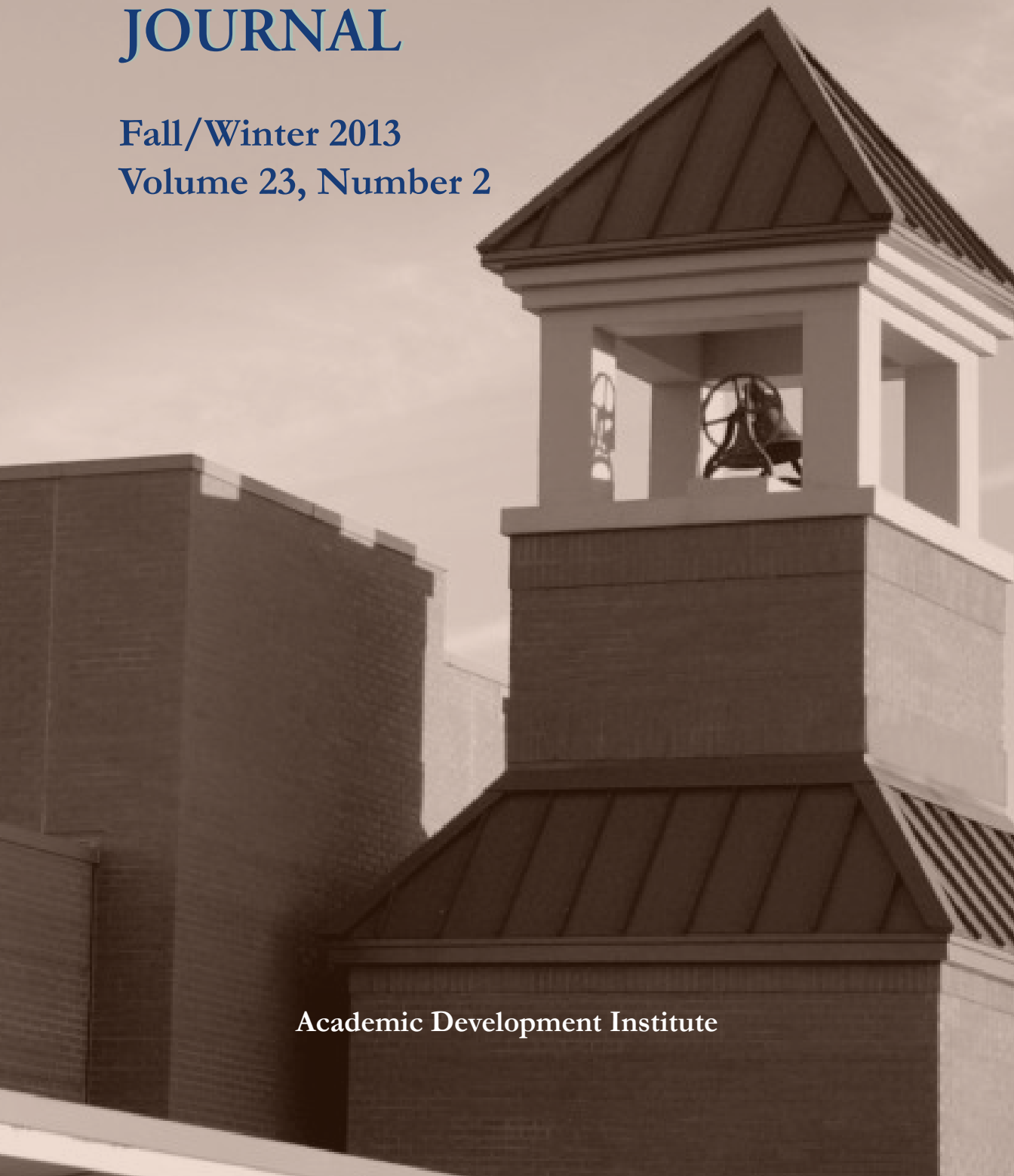

Academic Development Institute

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Editor's Comments

Helping parents and family member's increase their self-efficacy turned out to be a recurring theme in this issue. Well established as a key to engagement through the research of Kathy Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues, several different articles describe creative ways schools and programs are giving parents the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to become true partners in their children's education.

Deslandes and Rivard describe workshops designed to help parents better understand the new curriculum and assessments being used in Québec. Anderson, Anderson, and Teichert asked parents to reflect back on a family literacy program designed to engage them and help them prepare their children for kindergarten entry. Later in the issue, Shiffman examines the potential of the learning efficacy engendered by adult education courses to be transferred to parental involvement self-efficacy. Reece, Saudt, and Ogle describe a collaboration that took family engagement workshops into low-income neighborhoods, again providing wonderful opportunities to increase parental self-efficacy.

Mahmood's article also references efficacy, but in her case, it is the efficacy of first-year teachers in working with their students' parents that is examined. She calls for more balanced and realistic preparation for preservice teacher candidates. Bergman studied such candidates, examining whether their placements for field practice in a suburban or urban setting affected their perspectives on family engagement. Robbins and Searby explore parental involvement strategies used by exemplary middle school interdisciplinary teams, finding similar strategies but different approaches employed by an urban, a suburban, and a rural team.

Miller, Kuykendall, and Thomas examined the perceptions of teachers regarding school community factors (including parents' roles, homework, students' opportunities, etc.) across a large district, finding differences based on individual and school characteristics. Luter, Lester, and Kronick describe the beginning stages of an urban school–university partnership to run an afterschool program, highlighting the potential of such collaborations through a realistic lens. Gordon, Downey, and Bangert report on a school-based mentoring program affecting students' development and efficacy, resulting in better behavior and enhanced connectedness. Finally, we have a book review regarding fathers' involvement in education in locations around the globe.

Lori G. Thomas
December 2013

Editorial Review Board

A Pilot Study Aiming to Promote Parents' Understanding of Learning Assessments at the Elementary Level

Rollande Deslandes and Marie-Claude Rivard

Abstract

The new Québec curriculum is different from other curriculum reforms in that it is based on a competency approach, both cross-curricular and disciplinary. It thus means a move from knowledge-based to competency-based assessments which represents a real challenge to parents who may find it hard to understand learning assessments and their child's report card. In this article, the authors focus on a recent effort aimed at piloting workshops to promote parents' understanding of assessments. The article describes two case studies of workshops using an experiential learning approach conducted with parents of kindergarten and 6th grade students. In general, the parents who participated as active learners reported more knowledge and understanding related to school assessment practices. They also felt more equipped for interacting with their children to monitor academic progress. The workshops represent a potentially effective way of communicating with parents regarding learning assessments to help them better understand the evaluation methods used by teachers.

Key Words: learning assessments, competency approach, teachers' evaluation methods, parents, workshops, communication, Québec, Canada, report cards

Introduction

In 2001, the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (Ministry of Education, Québec; MEQ) started implementing a curriculum reform whose objectives

are success for all, the development of competencies, integrated learning, and evaluation in the service of learning (MEQ, 2001a, 2001b). The former curriculum based on objectives separated knowledge and competencies and did not allow for a global vision of learning. The new Québec curriculum aims to fill these gaps and stands out from other curriculum reforms in that it is based on a competency approach, both disciplinary and cross-curricular, that is intellectual, methodological, personal and social, and communication related. A competency is defined as "a set of behaviors based on the effective mobilization and use of a range of resources" (MEQ, 2001a, p. 4). For example, students who learn grammar rules can show their knowledge through memorization exercises, but they demonstrate their competencies when writing a letter. In the context of learning French as a mother tongue, it is a question of competencies in reading, writing, or oral communication. This shift thus requires moving from knowledge- to competency-based assessments.

Literature Review

Evaluation of Learning in the Québec Education Program

Implementing education reform that stresses the development of disciplinary and cross-curricular competencies demands a renewed evaluation characterized by a new vocabulary and ideas (Scallon, 2004). Learning assessments are based on a judgment regarding knowledge acquired and competencies developed by a student (MEQ, 2002a, 2002b). Several evaluation tools are suggested to gather information necessary to make such a judgment, such as observation checklists, lists with statements that describe a series of actions, self-evaluations on the part of the students themselves, and conferences between the student and the teacher. Using a teacher's logbook, anecdotal records, and the student's portfolio are strongly recommended to record information. The MEQ (2002a, 2002b) has also provided competency levels to guide school teachers in identifying the stages in the development of competencies. The legend used for report cards reflects the judgment regarding the development of competencies: (1) very satisfactorily to (4) with great difficulty, or (A) very easily to (D) with great difficulty.

In short, the whole evaluation process requires tools and ways of doing things that are different from what many parents and teachers have known (Deslandes & Lafortune, 2000; Dodd, 1998; Dodd & Konzal, 1999, 2000; Swap, 1993). Grade scores and group averages are replaced by qualitative comments. Some of the teachers are resistant to the implementation of the reform in its entirety, alleging that they have to give marks for competencies that, according to them, have not been evaluated (Pineault, 2006). Accordingly, parents often

react negatively to nontraditional practices if they do not understand the issues involved in their children's learning (Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, & Henrich, 2000; Dodd & Konzal, 1999, 2000; Lewis & Henderson, 1997). Parents are up in arms, claiming the report card that displays letters does not allow them to follow the progress of their child (Bussière, 2006). They also deplore the impenetrable language of school reports. They ask for documents that are clear and precise (Deniger, 2004; Fédération des Comités de Parents du Québec [FCPQ], 2008). It should be noted that criticisms made by both parents and teachers are reported mostly in the French media rather than in research.

In order to overcome these shortcomings, the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sports, Québec; MELS, 2007) revamped the report card in 2007 to include a grade in percentage for each assessed competency, a group average for each subject, and simplified competency labels. These changes seem to maintain ambiguity and confusion regarding the evaluation process; they do not appear sufficient to satisfy parents' requests.

Family–School Collaboration and Communication

Numerous literature reviews, research syntheses, and meta-analyses conducted nationally and internationally have stressed the family's influence on children's success in school (Adams & Ryan, 2000; Deslandes, 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Pourtois, Desmet, & Lahaye, 2004). There is also evidence that parental engagement positively influences other factors that lead to achievement, such as school aspirations, motivation to learn, and learning strategy use (Deslandes & Rousseau, 2008; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Heavy, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Van Voorhis, 2009). This process is a two-way street: parents can aid in their child's learning and provide the school with useful information on how he or she learns, and teachers can help parents understand the factors that influence their child's performance by informing them of their child's progress. Assessment is of great interest and concern to parents, because all parents want their children to do well in school (Dodd & Konzal, 1999). Many view their children's academic experience as an indication of how their lives will turn out (Martinez, Martinez, & Pérez, 2004). Consequently, they may be encouraged, worried, or confused by the information on report cards.

Studies have examined factors that influence parents' motivation to become involved at home and at school (Chrispeels & González, 2004; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Aside from some life context issues (e.g., knowledge, skills, time, and energy), these studies identified three main factors influencing parental motivation: parents' role construction,

sense of self-efficacy, and child and school invitations (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Parents will get involved if they believe that it is a normal responsibility of parenting and that their efforts will make a positive difference for the child. They will also get involved if they receive invitations from their child's teachers suggesting that their involvement is wanted and expected. Some researchers have underlined the importance of parents' conceptions regarding their role in predicting their involvement (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2004). Others have suggested adding a new construct to the sets of contributors, for example, parental knowledge of academic standards and tools for checking their child's progress (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001).

At the same time, report cards are generally considered one of the most important communication tools linking schools and families as well as one important aspect of communicating about assessments (Epstein, 2011). How can schools expect parents to participate in monitoring their child's progress if these parents do not understand the evaluation issues at stake in the competency-focused Québec Education Program? In response to these recriminations and in order to better understand the issues surrounding learning assessment for parents, the authors conducted a research program (consisting of 4 studies to date) between the years of 2007 through 2011 which was an extension of their work on school–family collaboration in the context of Québec education reform. The research program was intended to spur innovation within the current education reform, of which evaluation is a central component. The two goals of the research program were to identify parents' needs in relation to learning assessments and to pilot tools or workshops for parents.

A first study (2007–2008) was conducted among 125 French-speaking parents[1] of elementary school children on their needs regarding students' learning assessments, that is, parents' perceptions and understanding of the teachers' practices and of the parents' role in monitoring their children's progress in school. This study was based on Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2005) revised theoretical model of the parental involvement process that includes parents' motivational beliefs, that is, parental role construction, parents' beliefs about the teachers' role and parents' self-efficacy. It was also guided by Martinez, Martinez, and Pérez's (2004) research conducted in Spain on parents' understanding of teachers' assessment approach and parents' knowledge of what teachers assess. For this study, the Fédération des Comités de Parents du Québec (FCPQ), whose members are all involved within the participatory structures in Québec schools, put out an invitation and gave the link to an online survey in its *Action Parents Journal* (FCPQ, 2008). Voluntary participants came from fifteen different regions of the Province. Findings revealed that 64% of responding parents had attended university. Nearly 50% of respondents reported not knowing, not

being informed, and not understanding the methods used by teachers to assess student learning. More than 80% of parents wanted the teacher to discuss with them the activities that had been evaluated in the classroom (Deslandes, Rivard, Joyal, Trudeau, & Laurencelle, 2010).

A second study (2008–2009) examined parents' needs through educators' perceptions of parents' knowledge, role construction, sense of efficacy in helping their child, and understanding of assessment of learning, in conjunction with elements of parents' family life context. Identifying educators' points of view regarding the responsibilities of parents in that matter was perceived as a preliminary step to any process of identifying ways to meet parents' needs. This study, like the previous one, was based on Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2005) revised theoretical parental involvement model. We used a qualitative approach based on three focus groups conducted with educators (n = 27) working in two primary schools in low socioeconomic status (SES)[2] neighborhoods. The two schools were invited to participate because of their openness to the curriculum reform and research. The interview protocol was grounded on the theoretical model and the literature review. Once audiotaped and transcribed, the verbatim transcript of the focus groups were coded using L'Écuyer's (1990) mixed content analysis. Findings indicated that the expectations of educators towards parents far exceed those normally expressed, that is, to support the child and to supervise school work. In fact, educators said they expected parents to understand the nature of the child's difficulties and to have a global vision of the learning process. Some perceptions regarding parents seemed to be consensus among the participating educators, while others reflected different positions. Among the common denominators, these teachers felt that most parents living in low SES neighborhoods do not seem to really understand the changes in the assessment methods and the hermetic and complex language often used by teachers as a result of the implementation of the Québec reform in education. Certain educators questioned the willingness or desire of some parents to obtain more information related to learning evaluation methods, and some referred to parents' lack of availability and energy, as well as to a negative vision or perception of school (Deslandes & Rivard, 2011a).

The third study's (2009–2010) objectives were to develop and pilot some tools for parents. School teachers from one of the above-cited low SES schools believed many parents lacked strong interest in the evaluation of learning and had limited time and energy, so the teachers favored the development of simple tools such as leaflets characterized by the use of clear and simple language. Based on the framework of Epstein's six major types of parent involvement, this study concerned mainly *Type 1: Parenting* and *Type 4: Learning at Home* and aimed at giving information to parents and helping them to develop their

skills on how to assist children in preparing for academic assessments (Epstein, 2011). A working committee consisting of three teachers involved in each of the learning cycles (1st cycle: grades 1 and 2; 2nd cycle: grades 3 and 4; 3rd cycle: grades 5 and 6) participated in the creation of a pamphlet for their respective cycles. On each one, there were definitions of the concepts "knowledge" and "competency," illustrated with examples relevant to each of the learning cycles. A few short quiz-like questions asked parents to indicate whether they referred to knowledge or to competency. A correction key was printed in small size letters at the bottom of the page. The back explained the ABCs of the report card or the questions most frequently asked. After a validation process with parent members of the school governing board, the teachers distributed the pamphlets and a questionnaire related to the evaluation of the tool at the first meeting with each cycle group's parents (total of three groups) at the start of the 2010–2011 school year. A total of 13 parents completed the questionnaire on a voluntary basis, and six of them joined a discussion group in response to the invitation that appeared at the end of the questionnaire. The topics covered in both the questionnaire and the discussion group included the usefulness of the pamphlet tool, the way that school grades are calculated, exchanges with their child's teacher, and support of their child's schooling. All of the participants (three discussion groups) said that they now understand the difference between "knowledge" and "competency." They wanted to know more about grades, such as whether they came from evaluations or classroom observations. Others saw a lack of transparency in the percentage allocated to each component of the competency considering the grades appearing in the report card. Participating parents felt more able to ask the right questions of the teacher (Deslandes & Rivard, 2011b).

The above three studies served as a background to a recent study that is related to the second objective of our research program, that is, to improve parents' understanding of assessment with a pilot workshop based on two case studies conducted during the year 2010–2011. The following section of this article focuses on the findings that emerged from that fourth study. Challenges that lie ahead are then discussed. It is important to note that all of the conducted studies had first received university ethics committee approval.

Pilot Study on Parents' Understanding of Learning Assessment

In this fourth and recent study, two female teachers (two cases) working in the same rather low SES rural school volunteered to design and offer pilot workshops (objective two of the research program) to their kindergarten and 6th grade students' parents, respectively, in order to better equip them in

supporting their children in the learning evaluation context and in monitoring school progress and difficulties. The goal of this particular study was thus to preview workshops for parents. The school where the study took place had 322 enrolled White and French-speaking kindergarten to Grade 6 students. In 2010–2011, the socioeconomic environment index (EEI)[2] of the school was 6/10, with a score of 1 representing a well-off school and a score of 10, a very poor school. The kindergarten teacher retired in 2012 after 32 years of teaching, while the 6th grade teacher had been teaching at the elementary level for about 14 years at the time of the study.

Theoretical Framework of the Two Case Studies

This fourth study builds upon the experiential approach of Kolb (1984) which postulates that experiential learning is based on two processes: action and reflection. Experiential learning involves more than the acquisition of knowledge or understanding of a phenomenon; it requires ownership of experience that is revealed in personal choices showing a change in behavior or in action. This process allows for self-reflection on past actions. In other words, the learner transforms experience into knowledge, expertise, and skills. This type of study is also well suited to better understand the complexity of learning assessment. In the current study, parents were invited to experience teaching–learning situations designed according to the competency approach to curriculum and in light of the contents and knowledge required by the Québec Education Program (MEQ, 2001a). The Québec competency-based reform calls for more active parent participation. Parents' role as learners stands out as important in the *Pedagogical Renewal*. In other words, parents should be seen as lifelong learners. However, the majority of parents were exposed to a limited number of diverse teaching and assessment methods in their traditional classes during their childhood. Indeed, parents' beliefs in relation to learning in school are the result of their personal history—their past school experiences and their family life context and socioeconomic status (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) They develop mental models of what a child should learn and how it should be done. According to Dodd and Konzal (1999), some parents may be open to the introduction of nontraditional teaching and evaluation strategies, while others may resist the introduction of new ones. Perrenoud (2000) argues that a teacher must show great competency and be assertive in order to gain the support of parents who initially seem rather reluctant to his/her pedagogical approach. In what follows, we present two case studies that were guided by the experiential approach.

Data Collection and Analysis of the Two Case Studies

The qualitative case study format was used in the study. This type of approach is appropriate when one wants to understand a phenomenon in depth and has little data on it (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2003). As the two teachers working in the same school but different grade cycles used a somewhat different approach, we present the findings of each of the two cases separately.

The two teachers gave an invitation letter to parents who were present at the first meeting with their group of students' parents at the start of the school year (2010–2011). If the parents were absent, the letter was sent home through the child's communication folder. In the letter, the teacher invited parents to a two-hour meeting after school, scheduled at 7:00 p.m. on October 13, 2010 in the students' classrooms, during which parents would go through some learning situations that their children would also experience during the school year. The letter stated that the workshops would be followed by a period of discussion and exchanges and that coffee and prize drawings would be offered. The workshops' evaluation questions were prepared by the two involved teachers in collaboration with the two researchers. For the two case studies, each of the 60-minute group discussions that followed the workshops was audiorecorded and then transcribed by two first degree university students who had been trained accordingly. All participants had given their written consent beforehand. The analyses were conducted by a master's degree student also well trained in using the NVivo software and based on L'Écuyer's (1990) mixed content analysis, meaning that it was grounded on the sections of the interview protocol while letting new categories emerge (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The two researchers responsible for the study were involved in the validation process. In reporting the findings, we purposely chose to highlight the themes or categories that appeared of particular relevance to participants and that could possibly guide teachers in future development of similar workshops.

Kindergarten Level Case Study

Participants. Out of the 16 parents at the kindergarten level who had been invited to participate in the workshops, exactly seven parents (1 male, 6 females) of four boys and three girls showed up the night of the event. Four parents were from traditional families (i.e., two biological parents), and three were from nontraditional families (single parents and stepfamilies). Every level of schooling (i.e., elementary, secondary, vocational, collegiate, and university levels) was represented. Almost all of the participants had a two-child family (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of Kindergarten Children's Parents

Partici-pants	Participants' Gender	Level of Schooling	Family Structure	Family Size	Child's Gender
1	F	Collegiate	Traditional	2	M
2	F	Elementary	Traditional	2	M
3	F	Vocational	Traditional	2	F
4	F	Secondary	Stepfamily	4 & more	F
5	F	University	Stepfamily	2	M
6	F	Vocational	Single-parent	2	F
7	M	University	Traditional	2	M

Description of the Workshops. At the beginning of the meeting, the teacher asked parents to form teams of two or three individuals. The teacher provided them with the necessary material and explained how the workshops would be conducted. Four 15-minute workshops were offered. They were based on mathematics, art and emergent literacy, science, and music. The first workshop, based on mathematics, required parents to build a maze with provided blocks and to place a toy little boy at the entrance and a toy car at the end. In the second workshop, parents were asked to read the story of the fox and the crow; to identify the characters, the setting, and the action that was going on; to draw these elements with felt pens; and to write the title of the story at the top and his/her name at the bottom-left of the page. The third workshop was related to sciences. Parents were requested to choose one of the two suggested assumptions (floating or sinking) of seven different objects (e.g, dice, pen, straw) when they were put in a glass of water. They also had to calculate the number of correct answers they obtained. In the fourth workshop, parents had to illustrate on a sheet of paper a musical phrase that included short and long sounds, soft and loud sounds, slow and rapid sounds, to play it, to modify it if they did not like it, and to ask a friend to play it using very simple musical instruments that were provided by the teacher. At the end of the four workshops, the teacher looked back on each workshop to see how it had gone for the parents and to identify, according to participating parents, which competencies of the Québec Preschool Education Program had been targeted. She recalled to the parents that the Program fosters the development of six interrelated competencies (see Table 2). She also told them that each workshop offered an opportunity to develop several of those competencies (see Table 3 for a synthesis of the workshop contents and the targeted competencies).

Table 2. Québec Preschool Education Program Competencies

Number	Label of the Competency
C1.	To perform sensorimotor actions effectively in different contexts
C2.	To affirm his/her personality
C3.	To interact harmoniously with others
C4.	To communicate using the resources of language
C5.	To construct his/her understanding of the world
C6.	To complete an activity or project

At the participants' request, the teacher described their child's typical day in school and explained some of her teaching strategies. For example, she said: "I use a lot of cues with children; we do physical exercises in the morning, and at the same time, I work on their body image and their overall motor skills" (Competency 1). She went on to say: "In kindergarten, children do not always sit at the same place, as it is an opportunity to socialize and make new friends. It's just on the rug that they always have the same place, because it's easier and it avoids many arguments." She added that she teaches songs, some expressions in English, and she organizes fine arts activities, free games, and table games. She then gave an example of a teaching strategy: "Children, four at a time, drew together some trees. To do so, they had to come to my work table called the 'square table.' They then learned to follow directions." She also explained how she collected observation data on each of the students: "I have a small folder. I make an effort to focus on a particular child at a time. Remember that I spend the whole day with them; I know them, they change but not that much." To the parents' surprise, she said she gives mostly Bs and Cs but rarely As on the report card.

Evaluation of the workshops. After the workshops, participating parents were invited to respond to three open-ended questions using the focus group method (see Appendix A). The questions were about their understanding of the teacher's learning assessment methods, of their child's report card, and about the possibility of offering similar workshops in the coming years. Content analysis led to the coding of statements into five themes or categories: (1) difference between the two constructs, knowledge and competency; (2) academic assessment; (3) parents' self-efficacy; (4) evolution of the development of the child; and (5) knowledge of the child's daily routine at school (see Table 4).

Table 3. Contents of the Workshops at the Kindergarten Level

	Objectives	Materials	Targeted Competencies
1	• To build a maze using the provided blocks and placing the toy little boy at the entrance of the labyrinth and the toy car at the end	• Wooden blocks • Lego little boy • Toy cars	Mathematics C3. To listen to the others' ideas C5. To understand what a labyrinth is C6. To understand, execute, and complete a task
2	• To read a story • To identify the characters, the setting, and the action that is going on • To draw those elements with felt pens • To write the title of the story at the top and his/her name at the left-bottom of the page	• The story of the fox and the crow • Sheets for drawing • Felt pens (limited in number in order to oblige the participants to share)	Art and Emergent Literacy C2. To get organized and to show autonomy C3. To be able to negotiate and to share C4. To write some words C5. To retain the information C6. To understand, execute, and complete a task
3	• To write one's name at the top of the sheet • To propose a hypothesis by placing a red X in the appropriate case • To test the hypothesis (experimentation) • To put a green X in the case corresponding to the obtained result • To check if the hypothesis is confirmed • To write down at the bottom of the sheet the number of right answers	• Tray filled with water • Various objects • Instruction sheet covered with plastic • Red and green pencils	Sciences C2. To store the material C3. To listen to what others say C4. To write his/her name at the top of the page; to write the number of correct answers C6: To understand, execute, and complete a task
4	• To create a musical line and play it • To change it if desired • To ask a friend to play it	• Cards indicating different musical symbols (long and short sounds; soft and loud sounds; slow and fast sounds)	Music C2. To store the equipment C3. To listen to the others, taking turns C5. To distinguish different sounds and recognize the symbols C6. To understand, execute, and complete a task

Table 4. Distribution of Parents' Comments at the Kindergarten Level

Themes	# of Comments	Examples
Differences between knowledge and competency	6	We can really see the competencies they have to develop, and the things they'll have to do during the school year.
Academic assessment	6	I was wondering how the assessment was done. I had my answers. The majority of students will get Bs and Cs. It is a good thing that we know it before receiving the report card.
Parents' self-efficacy	10	If they have difficulties, we'll know more on how to help them.
Evolution of the development of the child	7	Since my daughter started kindergarten, she has improved a lot.…This is because of her new friends.
Knowledge of the child's daily routine at school	3	My son does not talk much. When I ask him what he did at school, he never remembers. It is interesting to see our child's learning class environment and to hear about a typical day at school.

The parents' comments showed that they understood the difference between knowledge and competency. One parent said: "We now know exactly which competencies they have to develop during the school year." They also understood that the teacher assesses competency attainment level mainly through classroom observations. Some even wondered how the teacher managed to really focus on one child at a time and arrive at a clear-cut evaluation that really reflects the level of competency development by the student. Parents indicated it would be easier for them to understand their child's report card. They admitted that for them, a C in the report card represented a poor performance. Being informed ahead of time before receiving the child's report card prevented any bad surprises. They also said that they felt more capable to intervene if their child is having difficulties. Furthermore, many parents expressed pride in their child's higher level of autonomy: "Just having an agenda and being responsible for it." Some appreciated being informed of their child's typical schedule during a school day. In short, participants thought that absent parents could also benefit from the workshops and that the formula should be repeated.

Sixth Grade Level Case Study

Participants. Of the 22 parents of Grade 6 students, three of them responded positively to the invitation. Because the participation was on a voluntary

basis, there was no way of knowing nonparticipants' reasons for not showing up. The participants were female, mothers of two girls and one boy. They had different schooling backgrounds (i.e., elementary level, vocational at the secondary level, and collegiate level) and came from diverse family structures with three or more children.

Table 5. Characteristics of Sixth Grade Children's Participating Parents

Participant	Gender	Level of Schooling	Family Structure	Family Size	Child's Gender
1	F	Vocational	Traditional	3	M
2	F	Elementary	Stepfamily	4 & more	F
3	F	Collegiate	Stepfamily	3	F

Description of the workshops. The parents participated in four workshops (see Table 6 for a synthesis of the workshop contents and the targeted competencies). The first workshop included a 6th grade student's written text containing several grammar and spelling mistakes. Parents were asked to make corrections using a self-evaluation checklist that every student must use in class and that is based on the targeted curriculum competency "To write a variety of texts in French." Then the teacher explained her own evaluation checklist and the links between her evaluation and the letter that appears on the child's report card. In fact, each letter corresponds to a range of scores, for instance the mention of "satisfactory" leads to a B, which in turn corresponds to a score ranging between 80% and 90%. Every rating has its own set of criteria, very well described within a grid. The second workshop required the parents to read a text and to answer questions using the worksheet on reading strategies employed by students in the 6th grade classroom. The third workshop was on mathematical skills using a worksheet with problem-solving strategies usually used in class. In the last workshop, parents were invited to make a puzzle according to provided instructions. The targeted competency was "to work in cooperation with others using effective working methods." After each of the workshops, the teacher described her own way of evaluating and the final rating that appears in the student report card.

Table 6. Contents of the Workshops at the Sixth Grade Level

	Objectives	Materials	Targeted Competencies	Discussion Topics
1	To read a student's text and make necessary corrections using a zero fault grid, dictionary, and grammar book	Text written by a 6th grade student	To write a variety of texts in French	Correction grid and explanations about the score on the report card
2	To read a text and to answer the questions using reading strategy cards	Text and questions to answer	To read a variety of texts in French	Correction grid and explanations about the score on the report card
3	To use problem solving skills and to describe the approach using the provided problem solving sheet	Problem solving sheet	To solve mathematical problems, to reason with concepts and to communicate using the mathematical language	Correction grid and explanations about the score on the report card
4	To make the puzzle in accordance with the given instructions	Mixed puzzle pieces	To work in cooperation with others using effective working methods	Description of the team work: climate and efficacy

Evaluation of the workshops. The evaluation at the 6th grade level of the workshops as a whole was conducted in the same way as the one at the kindergarten level. The group interview protocol was composed of four questions (see Appendix B). The coding of the verbatim transcript was done with the assistance of NVivo software. The analysis, which was based partly on Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2005) model, led to the emergence of five themes or categories: (1) understanding of the concepts of knowledge and competencies; (2) way of calculating the score on the report card; (3) parents' self-efficacy in intervening in their child's schooling; (4) parental responsibilities and challenges regarding their child's schooling; and (5) reasons linked to the low level of parental involvement in the workshops (see Table 7).

Just as in the kindergarten level case study, the participants said they now understood the distinction between the two concepts, knowledge and competency. One parent said, "It's like two things, but they are both needed in order to meet challenges." They also became aware of the important role of the teacher's observation notes and of the descriptive grids in the evaluation of

learning. A participant declared, "…now, I know that I'll have to pay attention to the evaluation grid that was used. It is a good thing I came tonight." However, some participants said that they still find it hard to assist their child in his/her learning: "Everyday's homework is not easy for me; it has been a long time since I got out of school." Another added: "In order to help, I need a dictionary, and yet it remains hard for me." Another one continued: "Being a parent is challenging." Several comments emerged as explanations for the low rate of parental participation in the workshops. They were mostly stated in terms of lack of time and energy and especially fear of being judged. One mother acknowledged: "I admit…I thought of not coming, but I decided…after all, I'm an adult." They think that the term evaluation is perceived as threatening by many parents; they suggested that in the future, any invitation sent to parents should not contain such a term that carries negative connotations. Finally, they deplored the constant changes in the Québec education system and the burden and the challenges associated with monitoring the performance of school children as parents.

Table 7. Distribution of Parents' Comments at the Sixth Grade Level

Themes	# of Comments	Examples
Differences between knowledge and competency	6	I understand that in order to develop a competency, there must be acquired knowledge first.
Academic assessment	7	Assessment through observation… that is interesting, even reassuring. When observing, the teacher sees things… It is very detailed; the grids help us to understand.
Parents' self-efficacy	5	I understand better. We receive a lot of information at the beginning of the school year, but we do not take the time to read everything.
Parental responsibilities and challenges regarding child schooling	5	We're here for our child and his education. Assessment is essential in education.
Reasons linked to the low level of parental involvement in the workshops	12	The word "evaluation" is scary to parents. Some parents feel they are being judged.

Discussion

The studies conducted within this research program provide a starting point for understanding the many challenges surrounding family–school communication in the context of learning assessment. Findings from the first study revealed rather well-educated parents' need to be better informed of the teachers' assessment strategies and to discuss with their child's teacher the workshops that were evaluated. Results from the second study showed consensus among educators regarding low SES parents' lack of knowledge and understanding regarding changes in learning assessments that are part of the main implications of a competency-based approach. However, there were divergent points of view among educators with respect to low SES parents' desire to know more about evaluation strategies. These led to prioritizing different approaches in helping parents to become better able to grasp the concept of evaluation that underlies the current Québec Education Program and to better monitor their child's academic progress. In the third study, some teachers chose to provide information to their students' parents through pamphlets, whereas in the fourth study, others thought of workshops in which parents were involved as learners. Some participating parents in the third study considered leaflets as a first step toward a better understanding of Québec's Policy on the Evaluation of Learning (MEQ, 2003a) and that other support measures should follow. The parents who participated as active learners in the fourth study workshops reported more knowledge and understanding related to school assessment practices. In general, they also felt more equipped for interacting with their children to monitor academic progress and to discuss it with their child's teacher. Unfortunately, parents were not asked to reflect any further on the experience they had gone through.

At the end of this research program, and especially following the completion of the fourth study, two points retained our attention: the low level of parental involvement in the workshops, and the context of ambiguity and controversy that currently prevails in Québec surrounding school reform and assessment of learning. Only about half of parents responded positively to the teacher's invitation at the kindergarten level, and only 11% of parents did so at the grade six level. Those small numbers, especially at the 6th grade level, give pause as to how much in general can be gleaned from this research. The whole might be considered a pilot.

There are several explanations for the low level of parents' participation in the workshops, all equally plausible. Such findings remind us inevitably of the life context elements as they are discussed in the revised model of Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005). These include the socioeconomic status of parents in

addition to their knowledge, availability, and energy, as well as the family culture that encourages parental involvement (or does not) and that is colored by parents' past school experiences. Also included are parents' self-efficacy and parents' role construction. Participants also mentioned the burden of family responsibilities and parents' fear of being judged or evaluated by their child's teacher. Is it possible that this vulnerability is accentuated by a low level of schooling that often prevails among parents from rather low SES backgrounds? Indeed, we understood that in such a context, the invitations sent to parents should avoid terminology with depreciative connotation like the words workshop and evaluation. The use of neutral and inviting terms represents an additional challenge for teachers who want to assist parents through active involvement in curriculum workshops. As a promising avenue, it might be worth thinking about having parent leaders with previous relevant training conduct the workshops with other parents. This suggestion is in line with Cunningham, Kreider, and Ocon's (2012) work on the positive effects of parent leadership programs with regard to parents' general leadership, communication skills, and parental involvement. It is also in the same vein as other research findings (e.g., Murray, Ackerman-Spain, Williams, & Ryley, 2011) that show the importance of training in building knowledge and empowering parents. Another possible explanation could be associated with parents' understanding of their role in relation to the evaluation of learning. During discussions with parents, some have indeed indicated that they relied on teachers when it came to evaluation of learning. Their concerns were more associated with monitoring homework. A last explanation could have to do with grade levels—that fewer 6th grade students' parents, as compared to kindergarten students' parents, were involved is not surprising given that parental involvement in schooling decreases as the child gets older (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002; Epstein, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Overall, the use of simple information tools seems appropriate as a first step with all parents, not just those with low SES. Information tools and workshops are a few of many ways that schools can use to remedy the current confusion regarding assessment.

The controversy in Québec surrounding the implementation and application of the education reform, with learning assessment at the heart of complaints among parents and in the media, is hardly conducive to collaboration between schools and families. While adjustments and corrective actions have already been taken by each of the successive ministers of education in office since 2001, doubts related to the benefits of reform appear to persist. There is reason to believe that shattering titles in the popular media such as "School reform. A grim portrait" (Dion-Viens, 2011) or "A clear report card…that lacks clarity" (Cardinal, 2010) are contributing to the fertile ground in ambiguity.

Also contributing is the lack of consensus among academics involved in teacher training and among practitioners from the field of practice. After the recent implementation of the unique provincial report card by the Québec education minister, there still seems to be discontent among some teachers' unions (Breton, 2012). In short, we may wonder if we are not witnessing media manipulation of public opinion. Before making a hasty judgment on the drawbacks of the curriculum reform, we should wait for the publication of the evaluation study of the reform. So far, it seems that the preliminary results show a rather grim portrait based on teachers', students', and parents' perceptions. Certainly, the academic performance of students having learning difficulties has not improved. However, some authors call for caution and suggest the possibility that the reform was not fully implemented in classrooms (Dion-Viens, 2013). To our knowledge, it is the first and only systematic approach that has been taken to assess the effects of the reform since the beginning of its implementation (Larose & Duchesne, 2012).

Conclusion

What do parents need to understand? From a report card overloaded with information and criticized by many parents, the MELS has moved to a report card that contains a minimum of information.[3] We favor the latter format, being clear and concise, as requested by parents. Too much information may cause confusion. Moreover, learning assessment falls within the teachers' expertise. It corresponds to one of the competencies in the list of professional competencies developed by the MELS. Similarly, to involve parents and inform them is another competency expected of teachers. Various well-known communication devices and strategies can be used to promote effective work with parents, including parent–teacher conferences, electronic mail, phone messages, memos, and evaluation copies or the child's portfolio sent home with his or her strengths and weaknesses being identified. However, the report card is still one of the main ways of communicating about assessments. Workshops represent another way of informing parents regarding learning assessment in order to help them in understanding evaluation methods used by teachers. Our findings show that such workshops are worth replicating elsewhere. However, we may wonder whether it is realistic to expect a significant number of parents to commit to learning about assessments. It is possible that a low level of parental involvement in such workshops reflects some discomfort or uneasiness on the part of parents towards the evaluation process.

We believe it is urgent that the MELS carries the torch to show leadership and consistency and paves the way for clear and precise assessment of

learning. The education minister must try to gather parents, educators, teachers unions, scientists, and students around a common vision of knowledge and of functional and enabling competencies linked to academic assessment. We are convinced of the merits of the approach deployed in this research program and of the need for preservice and in-service teachers' to be trained in these areas. Only when the blur surrounding learning assessment methods is dispelled will we be able to move forward to promote and further develop family–school communication and collaboration to support student success.

Endnotes

[1] Québec is the only province in Canada with a predominantly French-speaking population (about 80%). According to Statistics Canada, Censuses of population, 1971–2006, referred to in the Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages, *The vitality of Quebec's English-speaking communities: From myth to reality* (retrieved from http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/SEN/Committee/403/offi/SubsiteMar11/Report_Home-e.htm, pp. 5–6), only 8% of the population declares that their mother tongue is English. For the 2011–2012 school year, the MELS reported that 10% of elementary level students were attending Anglophone schools (MELS, 2011).

[2] In Québec, a socioeconomic environment index (EEI) is calculated by the Ministry of Education (2003b). A third of the EEI calculated represents the proportion of parents who are unemployed, while two-thirds correspond to the proportion of mothers who did not graduate from high school.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol at the Kindergarten Level

1. How did these workshops help you to understand our approach in terms of observation and assessment of children's development and learning?
2. Will it be easier for you to understand your child's report card? Explain.
3. Should we repeat the workshops next year? Explain.

Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol at the Sixth Grade Level

1. Did and to what extent have these workshop activities that your own child will experience during the year helped you to understand the difference between "knowledge" and "competence"?
   a) Yes/ No; b) Explain.
2. Do you know by now a) where your child's grades come from? b) How academic assessment is done? c) What strategies or evaluation methods we are using in class?
   a) Yes/No ; b) Explain.
3. Do you feel more comfortable and more knowledgeable about your child's learning assessment?
   a) Yes/No ; b) Explain.
4. Do you feel better equipped to assist your child in his/her learning?
   a) Yes/No ; b) Explain.

Through a Rear-View Mirror: Families Look Back at a Family Literacy Program

Ann Anderson, Jim Anderson, and Laura Teichert

Abstract

In this article, we report on a study in which we interviewed working class families who were the first cohort in a family literacy program that had been locally developed and implemented in a small village in Canada more than two decades previously in response to community-identified needs. The study was framed by Tulving's concept of episodic memory which he described as autobiographical and which allows one to recall and reflect on one's past experiences because they are significant. Ten of the original 18 families were available, and they were interviewed in their homes using a semi-structured protocol. Interviews were transcribed and then coded according to themes. Findings include the following: families reported that the hands-on structure of the program in which they worked alongside their children helped them understand learning through play and developmentally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy; they gained insights as to how they could continue to support their children's learning at home and in the community; they became more comfortable in school and knowledgeable about its workings and subsequently participated more in school affairs; they and their children benefited socially from the program; and they believed the program assisted their children's transition to school. They also identified areas that needed improvement, including more frequent sessions and more explanation of some aspects of the program. The study extends previous research in family literacy in that it demonstrates that programs can contribute to families' social capital.

Key Words: family literacy programs, social capital, retrospective interviews, early childhood, learning, parents, involvement, transition to school, Canada

Introduction

It is now generally recognized that families can be rich sites for children's early literacy learning before schooling. Since the publication of Denny Taylor's (1983) foundational book, *Family Literacy*: *Young Children Learning to Read and Write,* other researchers have documented how families support young children's literacy learning in diverse social and cultural contexts (e.g., Gregory, 2005; Mui & Anderson, 2008; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Because of this body of ethnographic and naturalistic research studies documenting the potential of the family as a site for young children's literacy development, educators have developed family literacy programs intended to build on and enhance children's literacy learning at home. Much of the research on family literacy programs has examined the impact on children's literacy development in the short term (e.g., Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2011; Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Jang, & Gagne, 2010; Brooks, Pahl, Pollard, & Rees, 2008; Phillips, Hayden, & Norris, 2006), and there is very little longitudinal research as to their impact. Furthermore, studies have tended to focus on young children's emergent print literacy knowledge or language development (e.g., Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000), and there is relatively little research that has examined the broader impact of family literacy programs in terms of their effects on home–school relationships, insights that parents gain in understanding schooling and how to support their children's learning, and how family literacy programs might benefit schools. As well, although parents are seen as playing an essential role in family literacy programs, there is a general dearth of research giving voice to their insights and perspectives.

Thus the current study is significant for several reasons. Despite the central roles that parents are expected to play in family literacy programs, this group has largely been ignored by researchers, even though they could provide a more expansive perspective on the effects of family literacy programs beyond children's early language and literacy development. As Swain and Brooks (in press), who studied family literacy in the United Kingdom and internationally, compellingly point out,

> parents are key players in FL programmes, not least because the agency they exert in whether they choose to attend or not, and the number enlisting, decide whether or not the programme is viable to run. We contend that research based upon insider insight and situated knowledge has the potential to produce bottom up evidence (Appleby, 2004). As insiders and consumers of the programmes, parents make vital contributions to policy and practice through their evaluations of the programme, but also through their insights on issues such as recruitment and retention.

> We therefore believe that parents' perspectives are key to designing future successful FL programmes (Hannon et al., 2006) and studying such views adds to understandings that will be useful to policy makers, local authority managers, head teachers, adult literacy teachers, early years teachers, parents, and researchers. (pp. 3–4)

Second, the parents in this study were able to reflect on and evaluate the program 20 years after they had participated in it and had seen their children proceed through school. That is, rather than thinking about anticipated or potential benefits of a family literacy program as parents in previous studies have done, usually after having just participated in a program with their four- and five-year-olds (e.g., Anderson & Morrison, 2007), the parents in this study had the benefit of having seen how their participation in the program had contributed (or had not contributed) to their children's literacy development and their learning as they proceeded through school. Related to this point, the years between their involvement in the program and this study would have provided time for them to reflect on the program and analyze its benefits and any shortcomings. Furthermore, two decades later, none of the parents had direct connections with the school or the teachers involved, and thus we postulated that they would feel that they could speak candidly about the program.

Framework

This study is informed by sociohistorical theory (Vygotsky, 1987; Wertsch, 1985) wherein learning is seen as social, as well as individual, with more competent or more experienced significant others supporting the learning of the skills and knowledge considered important in that particular context or community (Rogoff, 2003). Also important within this theory is the recognition that there are differences in the ways individual communities acculturate younger members. For example, in reference to literacy, Clay (1993) pointed out that the values ascribed to it, its functions and purposes, and how it is learned and taught vary considerably from one sociocultural context to the next. Thus, in this study, we were interested in understanding how parents saw their roles in supporting their children's learning, the types of activities and knowledge in the program they saw as valuable, and how their understanding of curriculum and pedagogy was influenced (or not) by their participation in the program.

Also informing this study is a theory of *social capital* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). A central tenet of this theory is that "cultural disposition, aptitudes, preferences, and behaviors/practices…are sent unconsciously and internalized through family socialization processes" (Symeou, 2007, p. 474). Some educators and researchers argue that middle class families have the necessary social

capital to ensure their children's success at school. As Laureau explains, "schools utilize particular linguistic structures, authority patterns, and types of curricula; children from higher social locations enter schools already familiar with these social arrangements" (1987, p. 74). Many children from working class and nonmainstream homes come to school not possessing this social capital and therefore cannot access the *codes of power* (Delpit, 2006) that enable them to succeed at school. We were particularly interested in ascertaining whether parents saw the family literacy program as enhancing families' knowledge of schooling, their interactions with teachers, their comfort level with schools, and otherwise "leveling the playing field" for them. Put another way, we wondered if the families believed the program contributed to their developing social capital that would enable them and their children to participate more successfully in school, knowing, of course, that they would not use that terminology.

Methodologically, this study draws on the construct of *episodic memory* (Tulving, 1983, 2002). Tulving distinguishes between semantic memory—the recalling of facts—and episodic memory, which he describes as "memory [that] is about happenings in particular places at particular times, or about 'what,' 'where,' and 'when'" (2002, p. 3). He later elaborated, "It is the only memory system that allows people to consciously re-experience past experiences" (Tulving, 2002, p. 6). Essentially then, episodic memory is autobiographical and allows one to recall and reflect on one's past experiences. Anderson and his colleagues, in their work on the long-term impact of museum visits, argue that episodic memory, unlike semantic memory, does not require rehearsal of information in order for it to be remembered or retrieved (Anderson & Shimizu, 2007; Anderson, Storksdieck, & Spock, 2007); it is imprinted in memory because of the impact of the experience. Thus, we theorized that families would remember and reflect on their participation in the family literacy program if it had a significant impact on them and if it had played a significant role in their lives.

Context

This study took place in Boonestown (all names are pseudonyms), a rural community of about 1,800 people in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Part of a larger incorporated town, Boonestown still retained its distinctiveness and strong sense of identity, and St. Mary's School, where the family literacy program was located, played a large part in this. With a population of about 300 students, this public school enrolled all children in the community from kindergarten through Grade 9, after which they attended a nearby high school for the final three years of secondary education.

Although the school had strong support from the community in the late 1980s, it was also facing many challenges. First, some of the children came from economically and socially disadvantaged homes where their early language and literacy experiences were different from those that school tends to privilege and build on (e.g., Heath, 1983). Second, the students consistently scored below expectations on standardized tests and other measures of achievement. Third, a considerable number of students dropped out of school once they reached the junior high or high school level (Norman, 1997). Fourth, the community lacked preschool and other organized early childhood programs. Finally, the principal and the staff realized that an inordinate number of students were being designated as having special needs. Believing that some of these challenges could be addressed by working with preschool children and their families, the school principal, with the support of his staff, appealed to the school district to implement "an early intervention program" (A. Mercer, personal communication, June 2007) to give the children a "head start." Responding to this identified need, the school district approved the establishment of a pilot "early intervention program," and district personnel began the work.

From the Ground Up

In the 1980s when this initiative began, there were very few models of family literacy programs generally and none that we knew of in Newfoundland and Labrador, a relatively isolated province of Canada with high unemployment, generally low literacy rates, and a large number of school dropouts. However, those charged with and responsible for developing the program intuitively knew the importance of community involvement from the beginning for initiatives such as this, and so a series of meetings was held with the school's Parent Advisory Committee, the Community Health Nurse, social workers, the priest of the Anglican Church that many of the families regularly attended, and the parents and other adults who would be participating in the program.

Based on this dialogue and discussion, the program that evolved consisted of monthly, two-hour sessions for four-year-olds and their parents or another significant adult. Sessions took place in the kindergarten classroom in the school, and the children and adults were encouraged to circulate among and engage in the various learning centers containing age-appropriate activities designed to promote children's language, literacy, and cognitive/intellectual development. The facilitators—the Grade 1 teacher and the kindergarten teacher, assisted by the district early childhood consultant—took care to model interactions with the children thought to support and promote children's learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). For example, they engaged the children in dialogic storybook reading, they explained to parents the importance of sorting and

counting in supporting young children's mathematical development, and they demonstrated through examples how children's writing develops from drawing and scribbling and how children's invented spelling indicates their emerging understanding of symbol–sound relationships and allows them to construct and represent meaning in print before they are able to spell conventionally. They also made sure to ask questions that promoted children's use of decontextualized language (e.g., Curenton & Justice, 2004; Snow, 1983); they drew children's attention to print and different texts and their functions and purposes (Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Lenters, & McTavish, 2012). They encouraged children to think beyond the here and now or the immediate context, what Siegel (1984) refers to as cognitive distancing. For example, when children labelled objects in the illustrations during shared book reading, they were encouraged to make connections between them and their own lived experiences. At each session, the facilitators provided each family with various learning resources to take and keep at home, including high quality children's books, writing and drawing materials, and so forth.

Method

A. Anderson and J. Anderson, the first and second authors, were both familiar with Boonestown, having lived there in the late 1980s when the family literacy program was developed and instituted. At that time, J. Anderson was the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction for the local school district that was responsible for St. Mary's School. He provided logistical and moral support for the project and worked with the primary consultant for the district and the teachers and principal at St. Mary's School in conceptualizing and developing the program. Because of other responsibilities, he was not involved in actually delivering the program, though he did visit sessions to lend moral support and to signal the district's interest in and commitment to the project. He left the district to assume his current position as a university professor after the first year of the program's implementation. Although he was aware of the program's continuation and success, he was not involved in it.

Cognizant of the lack of longitudinal research in family literacy programs, Anderson initiated contact with the people who had been involved in leading the program, who were very pleased that he was embarking on the research project and volunteered to lend any assistance, including helping to locate the families who had participated. To assist us with recruitment of the participants and with data collection, we employed a research assistant from the community who had recently graduated with a B.A. and was about to enter a two-year teacher education program. Interestingly, the research assistant had been one

of the children who had participated in the program with her mother as part of the initial cohort, but she reported having no recollection of the program.[1] It should be noted that the assistant's parents were not among the interviewees.

We were able to locate and contact 12 of the 18 or so families who had participated in the program nearly two decades earlier. As expected, some of the original families had moved elsewhere to find employment, and we were unable to locate them. Ten mothers agreed to participate in the study; the two remaining families were unable to participate for various reasons. We offered to interview the participants either in their homes or at a neutral location such as a coffee shop, the public library, a café, or restaurant. However, all ten participants asked to be interviewed in their homes.

Prior to commencing the interviews, J. Anderson worked with the research assistant and provided training in interviewing techniques, research ethics, and so forth. Accompanied by the research assistant, he interviewed two of the participants and afterward reviewed and discussed the interviewing process with the research assistant. She then conducted the third interview with the second author present, and over the next two weeks completed the remainder of the interviews on her own, according to the participants' availability. The interviews were recorded using a miniature digital recorder with a built-in microphone, which was usually placed unobtrusively on a table between the interviewer and the participant. The recorder was turned on just before the interview began and was turned off after it was completed. The interviewer created a digital recording file for each interview and identified the participants, the date, and location at the beginning of the interview (see Appendix). After data collection was completed, the audio files were transcribed verbatim. The research team next read through the entire data set and did an initial coding of the data. Using a constant–comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we looked for similarities and differences across the data set. We then grouped together similar codes into themes (Frost, 2011); we report these themes in the results section. A research assistant coded the data employing these themes, and an independent rater then coded about 20% of the data set. Inter-rater agreement was approximately 90%, and areas of disagreement were resolved after discussion.

Results

The analysis of the data revealed the following six major themes that describe the responses: (1) parents developing knowledge about literacy and learning, child development, and contemporary early childhood education and pedagogy; (2) the importance placed on social–emotional learning by the families; (3) the role of the family literacy program in helping children make

the transition from home to school in the kindergarten year; (4) parents' roles in supporting out-of-school learning; (5) the values that families saw in the structure of the program; and (6) concerns about the program and suggestions for improvement. Although this study was not a program evaluation, we feel it is important that this latter theme be included, because it is important to give voice to these concerns as expressed by parents.

Parents Developing Knowledge

One of the principal values that the participants attributed to the program was that it helped make the child-centered, play-based curriculum and pedagogy that their children would experience at school more transparent and understandable to them. That is, by working alongside their children at the learning centers in the classroom, by observing the modeling provided by the program facilitators, and through the ongoing discussions that were an integral part of the program, the families came to understand what early learning in a more formal setting "looked like." One parent commented, "I knew what was looked forward to and what they need and what was going to be done in kindergarten," while another said, "It helped me understand what the education of my child is gonna be looking like from the beginning." They also appreciated how their experiences helped them understand how they could support their children's learning and development. As one parent cogently put it,

> Helping the parents to understand their role, helping the parents understand how their child is going to be taught and how they will be learning and what would be available, the resources, you know, all that, the thing is, it's important for parents to be a part of that.

Another believed that the program levelled the playing field, as it were, by helping parents understand what was expected of children when they went to school and by supporting them by suggesting different ways that they could help their children "get ready for school." She elaborated,

> Ah, because before this program, a lot of children went to kindergarten, and they [had] absolutely no knowledge—anything regarding colors, numbers, and nothing. But with this way, at least every child got started, like they were a little bit prepared, right?

In addition to developing a better understanding of early childhood curriculum and pedagogy, parents also indicated that they developed a better understanding of children's development and children's learning. For example, some parents commented on individual differences among children, noting that they learn at different rates and have strengths in different areas. Others appeared cognizant of the tendency to "push" young children (Elkind, 1981)

when they are not developmentally ready to learn the targeted skills or acquire new knowledge (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). As one parent said, "I do not think they should [push] too much on the child, first, because…everything is exciting to them."

Researchers (e.g., Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991) have found that working class parents tend to favor skills-based curriculum and instruction involving structured activities, work sheets, and so on, tending to eschew learning through play. That these families from working class homes embraced the learning-through-play philosophy of the program—believing their children benefited from it—is likely attributable to the fact that the pedagogy was made *visible* (Gregory, Williams, Baker, & Street, 2004) to the families through the hands-on involvement, modeling, and discussion. Commenting on how her child enjoyed participating, one mother said, "They made it playful so that it did not seem like they were in school," while another remembered her child saying, "I would like to go to the water, I would like to go to the sandbox, and I think painting, of course." Another mother, reflecting on her own learning, said, "I never did know, child playing,why? [Now] I know it's good for them."

According to Lareau (1987) and others, working class families often do not understand the workings of schools, and some of them have unpleasant memories of their experiences there. Furthermore, historically, schools have tended not to involve families unless children were experiencing difficulties—a point brought home by one of the interviewees who said, "When we went to school, like even mother did not [indecipherable] anything, and if the mother came, that was bad. Like bad news!" Several parents commented on how, by participating in the program, they came to understand better, as one put it, "what was going on." They commented that they also got to know and understand the teachers better and, indeed, realized that the role of the teachers was more challenging and demanding than they had previously thought. In fact, several parents indicated that they had volunteered to help out at the school after the culmination of the program so that they could assist the teachers in their very demanding roles.

In summary, then, through their participation in the program, the families began to understand better the play-based, child-centered curriculum and pedagogy. They also developed insights into child development and came to recognize the importance of providing children with opportunities to engage in age-appropriate activities and experiences. Many of them commented on the value of play and the recognition that children learn through play. Finally, they indicated that they became familiar with the expectations and routines of school, got to know the teachers and other staff, and became more comfortable with being in school to the extent that they continued as parent volunteers.

Social–Emotional Learning

Because the program focused on literacy and early learning, obviously many of the responses alluded to the cognitive domain. Interestingly, several of the families also commented on how the program supported their children's social–emotional development. As explained earlier, there was a dearth of formal child care/early education opportunities in the community, and playgroups and the like were not common. Thus, families saw the program as a space where their children could interact with and get to know other children. As one parent commented, "I think that it was a really good chance to meet children their own age. Like the fact that they're too young to go outside to play." Although the community was quite small with most people knowing each other, in reality, some families felt isolated. For example, one mother commented, "Well, it gave them the opportunity to intertwine with other kids that we were living in an area that there wasn't [sic] a lot of children for her to play with." Elaborating on how her daughter learned prosocial skills such as sharing and attending as she interacted with other children, she elaborated, "…and when she went there, she got to learn how to share, listen to strangers—which was teachers—because that time they did not know her a lot." As with many contemporary families, some of the children came from single-child homes and, again, their parents recognized the broader social development that was promoted through the program, as was the case with D's mother, who said,

> D. has been the only child, right?…know kids and, like, more or less, a little second family there, when he went to there, and he had to share, and they shared toys, shared pencils. They all had little books that they had to work together, so they learn how to work as a group, as well as individual, right? So it showed them a lot of things, showed them a lot of things.

Therefore, while the program was intended to focus primarily on children's literacy and general cognitive development, it also appears to have had other positive consequences. As one of the participants put it, "So the human interaction...or whatever you want to call that, it's so important, along with book learning." Several of the parents also observed how their children made friends within the context of the program. Others commented on how it helped them develop confidence in their own abilities and also helped their children to develop confidence, especially when they transitioned to school, a theme that we address next.

Transition to School

Early childhood educators have long recognized that transitions from home to preschool and/or to school can be very challenging for children, and many educational jurisdictions have developed procedures and processes to help children and their families in this regard (Kagan & Tarrant, 2010). However, two decades ago in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, relatively little attention was paid to the important phenomenon of transitions in the early childhood years. One of the parents reflected on the experiences of her two older children's entry into kindergarten: "Apparently my son and daughter, when they start[ed] kindergarten, it was frightening them, it took a full year [to adjust], just kindergarten."

Many of the families commented on how the family literacy program helped their children make the transition into kindergarten by learning the routines and structures they would meet there. They commented on how their children "knew what to expect" and "what to do" when they entered kindergarten the next year. As one mother put it, "Yes, it did because by the time when she went to kindergarten, she knew the routine of what they had to do in the mornings." In addition, parents indicated that because their children had gotten to know the teacher and their classmates and had become familiar with the expectations and routines of the classroom, they entered kindergarten feeling comfortable and confident. Commenting on how she had accompanied her son to his first day in kindergarten the next year after participating in the family literacy program, one of them recalled, "He said, 'Ok, Mom you can go home now.' So this really prepared them; he was not…afraid." Another commented insightfully on how her accompanying her son to the sessions had allowed him to become comfortable with school in a highly supportive way, and he had no difficulties separating from his parents when he went to kindergarten the following year. Indeed, the support that the families described embodied the principles of scaffolding children's learning and development (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), a central tenet of Vygotskian theory.

Supporting Out-of-School Learning

Researchers have demonstrated that children greatly benefit from growing up in literacy-rich homes where their families encourage their engagement in a range of literacy events, school-like literacy practices, and nonschool literacy practices (e.g., Mui & Anderson, 2008; Purcell-Gates, 1996). Furthermore, as the literature on summer reading loss demonstrates (e.g., Allington, McGill-Franzen, & Camilli, 2007), children need continuing support from family or others in order to maintain what they have learned at school. Yet, one of the

criticisms of family literacy programs is that they download the responsibility for children's literacy learning from the school to the home (e.g., Whitehouse, 2001). Furthermore, school literacy and home or out-of-school literacy are sometimes positioned as oppositional or binaries. However, the dichotomy between school literacy and out-of-school literacy may be more of an issue for researchers and theorists than it is of practical importance for families.

Several perspectives with respect to this issue stood out with the families here. First, they tended to see education and learning as lifelong and occurring within and outside of schools, as reflected in the following comments:

> I think it's important because in reality, yes, a child goes to the school, and a child learns in the school environment from a teacher that is during the day. But that has to be sustained through the child's whole life, through the rest of their day, or through their evening, or so on.

> To me, it's not only about learning from books—learning to read and learning mathematics—those are the basics and very, very important. But to me, a child has to learn to interact with others; a child has to learn how to live in…the real world. And that's just as important to the education of any child as the book learning.

Families also saw the program as not only promoting the importance of parents and significant others supporting young children's early learning, but also making explicit how they could enact that support. That is, as we have argued elsewhere (Anderson, Anderson, & Morrison, 2012), although parents are inundated with the message in the popular media and from various educational, governmental, and community agencies about how they are their child's first and most important teacher, very little is done to make explicit to parents how they are to actualize that role. One participant, articulating what she saw as valuable in the program, reflected this reality:

> Helping the parents to understand their role, helping the parents understand how their child is going to be taught and how they will be learning and what would be available, the resources, you know, all that's going to be a part of that.

Another commented that, "All parents need to know the importance, their importance, or their roles, the importance of their roles in their child's learning." Others noted that while they would be indoctrinated on the importance of reading with their children *after* the children began school, through their participation in the program, they became more aware of the role of shared reading and other literacy activities in their children's literacy development prior to school and also in preparing their children for literacy instruction in school (Heath, 1982). As well, several parents valued the modeling of how

to support young children's learning on the part of the facilitators, while others commented on the high quality and engaging children's books that were provided and how they continued to share these books with their children at home. One parent commented on how she observed other parents reading with and interacting with their children, implying she also learned from that experience.

In summation, families realized that learning is an ongoing process, not restricted to formal instruction in school. They appreciated how they were made aware of how they could support their children's learning at home and in the community, and they valued the modeling and the resources provided them.

Structure of the Program

There are many different models of family literacy programs (e.g., Wasik, 2012), and while the so called four component—early childhood education, adult education, parent–child together time, parent time—or "Kenan model" (Darling & Hayes, 2004) is often presented as being the "best," we know of very little comparative, empirical research that has tested the efficacy of different program configurations, models, or structures. As was pointed out earlier, when the program was being developed at St. Mary's School, there were few available models of family literacy programs, and so the developers were guided by the research in early learning and development, early childhood education, adult learning, and, to a large extent, intuition or what made sense for the context in which they were working.

That the families valued the structure of the program was implicit in the themes discussed earlier. For example, having the opportunity to work alongside their children in the classroom provided parents with the opportunity to observe their children's learning and development. They also saw how their children engaged with the age-appropriate activities and materials at the various learning centers and appreciated how children learn through play. They valued the facilitators' modeling and commented that the facilitators made transparent and explicit how significant others can *scaffold* (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) or support children's learning and development. Moreover, they valued the materials that were provided, especially the high-quality children's books that were sent home from each session.

Parents also specifically mentioned what they saw as positive attributes of the structure and orientation of the program. For example, one mentioned how she valued the social aspect of the program and how she got to know her neighbors and the other participants better over the course of the year. Several parents also mentioned the value of the learning centers where they worked one-on-one with their child as being very valuable. One mother recalled, "they

were interested in what was going on and different centers, and they were really helped," and as indicated previously, others mentioned specific centers such as sand and water and how these helped their children learn and helped the parents understand learning-through-play. Others mentioned the modeling that the facilitators provided, especially in terms of shared book reading. Overall, then, the structure of the program seemed to work well for the families, especially the "hands-on" nature of it, as one of them noted.

Program Improvement/Issues and Concerns

To recap, all of the interviewed families appreciated the program and were very supportive of it. Nevertheless, there were several areas that they felt could be improved. Although the aim of this study was not to evaluate the program, we believe it is important to share the concerns of the families for several reasons. First, we believe that it is incumbent on us to report what the parents perceived as issues or concerns and not just what they saw as positive. Second, we think that this information is important for program developers and program providers to consider to insure that programs are meeting the needs of participating families. Third, the lack of a more critical stance in family literacy program evaluation has consistently been identified in the literature (e.g., Hannon, 2010; Thomas, 1998), and we believe it is imperative to listen to families' voices when they have suggestions for improvement.

The most frequent suggestion for improving the program was to hold sessions more frequently than the once-a-month schedule that had been followed. This sentiment was captured by the comment below in response to the question about how the program might have been improved:

> The frequency, I guess, the number of times that was available to the children, maybe could have been a little bit more. I am not really sure once a month was enough to, ah, for them to retain the memory of whatever [inaudible].

In terms of optimal frequency, several participants mentioned having sessions "four times a month," another mentioned "two weeks a month," while another opined that, "I do not think that any amount of it would have been too much."

As mentioned earlier, the program reflected a learning-through-play paradigm with activities designed to promote foundational early learning. All of the participants seemed to appreciate this aspect, and indeed, some of them mentioned it. However, one person also felt that not enough attention was paid to helping children learn "sounds" which we interpreted to mean letter–sound relationships or phonics. Also, while some of the participants appreciated the promotion of children's early writing, scribbling, and drawing, one participant

in particular took issue with invented spelling, which we assume her child engaged in later in kindergarten and Grade 1. Seemingly in response to the teachers' encouragement for families to accept and celebrate young children's early writing, she said, "If she [daughter] said like cat, k-t-t, I had to say that was correct. I did not agree with that."

In keeping with contemporary thinking in early childhood education, the developers tried to ensure that open-ended activities (Hertzog, 1998) were provided so that children could engage in them according to their development and levels of proficiency. Interestingly, one participant indicated that the activities were too difficult for some children, while others believed the activities were not challenging enough. It appears, then, that although the parents appreciated and understood some aspects of the child-centered, developmentally appropriate philosophy of the program, other aspects were not as apparent to them, and perhaps more explicit explanation was needed.

Discussion

Because of the relatively small number of participants and the lack of randomization, the results of this study should be interpreted cautiously. As well, it is important to point out that the parents were relying on memories of their participation in the program two decades ago. Although they identified some concerns with the program and offered suggestions as to how it could have been improved, it might be that their recollections are positively skewed. Nevertheless, the findings from this study should be of interest to those concerned about family literacy from theoretical, research, and practical perspectives.

As was indicated earlier, this is the only study that we know of where parents were asked to reflect back on and, we believe, evaluate the efficacy of a family literacy program after their children had completed school and therefore reaped any perceived benefits of participating in it. The separation of years, we believe, allowed the parents to think about the program more objectively, now that they and their children were no longer associated with the school. That they all looked back on the program fairly positively after 20 years and were able to articulate in detail how it supported their children's learning and their own understanding, we believe, speaks to the impact the program had on the families and the children.

In her study comparing and contrasting working class and middle class families' participation in school, Lareau (1987) found that because middle class families felt more comfortable in the school setting than did working class families, they became more knowledgeable about the expectations of schooling and ways that they could support their children's learning. Because they were

more familiar with school routines and policies and the teachers and other personnel, they also were able to advocate on behalf of their children. Lareau also concluded that the clubs and other out-of-school activities that the middle class families had the financial resources, as well as the time, to enroll their children in served as sites where parents networked, exchanging information and knowledge about children, learning, and schooling. We propose that by welcoming families into the classroom, working with them to develop an understanding of curriculum and pedagogy, and supporting them in developing relationships and networks, the family literacy program served to support these working class parents in developing social capital, approximating in many ways that of the middle class families in Lareau's study.

It was beyond the scope of this study to examine the impact of the program on children's literacy and learning. However, Norman (1997) tracked achievement of the first cohort of children to participate in the program and whose parents were interviewed in the current study. For example, comparing Canadian Test of Basic Skills results of this cohort of children in 1993 when they were in Grade 4 with previous Grade 4 cohorts who had participated in the three year assessment cycle, she reported average scores as follows: 20th percentile in 1984; 37th percentile in 1987; 30th percentile in 1990; and 50th percentile in 1993. Norman stated that, "the 1993 results showed the Grade 4 class [the first cohort of children to have participated in the family literacy program] at the 50th percentile…the first…class to [ever] reach these levels" (p. 44). Of course, the design of Norman's study did not allow claims of causality, but as she pointed out, the only factor that seemed to have changed in the school to account for the marked improvement in achievement was the introduction of the family literacy program.

Norman's findings are also consistent with converging evidence that family literacy programs do have a significant impact on children's early literacy development (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Anderson et al., 2011; Brooks et al., 2008; Phillips et al., 2006). In addition, the results of the current study are consistent with those of Swain and Brooks (in press) indicating that family literacy programs can have positive results for parents. For example, the parents reported that the program helped make explicit the knowledge and skills that would support their children's learning once they entered kindergarten. They indicated that they came to understand the learning-through-play philosophy that their children would encounter in the primary grades at school. They also told us that they became aware of exactly how they could support their children's early learning.

The current study also contributes to the growing literature on retrospective interviewing and other methods that tap participants' memories as a way

of measuring the long-term impact of events and experiences in their lives. As previously noted, Anderson and his colleagues used this technique extensively relative to experiences with museums, exhibitions, fairs, and so forth (e.g., Anderson & Shimizu, 2007). As researchers, we were surprised but very impressed at the vividness and detail of the families' memories, and we see this method as being appropriate for examining other family literacy programs. Especially important, we believe, is that families are able to reflect on and evaluate their experiences after having the benefit of seeing their children progress through school and make their way in life now as adults.

Of course, this distancing also allowed the families to offer constructive criticism. For example, nearly all of the families observed that the sessions were too infrequent and that the program needed to have been extended. Participants also identified issues that they found troubling, as in the case of the parent who did not appreciate or understand invented spelling and its role in learning to read and write in English.

Conclusion

Although doubts about the efficacy of family literacy programs persist in some quarters, we believe this study contributes to the converging evidence that family literacy programs can positively impact young children and their families. That is, if the "family, home, and community are the true drivers of a child's education" (National Center for Family Literacy, 2013, para. 3) and families are indeed their child's first and most important teacher, it appears imperative that opportunities be included for them to provide feedback about their experiences in family literacy programs, as we did in this study. This study also suggests that programs such as the one at St. Mary's School can help families develop the knowledge or social capital that will assist them in supporting their children's learning and schooling in the long term. Researchers have tended to focus on the effects of family literacy programs on participants' literacy or more general cognitive development and, although these are obviously important, the results of this study suggest the impact of family literacy programs go beyond these, at least from the perspective of participants. Finally, the study supports the notion that tapping into families' memories of their experiences can yield valuable information that educators and others can utilize as they develop initiatives designed to support young children's success in literacy, in school, and in life.

Endnote

[1]During the study, we met several of the children who had participated in the original program. As young adults, none of them now had any memories of the program, although they recalled hearing their parents occasionally make positive references to it over the years. All 10 children whose parents were interviewed had completed high school, and those we met were doing quite well in their careers.

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Appendix. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

I am working with ($_{\text{participants name}}$) in ($_{\text{name of community}}$) and today is ($_{\text{date}}$).

First, thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview. We are interested in hearing from you about the program that you and your child participated in the year before he or she went to kindergarten at St. Mary's School.

1. Did the program help **you** help **your child** when he or she went to school in kindergarten?
2. If **yes**, in what ways **did it help you help your child** when he or she went to school in kindergarten? If **no**, why do you think the program **did not help you help your child** when he or she went to school in kindergarten?
3. Did the program **help your child** when he or she went to school in kindergarten?
4. If **yes**, in what ways did it **help your child** when he went to school in kindergarten? If **no**, why do you think the program **did not help your child** when he or she went to school in kindergarten?
5. What aspects or parts of the program did you find particularly helpful?
6. In what ways were these parts or aspects of the program helpful?
7. What aspects or parts of the program did you find not helpful?
8. In what ways were these parts or aspects of the program not helpful?
9. Did the program help you help your child as he got older and progressed through the grades?
10. If so, in what ways do you think the program helped your child later on in school as he or she got older and progressed through the grades? (If not, why not?)
11. What else could the school have done to help you support your child in school?
12. The program that was developed at St. Mary's is now used throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. Why do you think it is important for schools to be working with parents as was done in the program you and your child attended?
13. If you were to give advice to schools about working with parents, what would you say?

First-Year Preschool and Kindergarten Teachers: Challenges of Working With Parents

Sehba Mahmood

Abstract

The significance of relationships between the parents and teachers of preschool and kindergarten children is well established. Teachers and schools are presumed to be responsible for lack of parent–teacher collaboration. Internationally, early childhood teacher education programs recognize this and offer courses related to parents and families. This study documented the views of preschool and kindergarten teachers in their first year of teaching, focusing on areas of concern about working with parents. This research utilizes the social exchange theory as its conceptual framework to examine if the absence of reciprocity from parents can result in problems for new teachers. Interviews conducted with 14 first-year teachers in New Zealand indicate that parental involvement remains challenging for early childhood teachers. The four constructs in the findings reflected the social exchange theory: lack of reciprocity, difficulties of building relationships, power-dependence, and social identity of early childhood teachers. The findings reveal that, despite the new teachers' efforts, some parents are not responsive. The successful functioning of this partnership requires active participation and willingness of not only the teachers but parents as well. Simply portraying the "ideal" image of a relationship that the new teacher should be establishing through preservice teacher education is inadequate. The rhetoric regarding parent–teacher relationships should reflect the reality of practice. To ensure the success of new teachers, the challenges of working with families should be part of the explicit discourse of teacher education.

Key Words: preschool, kindergarten, teachers, parents, social exchange theory, New Zealand, United States, family, involvement, challenges, barriers

Introduction

The importance of parent–teacher collaboration and its positive impact on children is well documented (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Furthermore, a meta-analysis of 41 studies examined the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement, confirming a strong association between them (Jeynes, 2005). The significance of this relationship between the parents and teachers of preschool and kindergarten children is even more crucial and has been propounded over a number of years (Honig, 1975; Powell, 2003). Research has shown that when parent–professional partnerships and family-centered practices are adopted, families are satisfied; additionally, parental beliefs about their own self-efficacy and empowerment increase (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007). This understanding has led to the majority of international teacher education programs adopting standards related to working with families. In the USA, the standard requires teacher education programs to prepare candidates who can create respectful, reciprocal relationships that support and empower families and to involve all families in their children's development and learning (NAEYC, 2011). In Australia, teachers are expected to engage professionally with parents, carers (caregivers), and the community (AITSL, 2011). The UK Professional Standards for Qualified Teacher Status stipulate that teachers recognize and respect the contribution that parents and carers can make to the development and well-being of children and young people (Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2008). The standard for graduating teachers in New Zealand is to have the knowledge and dispositions to work effectively with parents, caregivers, families, and communities (NZTC, 2007).

These standards have influenced the curricula of teacher education programs. Hence, most early childhood teacher education programs offer courses for working with parents and families. The schools and colleges of education advocate for and teach these courses, as research shows that constructive relationships between teachers and parents can contribute to children's learning and well-being at home and in the early childhood setting. Such relationships give young children a sense of continuity, trust, and security (Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk, 2010). Given the positive influence parental involvement has on children, beginning early childhood teachers learn how to effectively communicate with and involve parents in their children's education. There is no dearth of literature on this topic, which has been researched for

many decades now and continues to be updated (Keyser, 2004; Koralek, 2007). However, according to Miretzky (2004), most of the literature on parent involvement encourages interactions that continue an unequal relationship. She asserts that newsletters, workshops for parents to help children with homework more effectively, and encouraging teachers to contact parents more frequently does create more of an interaction between the school and the home, but also continue to keep parents in the role of visitors. Jeynes (2011) states that the most powerful aspects of parental involvement are more subtle, rather than a simple focus on writing newsletters as mentioned by Miretzky. These include parents maintaining high expectations of their children, communicating with children about school, and parental style (Jeynes, 2011). Experts view parent involvement differently. However, there is general agreement about the benefits of this collaboration for all concerned. Thus, it is important to consider new teachers' views on building relationships with families.

The early years of teaching are critical in influencing both the quality of teaching and the teacher's retention in the profession (OECD, 2005). Buckley, Schneider, and Shang (2004) contend that one significant factor for teacher retention is improving teachers' relationships with parents and the broader community. These authors assert that strategies to accomplish this have been a focus of education reform for decades, but progress is difficult, and the challenge of increasing parental involvement remains, especially in urban districts. Over the years, other studies have confirmed this. A 1991 survey of first-year teachers in the U.S. found that 70% of teachers thought that parents viewed schools and teachers as adversaries (Metropolitan Life, 1991). Almost a decade and a half later, "new teachers consider engaging and working with parents as their greatest challenge and the area they were least prepared to manage during their first year" (Metropolitan Life, 2005, p. 5). Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, and Reed (2002) suggest teachers with limited experiences or skills may reach out to solicit participation only to give up prematurely if efforts are not immediately successful. Hence, it can be concluded that parental involvement remains problematic, especially for teachers in the first year of teaching. The U.S. Census Bureau (2011) reports that there are 691,000 preschool and kindergarten teachers in the U.S. alone; this implies that very large numbers of people globally are involved in this relationship. Thus, it is imperative to examine the challenges faced by new teachers in establishing and maintaining parent–teacher collaboration. This is important for retaining new teachers in the profession. In turn, this will ensure the quality of teaching and learning experiences, as recent research has shown that early childhood centers with high rates of teacher turnover have lower levels of global quality (Cassidy, Lower, Kintner-Duffy, Hegde, & Shim, 2011).

The aim of this study was to document the views of preschool and kindergarten teachers in their first year of teaching about working with the parents of their students, focusing on areas of concerns. It is recognized that beginning teachers also have positive experiences with parents. However, this paper is delimited to difficult aspects of the new teachers' work with parents and families. Exploring new teachers' views pertaining to this part of their work provides the early childhood teacher education field with opportunities to reconsider some portion of courses offered as well as practicing teachers' professional development needs. This study was carried out in New Zealand.

A study conducted by an international ECE Task Force (Education International, 2010) describes early childhood education in the U.S. consisting of part-day and full-day programs. Similarly, half-day and full-day programs are offered in New Zealand. Early childhood education provision in both countries includes purchase-of-services (private sector) and public or community (not-for-profit sector) systems. Other similarities are that higher numbers of early childhood teachers in both countries are employed by the private sector (Education Counts, 2013; Education International, 2010), the differences in pay scales of teachers working in public and private programs, and the professional status of teachers working with young children. In New Zealand, remuneration for early childhood teachers varies greatly (TeachNZ, n.d.) according to the type of service—community (not-for-profit) or private. Although the New Zealand Ministry of Education funds early childhood services to pay the same salaries to qualified early childhood teachers as those paid to primary and secondary teachers, yet, "there is no effective mechanism to ensure that early childhood teachers across the sector are paid at the same rates" (Education International, 2010, p. 64). Teachers who work in community (not-for-profit) kindergartens have pay parity with primary and secondary teachers and are better paid. This is similar in the U.S., as, "typically, teachers working in public school programs receive a much higher salary than those teachers working in private settings" (Education International, 2010, p. 87). Kane (2008) reports that in New Zealand, people working in early education such as teachers, head teachers, management committee members, and student teachers are all convinced that their role and work is fundamentally misunderstood by the wider society. The low status of early childhood teachers in New Zealand is also reflected in the U.S.: "The status of teachers involved in early childhood education in the U.S. is markedly lower compared to the status of teachers in primary and secondary levels" (Education International, 2010, p. 87). The congruence of many key indicators in the field in the two countries as outlined above provides a basis to suggest that this study could be relevant to the experiences of first-year early childhood education teachers in many places.

The participants completed a three-year early childhood education teaching program from a New Zealand college of education. They all graduated in the same year and had completed the same courses in their teacher education program. These new teachers fulfilled the requirements of two family-related courses. In the first year of training, they studied family from a sociological perspective. In the second year, they studied about working with parents as partners. Of the 14 participants, seven worked in public not-for-profit centers, and the other half worked in private early childhood education settings. There was no attempt to recruit participants based on their demographic characteristics. The criterion was that they were in their first year of teaching with the same educational background. All 14 participants were women between the ages of 21 years to their early 30s. Europeans are 67.6% of New Zealand's population (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). This was reflected in the participant pool, as 10 participants identified themselves as European, 2 as indigenous Maori, and 1 as Samoan.

Conceptual Framework: Social Exchange Theory

The aim of this study was to document first-year teachers' views of the difficulties of their relationships with students' parents. Relationships are mutual; however, the general perception is that teachers and schools are responsible for the deficits in parent–teacher collaboration. For example, Tett (2001) refers to it as the control that professionals have imposed on schooling, while Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) conclude that the problems in the parent–teacher relationship arise from the constant "othering" of parental knowledge by teachers (p. 242). Similarly, Kalyanpur, Harry, and Skrtic (2000) contend that barriers to parent–teacher collaboration are a result of broader systemic problems within the education system itself, such as the hierarchical structure in which teachers are assumed to have knowledge of best practices for children, while parental knowledge and beliefs are devalued. Thus, much has been written about the power schools and teachers hold over parents. This study employs social exchange theory as its conceptual framework to examine the parent–teacher relationship.

Social exchange theory is among the most influential conceptual paradigms for understanding workplace behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Social exchange involves a series of interactions that generate obligations. Within social exchange theory, these interactions are usually seen as interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person. Social exchange theory's success proposition delineates that "for all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action under similar stimulus conditions" (Homans, 1974, p.

16). According to Chibucos, Leite, and Weis (2005), social exchange theory assumes that because of the competitive nature of social systems, exchange processes lead to differentiation of power and privilege in social groups. Hence, this study is well situated in the social exchange theory as it meets the abovementioned key assumptions of this theory. It documents the views of new teachers as they work with parents, thus these interactions are symbiotic and reliant on the actions of the other person. Further, it posits that if particular actions of teachers or parents are reciprocated, then such actions are more likely to be repeated. The study focuses on aspects of teachers' work that they found troublesome. Therefore, this theory provides a lens to view differentiation of power and privilege between new teachers and parents with whom they found it difficult to work.

Social exchange theory studies the mutual gratifications persons provide one another that sustain social relations. As per this theory, social relationships develop depending on the exchange of resources between parties and the weighing of costs and benefits. In early childhood education programs, social exchange theory can be applied to parent–teacher relationships. According to Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, and Moodie (2009), the perceived benefits of parent involvement in an early childhood education program can be tangible (e.g., parent education courses) or intangible (e.g., a warm and welcoming environment). For example, if a parent was asked to volunteer in the early childhood education program, the social exchange theory predicts that the family member would begin to weigh the cost of volunteering in the program against the benefits the family receives from the program. If the parent feels that the benefit, whether tangible or intangible, she receives from the program outweighs the costs of volunteering, she may decide to volunteer in the program. However, if the cost of volunteering outweighs the benefits, then she may decide not to volunteer.

Social exchange requires others to reciprocate, and mutual reinforcements influence the parties in the relationship. Thus, behavior that generates positive consequences is likely to be repeated, whereas if reinforcement fails or if reciprocity is not observed, then relations tend to terminate. Further, according to Blau (1964), the failure to reciprocate validates claims to superiority, and the unwillingness to enter into "an egalitarian exchange relation is likely to produce hostility" (p. 113). An example of this could be the notion of the teacher as the professional fountain of knowledge, thus dispossessing the parents of their roles as the primary stakeholder in the education of their children; parents are likely to resent such a relationship. Trust is a core principle of social exchange theory; therefore, a failure to reciprocate "engenders loss of trust" (Blau, 1964, p. 108). Hence, if a mutual trust evolves between the parent and the teacher,

the extent and commitment to the partnership will increase. On the contrary, if trust between these parties is not developed or is lost, then the commitment to this relationship will begin to diminish, as will feelings of engagement.

In reciprocal exchanges, a comparable inequality is produced when actors reciprocate each other's giving at different rates. If disadvantaged actors must give more frequently to maintain their powerful partner's intermittent reciprocity, they pay more for the benefits they receive and their advantaged partner pays less (Molm, Collett, & Schaefer, 2006). Earlier, Blau (1964) cautioned that established power enables an individual to compel others to provide services without offering a fair return. This unequal exchange can happen in parent–teacher relationships. For example, a kindergarten teacher might be reaching out to parents for something she believes is important. However, if the parent ignores this, then this implies that the parent is the powerful actor in this network. This reflects Blau's warning that unequal power leads to unequal benefits in relationships.

Molm (2003) emphasized the early stage of relationship development. Therefore, relationship development is analogous to climbing a ladder. The goal achieved at step one, successfully grasping the next rung, provides the foundation for an even higher climb. This makes it imperative to help beginning teachers succeed in their relationship building with parents and provides a rationale for documenting teachers' concerns early on in their careers. Linking parent–teacher relationships and social exchange theory is a relatively unexplored area of research and is not represented to any great extent in the existing literature on this topic. Hence, it is envisaged that social exchange theory may shed light on how these relationships influence and affect new teachers to exercise power in their daily lives.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative framework, as this researcher was "genuinely interested in the subject, both in terms of the overall phenomenon and the people who can shed light on it" (Toma, 2000, p. 180). Qualitative research focuses on situational, contextual issues embedded in the actions and meanings of the participants, thus it was suited to documenting the concerns of new teacher–parent relationships. This study could be indicative of the experiences of new early childhood education teachers in other contexts, as it may provide a vicarious link with the reader's experience and thus can be a basis for generalization. According to Stake (1978), to generalize in this way is to be both intuitive and empirical. These naturalistic generalizations are arrived at by recognizing the similarities of issues in and out of context and by "sensing the natural covariations of happening" (Stake, 1978, p. 6). Hence, readers are

invited to compare connections to their contexts. A researcher using qualitative methods can gain an insider's view of the field of study. However, the close involvement of the researcher can often raise methodological or moral issues. This researcher did not know the participants and had never met them prior to the study. There was no conflict of interest, as the researcher was not their teacher, employer, or in any other position of influence. Despite this, the power differential between the researcher and the participants is accepted. Further, it is acknowledged that a female researcher can often elicit material from other women with ease (Finch, 1984), and this can raise ethical issues. Recognizing this, procedures are clearly stated, aiming for an incisive, scholarly work that can also be useful for application in the field.

Data Collection and Analysis

The first contact with the participants was made through a college of education faculty member, who invited recent graduates to this study. Those people who agreed to participate also provided their telephone numbers. This investigator's initial contact with participants was via telephone. During this call, the purpose of the study and the nature of the participant's involvement in the research were explained, and confidentiality and anonymity of the participant's contribution were assured. Participant information sheets, interview questions, consent forms, and ethics approvals were sent out. The next telephone contact set up a time and place for an interview that was convenient for them. Individual participants were interviewed personally; each interview lasted for approximately one and a half hours. It was important to get an understanding of the new teachers' perspectives on working with parents in their own words, thus interviews were considered a useful strategy. It was envisaged that this method would allow a broad range of issues to emerge. Prior to the interview commencing, written informed consent was obtained from each participant. These interviews were conducted in the sixth or seventh month of their first year of working after graduating from the early childhood teacher education program. The primary research question was: What are the new teachers' concerns in working with parents? The interviews were guided by the questions below, which emanated from the broader aim of this study.

1. Why did you choose early childhood teaching?
2. What do you see as your role in working with parents?
3. What are the difficulties of your day-to-day communication with parents?
4. What are some challenges that you did not anticipate?
5. What were some concerns of working in this particular context? (socioeconomic area, cultural differences, any others).

The purpose of these interviews was to gather thick descriptions of the challenges experienced by beginning early childhood teachers in their work with parents. Hence, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to explore, probe, and ask questions that elucidated and illuminated the particular topic (Patton, 2003). The first question was useful in opening the conversation and establishing reasons for participants' career choice. The subsequent questions reflected the overarching research question. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed; names and identifying features of their early childhood settings were removed from the transcript and pseudonyms applied for teachers and anyone mentioned (including students).

As qualitative research is iterative, data collection and analyses were concurrent. For example, as the first interview was transcribed, it revealed some points about preservice courses that were probed in future interviews. The interview transcription was verbatim; as these transcripts were read, parts of the text were identified and marked, and then these were reviewed. The process of open coding allowed the researcher to mark sections of the transcripts by naming or using the participants' words that related to a specific subject. Hence, at this stage, coding the data was at the concrete level of analysis. Through comparison, the codes were summarized to the first level of "abstraction" (Punch, 1998, p. 208); these are identified as categories. The next phase of analysis was at a further conceptual level; this aided in the creation of specific constructs. The aim here was to identify the "underlying essence of the phenomena being studied" (Daly, 2007, p. 220). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) refer to these as "theoretical constructs" (p. 67). Social exchange theory, which is the theoretical framework of this study, is evident in these constructs. In summary:

- The codes were identified through interview transcripts; these were at the concrete level, as they were the actual words or phrases from the transcripts.
- The categories were the first level of abstraction, and they were reached through comparison of codes.
- Categories were organized at a higher conceptual level to identify constructs.

Figure 1 delineates the data analysis process. The construct, "Lack of Reciprocity" is taken as an example. As the findings indicate, this construct consisted of three categories: communication difficulties, uncertainty of pedagogic expectation, and parental hostility. Figure 1 uses two of these categories as an example. Instead of examples for the third category, this part of the figure is used to explain how the concrete data from the interviews led to the constructs to identify the underlying essence of the topic of this study.

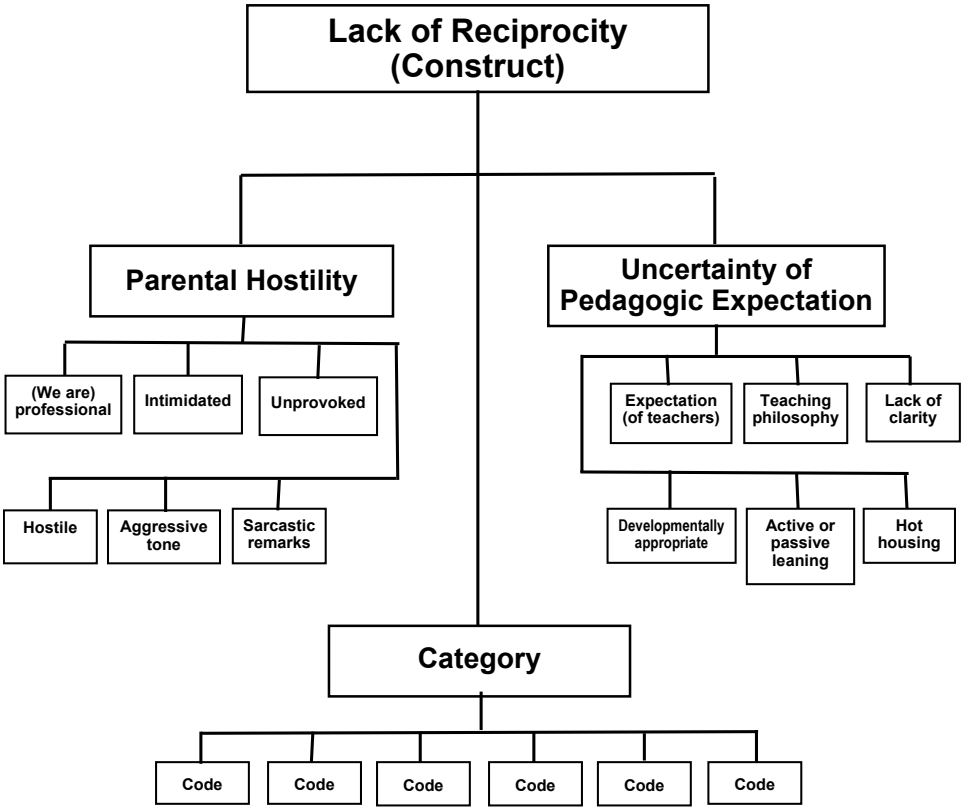

Figure1. Codes to Constructs

Reliability and Validity

Qualitative studies do not neatly fit into the traditional concepts of reliability and validity. For example, a study of inter-rater reliability in qualitative research by Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, and Martaeu (1997) concluded a hallmark of qualitative research is that it is inherently subjective. Thus, analysis is a form of interpretation, and interpretation involves a dialogue between researcher and data in which the researcher's own views have important effects (Morse, 1994). Hence, this study has employed approaches that are suited to qualitative research. To safeguard rigor, verification strategies such as ensuring methodological coherence and sampling sufficiency; developing a dynamic relationship between sampling, data collection, and analysis; and thinking theoretically were employed, as recommended by Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002). Methodological coherence was ensured through congruence between the research question and the methods employed. A qualitative investigation provided the best means for exploring the first-year teachers' concerns regarding their work with parents. The sample was appropriate; it consisted of

participants who were first-year early childhood teachers, as they have the best knowledge of the research topic. This first-hand information ensured effective saturation of categories with optimal quality data. Data collection and analysis were a parallel process; this mutual interaction confirmed what was known and what the researcher needed to know. For example, it was already known through earlier studies that parents in lower socioeconomic areas are somewhat less involved in their children's schools. However, the interviews revealed information related to parents in higher socioeconomic areas; this was further explored and examined through the process of iterative data collection and analysis. The theoretical framework of social exchange theory was utilized to interpret and analyze the data; this led to a deeper conceptual understanding of the challenges faced by new teachers. "Together, all of these verification strategies incrementally and interactively contribute to and build reliability and validity, thus ensuring rigor" (Morse et al., 2002, p. 19).

Findings

Five constructs were identified from the data; four of these reflected the social exchange theory, which was the theoretical framework in this study. The first construct is titled Lack of Reciprocity because it describes new teachers' experiences in which their efforts in trying to reach the parents were not mutual. This includes the following three categories: Lack of Communication, Uncertainty of Pedagogic Expectations, and Parental Hostility. The second construct, Difficulties of Building Relationships, depicts how differing contexts of parents make it a struggle to form connections. The three categories for this construct are Higher Socioeconomic Level, Lower Socioeconomic Level, and Cultural Differences. The third construct, entitled Power-Dependence, explains how the absence of expected exchanges can generate the problem of inequality in relations. This covers the category of Parent Volunteering. The fourth construct, Social Identity of Early Childhood Teachers, clarifies the new teachers' opinions regarding the status of their profession and its links to how parents respond to them. The category for this is titled Status of the Profession. The final construct did not indicate links to the social exchange theory, rather it reflected the interview question, "What are some challenges that you did not anticipate?" Thus, it was titled Unanticipated Challenges. The category for this is Preservice, as the participants referred to their present challenges in relation to their college courses. Statistical generalization of the findings presented in the next section is not intended, but the findings can be applied by "naturalistic generalization" (Stark & Torrance, 2005, p. 34), thus readers may recognize aspects of their own experience and intuitively generalize.

The participants chose early childhood teaching as a career because they wanted to "make a difference for children," "work in a helping profession," "give something back to my community," and they "enjoyed working with children." In responding to the question, "What do you see as your role in working with parents?" all 14 participants were positive, as the following examples indicate:

> I would like to support parents in their role; I know they are the primary people in the child's life.
>
> As a teacher, my role is to follow the parents' aspirations and views. I have to work to build closer connections between the home and the center [early childhood education program].
>
> Effective working relationships and involving parents with their child are important for me.
>
> My role right now, I would say, [is to] develop two-way communication about children's learning.

The new teachers described their role was to "work" with parents, "in partnership with parents;" they used terms such as sharing, participating, communicating, collaborating, respecting, and belonging to describe their role. Eight new teachers also emphasized that they want parents to view them as "approachable" and "friendly." It is noted from the outset that the focus of this study was documenting the concerns of beginning early childhood teachers; this in no way negates the positive relationships that they were forming with parents. However, each of the 14 participants had experienced some parents with whom they found it difficult to work. In early childhood education programs, the teachers have a triadic relationship with the child and the parents. Therefore, the value of this relationship to the career of a first-year teacher cannot be overemphasized.

Construct 1: Lack of Reciprocity

Communication Difficulties

In this study, first-year teachers felt that, as they were settling into their new positions, communication with parents could be difficult. Nearly all (13) participants mentioned this area of difficulty. There was variety in the types of communication issues, from parents who found it difficult to communicate in English to parents who simply chose to ignore the teacher's request. Parents who do not follow the school's policies can make this a further challenge:

> Some parents don't seem to understand that when their child is sick they cannot bring them to the preschool; it is in the policy, and the parents

> signed it when they enrolled their child. We even send newsletters—doesn't make a difference to some; it is just those few [parents].

Participants used many strategies to involve parents, such as approaching parents personally and notice boards with center happenings. However, they reported that despite these efforts involving some parents was difficult. One respondent explained how she was trying to overcome the problem of lack of communication with the parents, but it seemed that her efforts did not make much difference:

> We used to put the children's art on the shelf for the parents to collect, but it would sit there and sit there, and parents wouldn't pick it up. But now I have this special sign to go and check. Today a father flew in, dropped off, and flew out. He was so fast, and his child has these six paintings, and they haven't been picked up in three weeks. It's a shame.

The teacher wanted the parents to pick up the child's art work, as she believed that it would be a wonderful opportunity for conversations between the child and parents about what the child was doing at preschool. She reported on a positive experience of a parent who regularly picked up her daughter's paintings. The teacher explained that in kindergarten, they were talking about things to sit on, such as chairs and benches and so on. The children were drawing and painting these. The little girl came in one morning and sang the nursery rhyme, "Pussy cat, pussy cat....under her chair." The new teacher reported feeling "chuffed" [very pleased], as it showed her that the mother was extending the child's learning at home. In addition, several participants declared that they considered themselves good communicators; these experiences of communication difficulties were new to them. All 14 participants mentioned that college had taught them to reflect on their teaching, and thus they kept trying different ways of reaching parents.

Uncertainty of Pedagogic Expectations

Eight participants reported unclear or differing expectations about teaching and learning. When parents do not share their expectations clearly, beginning early childhood teachers feel less valued. This participant was at a loss, trying to understand what the parents actually wanted from her for their child:

> Only some parents sort of have an attitude that perhaps we are not doing our job properly, that we should be doing more. What can we be doing? What do you want from this center for your child? They say oh no, no, no, it's fine…only with a few of them, and that can be difficult. I find that quite frustrating, that they just won't come straight out to you and say, I wish you'd do such and such, because my child will really benefit

> from it. You know, that sort of talking behind your back sort of thing. I find it hard to deal with, and I have to keep my mouth shut, because I am the sort of person that would like to go up to them and say, you know, what's the story. Whereas, I know I really can't do that.

Furthermore, these teachers indicated that if they had clarity about what the parents expected, they could provide more meaningful learning for children.

Another challenge that was reported by six participants was the mismatch between their teaching philosophy and parental expectations. "Jenny's parents keep asking me to give her written homework." Another participant reported a parent's request: "I want Ben to get into Kings [elite school]; make him do some real work." The teachers followed developmentally appropriate, constructivist approaches to learning and teaching, while some parents wanted more structured learning for their children with a strong emphasis on academics. Thus, the program that the teachers presented was not valued, and this made them feel that they were not succeeding as teachers.

Parental Hostility

Handling angry parents can be stressful for any teacher, especially a first-year teacher. The participants were aware of their role as professionals; they wanted to have positive relationships with parents, colleagues, and students. The interview transcripts show that all participants often mentioned respect and being polite and pleasant. Some specific strategies reported by the participants were: listen actively, phrase positively, don't get emotional, and give constructive feedback. Six participants also reported that they had come across irate, confrontational, rude parents, whose reactions were unprovoked. As one participant reported the following incident, she mentioned that she felt intimidated but also embarrassed, as this happened in open view of other staff and parents: "Yesterday, a father was aggressive and sarcastic with me. He wanted me to 'tell' his daughter to put on her shoes outside."

Some parents can feel offended and become unreceptive when teachers have to tell them about a problem their child is having. A child at preschool was pushing other children, sometimes quite forcefully. After talking with her head teacher, the participant asked the parent to come to a meeting. The parent insisted that the child "never does that at home, and you [teacher] do not know how to deal with these situations." The teacher had prepared a behavior management plan so that she could work in conjunction with the parent. However, the irate parent did not give her the opportunity to talk about this plan.

Parental aggression towards teachers is a cause of concern, and disarming volatile parents was a challenge, but teachers were also unsure of the reasons for this hostility: "What caused her [a mother] to lash out at me?" The altruistic nature

of the participants came through in the interviews as they worried about the well-being of children whose parents demonstrated confrontational behaviors.

Construct 2: Difficulties of Building Relationships

Higher Socioeconomic Level

Teachers reported that their college courses had covered contemporary societal issues related to working with families, such as poverty, family arrangements, racism, language, and cultural differences. They also mentioned that the lectures, class discussions, and professional literature all seemed to say that teachers working in high socioeconomic areas would have no difficulties in working with parents. They explained that working in high socioeconomic areas was always discussed as a secondary topic, lightly touched upon to contrast working with "difficult or different" families. One specific advantage of teachers working in high socioeconomic areas that the participants reported learning about through their teacher education courses was parental involvement, because "middle-class parents see teachers as equals." The six new teachers who worked in these areas were not prepared for the challenges they faced: "It's middle-aged, higher class people—the parents. They zoom in, drop their child off, and zoom out. It's really hard when they zoom in and out so quickly. I don't even know the parents' names; it's terrible."

Other concerns mentioned by teachers who worked in higher income areas related to children being dropped off and picked up by nannies. The participants rarely saw or talked to the parents. Some parents employed au pairs; these young individuals come to New Zealand via Working Holiday Scheme Work Visas. There are regulations that au pairs from certain countries must not work for the same employer for more than three months, which means that the family employs them for short durations: "Robert [student] has had two au pairs since I started here. Sometimes their English is not so good, so I find it hard, and they are not Robert's mum, so I don't say much."

The participants raised the issue of discontinuity in the child's life. For example, they mentioned that behavior management could be inconsistent if there are too many caregivers for the child or if the caregivers changed often. The participants also noted that many parents remained in high-pressure jobs to provide the best for their children. The new teachers could see the parents' perspectives, even though the lower parent–teacher contact was problematic.

Lower Socioeconomic Level

Eight teachers who worked in low socioeconomic areas discussed their familiarity with the theories of parent involvement; they reported that they were

"sold on the importance of involving families." They wanted to "support marginalized families," and they were trying to implement the strategies that they had learned through their college courses. However, it seems that some aspects were still challenging, despite their efforts to develop relationships.

> In this area [name of the low socioeconomic area], getting through to parents is basically very difficult, because they come in, drop their children off. So I don't get to talk to a lot of parents in the morning. Can't see them in the evening, they want to go home. So it has been difficult to get to know them, and if there are any problems, it is sort of hard to try to tell them to hold on—we've got to talk.

The participants who worked in these areas were consistent in their understanding of challenges faced by low-income families. They reported scheduling meetings to meet the shift work patterns of some of the parents. They also showed awareness that many traditional means of parent involvement such as bake sales or book fairs require a financial contribution, which might be difficult for these families. Knowing these constraints, they endeavored to create a sense of goodwill between the parents and themselves, yet despite this, the response was lacking from some parents.

As in the higher income area, in lower income areas, many children were brought to the early childhood center by others, but mostly grandparents. This also made communication difficult.

> Jenny's parents run the Chinese bakery in [name of area]. They start work very early in the morning and finish very late. Her grandmother brings her to the center; she is very sweet but does not speak English, so you can see my challenge.

The participants reported that they had limited knowledge of intergenerational contacts, such as approaching and working with grandparents from culturally diverse families. Engaging grandparents who spoke limited English in a two-way communication about their grandchildren was a challenge. The participants wanted to share information about the child's day in the kindergarten and wanted to encourage the family members to share information about the child's experiences in the home, but this was difficult. The participants were particularly frustrated that they could not communicate positive news about the child's achievements; they felt ineffective in their role.

Cultural Differences

Nine teachers working across socioeconomic areas reported incidents of cultural variations in childrearing. Thus, these concerns were not confined to a particular socioeconomic area. The teachers were unfamiliar with these cultural

differences and found them to be very disconcerting as a first-year teacher. One parent asked the teacher to keep her son's layers of clothing on during a warm day; the new teacher felt that the child would be uncomfortable. Another parent asked the teacher not to let her daughter play with water. The beginning teacher felt conflicted, because water play was a part of the center's program; moreover, the child enjoyed water play. The new teacher had observed this child trying to make friends and attempting to use English at the water trough. She explained this to the mother, who responded no because she gets "colds." In the interview, the new teacher reported that she was familiar with the benefits of water play through her college courses, but did not remember discussing any problems such as the one she faced. This first-year teacher also faced an ethical dilemma; she explains:

> A parent wants to do a spiritual purification ceremony; the other teacher feels that since it will not involve anyone at session time it will be OK. I feel it is inappropriate; we have parents and staff of many different religions who would probably not wish this. I feel that if one religious group is permitted to do such a ceremony, then other groups must have the same rights and opportunities.

The interview transcripts showed that the teachers demonstrated a genuine interest and respect for culturally diverse families. However, they still grappled with this part of their work and questioned if it was possible to meet the needs of all these different families. Early childhood teachers' difficulties in this area were not limited to parents from cultures that they were unfamiliar with but happened with parents from the majority culture as well.

> I was singing the greeting song at the morning mat time, you know, with greetings from different countries. A parent came and told me, "I don't want my son learning coconut languages."

Coconut is a derogatory term for people of the Pacific Islands, many of whom have settled in New Zealand. This young teacher was distressed; she found it unbelievable that people could think like this. The teachers were prepared to work with young children to help educate them about stereotypes, prejudice, and racism. However, responding to parents who had the presumption of privilege or domination were not in their repertoire of teaching strategies. These parents refused to acknowledge the diversity that exists in schools today. The reluctance of such parents impaired the teachers' abilities to be inclusive and to help eliminate stereotypes at an early age.

Construct 3: Power-Dependence

Parent Volunteering

Five participants who worked in not-for-profit centers reported that parents were expected to volunteer to assist with the maintenance of the center and administrative tasks. However, they described a lack of support:

> The parents here are actually quite a challenge. They have had a [teaching] team in the past, which has done everything, so the parents think the teachers should do everything. The last team actually burnt out.
>
> At this particular center, parents think that the maintenance of the center is the teachers' responsibility.
>
> We get no parent support, just look at the playground and the garden; it's pretty shocking really. We can't get parents to come in and help us with these things. It is a lot of pressure on us teachers, because we are taking a lot of workload that parents could. You are not just a teacher here, but a painter, carpenter, counselor; we do all our own books—money and all that. It's more than just teaching.

Even when there is a clear expectation that parents will volunteer in their child's school, some do not. This absence of parental involvement leaves teachers depleted of physical energy and emotionally exhausted. This lack of reciprocity also demonstrates an imbalance between investments made by teachers and the outcomes. Hence, teachers' contribution to the relationship was more than they got in return.

Construct 4: Social Identity of Early Childhood Teachers

Status of the Profession

A majority (12) of the beginning early childhood teachers reported that their role and work was not understood. They believed that the public perception of early childhood teachers is that they are glorified babysitters—their job is to play with children and paint, and anybody can do this. This view is reflected by some teachers who felt undervalued by parents:

> This work [early childhood teaching] is not easy peasy, but it is exactly what some parents think: we are baby sitters; 14-year-olds can do it, so I guess they treat us like that.

A participant narrated her experience of a child's mother who was a lawyer; because of her schedule, the nanny picked up the child at the end of the day. Once the mother came to pick her daughter, instead of the nanny. The new teacher told the mother in an appreciative manner that it was good to see her pick up her child at this time, as the child seemed happy to see her mother.

> Maria's mother told me I was lucky that I could sing and play the whole day; her job was so [oooooo] intense.

These teachers had spent three years and many thousands of dollars in a university level study and considered themselves to be professionals. However, as early childhood programs also employ teachers who are not qualified, it becomes difficult for parents and the public to differentiate between qualified professionals and those who are not. Beginning early childhood teachers feel frustrated when the complexity of their role is not understood, their work is seen as less than teaching, and their jobs are held in low esteem by parents.

Construct 5: Unanticipated Challenges

Preservice

During the interview, all of the participants referred to their preservice education. They wished that they had more understanding of working with challenging parents. They mentioned learning about producing newsletters, designing notice boards for parents, finding community services for parents, and practicing mock parent–teacher conferences. All these strategies would be useful; nonetheless, new teachers reported:

> While I have been at the center, there have been some incredible things that I've had to deal with, especially with adults, you know their questioning you. You've got to work with the parents, and college has to realize some things—like that it's not just saying hello to the parents or greeting the parents, there is more to it.

> I didn't feel college prepared me at all in dealing with the everyday, how to communicate with parents who are not "ideal parents," so I really had to work on that.

New teachers also recognized that the college could not prepare them for everything. A participant reported that a mother brought her son to the afternoon session at the kindergarten with the letters ---- in blue on his forehead and wearing a blue bandana. She and the other teacher were not aware of the significance of this, but the head teacher gently took the child aside, wiped the letters from his forehead, and removed his bandana. Later, she explained to her colleagues that this represented a name of a "gang" and its colors. The new teacher explained that the head teacher approached the mother about this, who responded that her child looked "cute" and "fierce." The new teacher reported that the head teacher had worked in this area for 15 years, and this was the first time something of this nature had happened. She reflected on this: "College can't give us a magic pill for all our problems."

Discussion

All the new early childhood teachers in this study were aware of the need to have positive relationships with their students' parents. They emphasized the importance of working with parents and being able to relate to the families. Participants wanted parents to see them as approachable and friendly and to trust and respect them. Despite this affirmative understanding of their role, they reported challenges in working with parents.

Relationships

Communication and building relationships with parents were difficult for new teachers. They reported three interrelated problems. The first was how to get parents involved, for example, parents who "zoom in and out" and fail to communicate with their child's teacher. From the teachers' perspective, contact at drop off and pickup would be useful. Recent research from Italy reinforces this. In the Italian study, both parents and educators reported that the most frequent type of contact was informal conversation at the beginning or at the end of the child's school day; the frequency of home–school contacts is associated with the quality of the relationship between parents and educators. The more frequent the contacts, the more collaboration and positive relationships can be fostered (Pirchio, Volpe, & Taeschner, 2011, p. 66). Another example was the parent not bothering to pick up his child's painting for three weeks. The teachers were aware of the importance of this type of involvement. The new teachers' understanding is supported by a study which characterized involved parents as those who were providing a rich learning environment at home with activities, including talking with their child about the importance of school and helping them practice what they are learning at school. Children of these involved parents evidenced higher levels of social skills, greater achievement in reading and mathematics, and demonstrated greater academic motivation (McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004).

Second, this lack of communication on the parents' part left new teachers in a predicament about the nature of pedagogic expectations, such as "What do parents want from kindergarten for their child?" They expressed disappointment when their efforts to involve parents were thwarted by a lack of parental response and apathy in some cases. Time pressures on parents may be partly responsible for a lack of engagement, and cultural or linguistic differences can impede information flow. However, it is a reality that some parents are not interested in discussing their children's learning. Preservice teacher education can provide an authentic picture of problems that new teachers are likely to encounter. The parent–teacher relationship can be successful if both parties are

making the effort; in this study, the teachers reported that they made many efforts, but some parents were still not receptive. This type of mismatch should be overtly examined during preservice training.

Third, parental hostility and denial of a teacher's competence were also issues, for example, when the father angrily told the teacher to ask his child to put shoes on outside. It may be more likely for new teachers to experience parental aggression as they have yet to develop effective strategies to avert parental conflict. Learning to avoid, prevent, reduce, and resolve conflicts with parents is as important as learning about writing a newsletter for parents. Preservice education can better prepare teachers to deal with confrontational parents. Further professional development based in the settings where the teachers are working is another way of dealing with these concerns effectively. One specific suggestion is to use Smyth's (1991) framework for reflection on action. Through this approach, teachers would be encouraged to pose a series of four questions, respectively moving from description to meaning to confrontation to reconstruction. This could be a powerful tool for prompting higher-order reflection on issues and concerns identified by these teachers.

Socioeconomic Status

Earlier literature on teacher–parent relationships in the early years (Benson & Martin, 2003; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000) contends that a major factor determining parents' involvement is their employment. Particularly, poor, working-class parents tend to work longer hours and have less control over when they work than richer, middle-class parents. Thus, these studies have concluded that the lower the income level of parents, the less they will be involved. The findings of the present study refute the above conclusions. New teachers in upper-middle-class areas reported that many parents were focused on their careers. Therefore, nannies, au pairs, or grandparents were their first point of contact, which added to the difficulty of trying to communicate directly with the parents. Thus, lack of parental involvement was an issue for new teachers in differing socioeconomic areas. Some high-income professionals can have inflexible work schedules, or they want to or feel they must demonstrate a single-minded commitment to their jobs, which makes it necessary to rely on other caregivers. Parents in lower socioeconomic areas might have time constraints due to work schedules or having other children in their care; these can be barriers to parent involvement. Another factor for parents in lower economic areas is that because of their own educational backgrounds, they might not be confident in communicating with teachers. Besides these genuine reasons, some parents may just lack interest in their child's learning; Flynn (2007) states that, unfortunately, some parents try to divorce themselves from their parental

responsibilities. Such parents will tell a teacher, "he is your problem from 9 to 3" (p. 24). It is important for new teachers to be aware of and be prepared to deal with this range of difficulties; simply focusing on noninvolvement of low-income parents is limiting teachers' readiness to work with all parents. When dealing with issues related to the socioeconomic aspects of their work, both preservice teacher education and continuing professional development could encourage teachers to question their underlying assumptions, biases, and values that bear on their teaching. Teachers should be urged to ask questions about constraints and possibilities of working with families from different socioeconomic groups.

Parent Involvement

The findings indicate that new early childhood teachers' sense of efficacy is impacted when parental support is insufficient. Participants who worked in not-for-profit settings such as public kindergartens, where there is an expectation of parents volunteering their time and expertise in the early childhood setting, specifically mentioned this. This expectation is clearly communicated to parents before they enroll the child in this type of setting: "taking part in working bees on the maintenance of the building and grounds is a part of the parent's role" (Nelson Tasman Kindergarten, 2012, para. 2). A working bee is a New Zealand term for a voluntary group doing a job to assist an organization such as a school. Maintenance of building and grounds is a physically demanding and time-consuming job. Interviewed teachers found that this support was missing; besides their normal working hours, they had to come in on weekends to complete this maintenance work. During their first year of teaching, they felt unprepared to engage families in this aspect of their children's education. Thus, this lack of volunteering placed pressure on teachers with an already high workload. Parents' volunteering in schools is recognized as an important aspect of establishing partnerships (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). Therefore, it is argued that for a true partnership to develop between the parent and teacher, new teachers should be prepared for the reality of practice as, in this situation, parents were not receptive to volunteering in early childhood services. These experiences should also be part of the discussion that happens in teacher education courses. A suggestion for in-service professional development is for teachers to be action researchers on specific difficulties such as lack of involvement from some parents. The recommendation here is not for a scholarly action research project; rather, teachers can be encouraged to articulate, document, and dialogue with professional development mentors or their more experienced peers about what they are observing, what would they like to see, how things might be different, and what possibilities are there for the future.

Cross-Cultural Competency

Preservice courses in cultural competency require student teachers to be aware of their own biases and to be inclusive of other cultures. To welcome families from minority cultures in their settings, the new teachers put greetings in various languages on the classroom walls. They introduced art and music from different nations; they celebrated various "country days," when students from a particular country were encouraged to wear their traditional clothing and parents were invited to share foods and stories from their culture. They were doing all they had learned at college; despite this, new teachers faced challenges from two angles. The first type of difficulty arose with families whose cultural backgrounds were different from their own. Beginning teachers reported lack of familiarity with many cultural aspects; they wanted to be inclusive, but in the words of one participant, "did not know enough," such as differences in child-rearing practices. They found it difficult when parental requests were outside of their norm, such as parents wanting their child to be dressed in many layers of clothing, or children who were not allowed to participate in what they considered as typical activities in an early childhood classroom such as water play. It is contended that new teachers had yet to come to an understanding that other ways of child development are equally valid. They were steeped in what they had learned in college as being appropriate, child-centered practices and had very little practical experience to temper this idealism in practice. With further experience in the field, they are likely to understand that there are many views of optimal child development. Teacher education courses can help students understand that there is no simple solution for cultural differences. The visible aspects of culture—food, costumes, music, and so on—are just a piece of the whole picture. The same parent who wholeheartedly supports the teacher in celebrating a "country day" by bringing in their cultural cuisine to share with the students can also be the one whose norms and values are not understood by the teacher. Further, the process of cultural competency development will be challenging because it requires educators to "learn to relook, reconceptualize, reexamine, and rethink" (Miranda, 2008, p. 1743).

The second form of difficulty came from families from the mainstream culture who did not support the new teachers' attempts to introduce other cultures to children. Preservice programs should prepare students to work with parents who may resist multicultural practices because they disapprove of certain norms and values of other cultural groups. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) have stated that demographics and worldviews are rapidly changing, but the key question is whether teacher preparation programs are evolving as fast as our population. In light of the findings of the present study, preservice

programs have a crucial responsibility in this regard. Besides teacher education, professional development opportunities should be focused on helping teachers develop a genuine interest in and respect for cultural diversity. Teachers can feel more culturally competent if they do not always feel like they are walking on eggshells when dealing with cultural diversity. Teachers should also have opportunities to confront their own understandings of diversity. For example, do they view cultural or linguistic diversity as something that needs to be fixed in order to bring it to the norms? Alternatively, do they view diversity as an asset that will strengthen their teaching and learning? Such a holistic approach is likely to help teachers become more confident when working with parents whose backgrounds are different from their own culture or parents who refuse to acknowledge differences.

Preservice Education

When new teachers have difficulties in their relationships with parents, they question their competence. According to Katz (1996), with the growing understanding of the importance of parent involvement, teachers may worry about doing everything they know to tap the benefits of involving parents. New teachers were dissatisfied with some aspects of their preservice education because, in their opinion, there was an inconsistency between their teacher education programs and the real world of teaching, specifically as it related to parent–teacher relationships. In their opinion, the college courses focused on strategies and techniques to involve parents. The assumption seemed to be that the parents would respond positively, and both parties would work together for the children. Nevertheless, this was not always the case; thus, these new teachers felt ill equipped to deal with this reality. There is a similarity in the opinions of new teachers and teacher educators. Only 7.2% of teacher educators in a study by Epstein and Sanders (2006) strongly agreed that the new teachers who graduated from their programs were prepared to work with all students' families and communities. Further, there is a theory and practice binary, accordingly, students learn about teaching in the university, and they learn "how to" do teaching in the school (Thomson, 2000). New teachers' experiences indicate that the focus of their preservice education was on theories of partnership between school, family, and community; they were actively trying to develop such partnerships. However, they were unfamiliar with the kinds of problems that they encountered in their first year. Awareness of day-to-day practical problems should be a part of early childhood teacher education, as this is useful for new teachers who have yet to develop their own repertoire of experiences on which they can base their practices.

Another reason behind this lack of satisfaction with their preservice education could be attributed to the fact that many newcomers to the field misconstrue early childhood teaching as just being about liking children or an ability to have fun with them. The authentic view of early childhood teaching is that it is a complex, demanding job. Early childhood teachers have to understand and apply knowledge of childhood development. They provide a variety of experiences that build future competence in language and literacy, mathematics, and science, as well as in gross motor development, social skills, emotional understanding, and self-regulation. They need to develop relationships with children's families, additionally accommodating for diversity, inclusion, and equity. It would serve new teachers better if the difficulties that early childhood teachers face daily, such as those identified through this study, are disclosed to student teachers so that they feel better prepared. Teaching can be complex, ambiguous, and filled with dilemmas requiring ongoing learning; this is where in-service professional development becomes the lifeline for new teachers. According to Osterman and Kottkamp (2004), experiential learning theorists like Dewey and Piaget claim that learning is most effective when it begins with experience, in particular, experience that is problematic. Hence, supportive professional development can reassure new teachers that they should not view themselves as passive recipients of knowledge. They can learn and grow as teachers through collaboration, self-awareness, and self-reflection.

Professional Status

Parents' insufficient regard for the beginning early childhood teacher could be related to the paucity of value for teachers of young children or societal perceptions of this field. This absence of esteem seems to be almost universal. In the USA, early childhood education lacks status (Kagan, 2009). Internationally, "the status of teachers involved in early childhood education is considerably lower than teachers in primary and secondary levels" (Education International, 2010, p. 28). This lack of professional standing is summarized by Woodrow (2007) who states that early childhood work in the prior-to-school sector is considered "peripheral and low status, non-educational, and 'un-teacherly'" (p. 239). This is because those outside of the early childhood education sector do not understand the complex aspects of this job and its demands. When early childhood teachers have difficulties with parents, they may perceive that their professional status is questioned by parents. This requires a concerted effort to inform the parents about the multifaceted role of the teacher. Further, it is crucial for the field to move towards advocating for the role of the early childhood teacher at the community, state, and national levels.

Social Exchange Theory Framework

Documenting beginning teachers' concerns about parent–teacher relationships gives voice to the experiences and perceptions of those most directly involved. Parent and teacher relationships are assigned and not chosen and are prone to differing expectations and values. The parent–teacher partnership should be formed by a mutual aspiration to understand and consider diverse viewpoints through dialogue with each other. This reflects the conceptual framework of this study. In the social exchange theory, social actors form relationships when some purpose attracts them to one another—parents and teachers share a common interest in the child. The theory further posits that interpersonal relationships involve the exchange of rewards, some of which are altruistic in nature. It is contended that in this study, new teachers sought altruistic rewards, as they came into this profession wanting to help others. Social exchange theorists argue that all actors must reap some benefits from the exchange relationship; if actors fail to gain rewards in a relationship, they will cease their involvement in it. Based on the findings, it is cautioned that if new teachers feel that the relationship with parents is not helping them gain the altruistic rewards that initially attracted them to this position, then they might give up on trying to form a relationship with parents. This would be detrimental for all involved, including the children in these programs.

Limitations and Future Research

There is no attempt at generalizations in this study, rather the readers are invited to compare connections to their contexts. The sample size could be considered a limitation. However, this is a qualitative study, and the aim is to provide thick descriptions. The very nature of self-reported data is also a known limitation of research. Another related limitation was the voluntary nature of this study. This raises the question: Are the new teachers who did not volunteer more or less satisfied with this aspect of their work? A woman interviewing women can raise ethical concerns (Finch, 1984): Would the results be the same if this study was conducted by a male? Maxwell (1992) answers this best; according to him, an interview is a social relationship between the interviewer and the informant, therefore it must be understood that the informants' actions and views could be different in other situations. Therefore, the validity of an interview is in the account and not in the method or researcher.

This study was conducted when the participants were in their sixth or seventh month of their work; future research could consider additional follow-up interviews conducted later on in their careers. The study could also be replicated in the U.S. or other countries with a similar cohort. Another possibility

is to track teachers through their early careers in different work contexts, such as public or community kindergartens and privately owned preschools, to examine the subsequent differences or similarities in their experiences. It would be useful to ask the same questions of both new and experienced teachers in the same contexts. The study did not claim to be the voice of all stakeholders in early childhood education. However, parents' views on new teachers could provide a different perspective and lead to a more comprehensive representation of the research topic.

In today's society where the consumers' rights are paramount, it is likely that some parents see early childhood education programs as a commodity to parents-as-consumers. As in businesses, some people take the idea of consumer rights too far, without regard to the responsibility aspect. The findings suggest that early childhood teachers' concerns were about such parents. Thus, the relationship was one-sided with teachers making the effort to sustain it without reciprocity from these parents. Hence, this lack of reciprocity generated the problem of inequality in the relationship; this is reflective of the power-dependence paradigm of the social exchange theory. The difficulties that these early childhood teachers faced are also a result of the status of the profession—many parents have yet to acknowledge early education as a legitimate part of the education system, and thus they do not value the teachers. Parents who do not acknowledge the value of early childhood education programs miss the view of education in its broadest sense as it encompasses learning, care, and upbringing. If the parents are disengaged from their children's schools, it makes it problematic for the new teacher and leads to discontinuities in relationships. The successful functioning of a partnership is not possible without the active and willing participation of all members. It is a hope that this article provides possible avenues for revisiting an old concept such as new teachers facing difficulties in their work with their students' parents, even as it introduces opportunities to examine it from the perspective of new teachers who understand the value of these relationships and are making efforts to be inclusive of parental perspectives.

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Comparing the Effects of Suburban and Urban Field Placements on Teacher Candidates' Experiences and Perceptions of Family Engagement in Middle and High Schools

Daniel J. Bergman

Abstract

Two groups of teacher candidates completed a survey based on the Parent Teacher Association's National Standards for Family–School Partnerships at the start and end of the semester of a general methods course and corresponding fieldwork (practicum) experience. One group of participants (N_S = 60) completed their clinical fieldwork in a suburban middle or high school; the second group (N_U = 40) completed fieldwork in an urban school setting. Repeated measures *t*-tests were conducted for the entire sample and found significant increases from pre- to post-survey in the number of specific ideas shared for welcoming families into the school as well as for communicating with parents and families. A mixed between-within subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the impact of different semester-long field placements (suburban or urban), finding that urban-placed participants had significantly more ideas about communicating and welcoming families. Implications are addressed, including the role of family engagement in teacher education and the impact of fieldwork placement location.

Keywords: family engagement, parent involvement, field experiences, urban, suburban, secondary teacher education, preservice teachers, middle grades, high schools, candidates, practicum, perceptions

Conceptual Framework and Introduction

Importance of Family Engagement in Schools

Parents and families have a major impact on students' school performance (Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In fact, over 20 years of research reveals that family engagement leads to improved student achievement (Constantino, 2008). Family engagement has been defined as more than just parental involvement. Heather Weiss, Founder and Director of the Harvard Family Research Project, describes family engagement as "a shared responsibility between schools/programs, communities, and families" (as cited by Tschantz, 2010, para. 2). Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies (2007) outline several effects that echo the importance of school–family partnerships:

1. Partnerships are closely linked to student academic achievement.
2. They build and sustain public support for schools.
3. Families and community members can help schools overcome challenges.
4. Teachers benefit from positive partnership involvement.
5. Partnerships meet the legal requirements of legislated education reform.

Partnerships do not flow in only one direction, however. Rather than a means to an end, family engagement benefits parents and families beyond student achievement. To quote Joyce Epstein, "The way schools care about children is reflected in the ways schools care about children's families" (2009, p. 7). Research by Epstein and her colleagues laid the foundation for the Parent Teacher Association's (PTA) National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (PTA, 2010). These standards focus on a partnership approach and include welcoming all families, communicating effectively, supporting student success, and more. Instrumental to the creation of the standards was research that linked student achievement to family engagement, which included proactive components of organized programs reaching all cultures and an outcome emphasis on student learning (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; PTA, 2012). In these standards, partnerships are created and sustained not just through involvement of families, but through active engagement—including balanced contributions and initiative taken by both families and schools.

Teachers are aware of the key role parents and families play in education and support their participation in schools (Smith, 2002). More parental involvement is the number one response teachers give for ways to improve students' success (Metropolitan Life, 2002). In recent years, partnerships among schools, families, and the community have become an educational priority at both the state and federal levels (Flanigan, 2007). Since the late 1990s, a growing number of states have included family/community involvement skills and knowledge in their teacher preparation standards (Gray, 2001).

Teachers' Perceptions and Preparation for Family Engagement

Despite the recognized importance of family engagement, multiple studies have found that teachers feel ill-equipped to interact with students' families (Dotger, 2009; Freeman & Knopf, 2007; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Levine, 2006; Lynn, 1997; Tichenor, 1998; Turner, 2000). Historically, teachers have had scarce formal preparation—preservice or inservice—to work with parents and families (de Acosta, 1994; Epstein, 2001; Epstein, Sanders, & Clark, 1999; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005). Teacher education programs often lack any course or unit that focuses exclusively on parent and family involvement (Coleman, 1997; Flanigan, 2005, 2007; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Moreover, programs that do address this content are typically found in a few specific license areas such as early childhood, elementary, or special education fields, as opposed to preparing all teachers (Epstein, 2001; Giallourakis, Pretti-Frontczak, & Cook, 2005; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Powell, 2000). Where family engagement is addressed, curriculum often focuses mostly on parent–teacher conferences, parent concerns, newsletters, and working within the community (Dotger, Harris, & Hansel, 2008; Stevens & Tollafield, 2003; Tomczyk, 2009). Gray (2001) dubs these actions as "reactionary strategies," in that they usually occur after an incident or experience with a difficult situation. Missing have been proactive strategies such as interactive homework, workshops, class-originated newsletters, and year-long partnership programs.

More recent efforts have emphasized a proactive approach for family engagement, taught largely through inservice teachers' professional development. Following the example of counselors, one course taught teachers active listening and related skills through practice and reflection, resulting in increased confidence and improved communication with students and families (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). The Bridging Cultures Project, which includes both inservice training and action research, has been found to enhance teachers' interactions with families as well as instructional methods (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). Additional proactive approaches that have yielded higher student achievement and parental involvement include regular telephone and text/written correspondence (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Westat & Policy Studies Associates, 2002) and interactive homework accompanied by teacher-initiated communication (Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Van Voorhis, 2003, 2011a, 2011b). The significant impact of these strategies suggests that preservice teachers should also learn and practice similar methods.

Teacher preparation plays a critical role in school–family partnerships, since the ideas formed during this time may last throughout educators' entire careers. Unfortunately, teacher candidates often perceive from their fieldwork cooperating teachers that students' struggles are due to uncaring, uninvolved parents (Grossman, 1999). Future teachers may receive mixed messages from cooperating teachers and university faculty (Flanigan, 2005). From the university perspective, cooperating teachers' "negative attitudes [about students' families] are undoing everything faculty have tried to do with teacher candidates at the university level" (Flanigan, 2007, p. 106).

Past Efforts and Present Research

With proper attention, preservice teachers can learn how to successfully work with students' parents and families (Hunzicker, 2004; Katz & Bauch, 2001). A one-semester course (in special education) showed gains in teachers' understanding of family engagement (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007). However, the primary focus of these teachers remained on laws and legal obligations. Flanigan (2007) notes that further research is needed to determine teachers' attitudes, understandings, and abilities in collaborating with parents and families. Moreover, little work has been done with teachers working with middle and high school students, whose families may have multiple engagement opportunities in athletics and activities, but are less likely to attend parent–teacher conferences (Henderson, Hunt, & Day, 1993; Welsh, 2003).

Another unexplored topic is comparing teacher candidates' experiences and perceptions of family engagement after clinical fieldwork (or practicum) experiences in urban or suburban schools. Disparities between suburban and urban schools are widely known and include financial distribution (Gamoran, 2001), quality of facilities (Marx, 2006), and graduation rates (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center [EPERC], 2008, 2009), with suburban schools typically having the advantage in all of these areas. In addition, parental involvement is typically less in urban schools than in suburban schools (U.S. General Accounting Office [GAO], 2002). Many teachers in urban schools do not know how to foster partnerships with students' families, especially for teachers who do not live in the same community as the school (Sanders, 2006). Although a study into graduate coursework for new teachers finds significant growth in participants' dispositions, knowledge, and relationships with students' families in urban communities (Warren, Noftle, Ganley, & Quintanar, 2011), research has also found that teacher candidates struggle to grasp the complexities of urban teaching and reflect on their role in such settings (Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Hatch, 2008).

The present study sought to explore the relatively unexamined issue of preservice middle and secondary teachers' preparation to engage families in different types of fieldwork school settings. In particular, two questions framed the research, focusing on middle and high school teacher candidates:

1. How do middle/high school teacher candidates' perceptions of family engagement change after experiencing a one-semester general methods course and accompanying in-school fieldwork (one hour/week) with explicit family engagement instruction?
2. How do perceptions of family engagement compare between teacher candidates with fieldwork experience in urban middle/high schools and teacher candidates with fieldwork experience in suburban middle/high schools?

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Overview

Participants of this study included teacher candidates (preservice teachers) in their junior year of college, enrolled in a one-semester general methods course for future middle and secondary teachers (grades 6–12), along with a parallel fieldwork experience (practicum) in local schools. This undergraduate class is an introduction to instructional strategies, teacher classroom behaviors, assessment methods, and classroom management. There were two sections of the course in each semester studied, both taught by the same instructor.

Throughout the semester, three different guest speakers came to present to the classes. One speaker was the coordinator of an afterschool tutoring/mentoring program for middle school students. Another was the state director of the Parent Information Resource Center. The third presentation was by a team of individuals from a local school district's family engagement support office. All three presentations featured various means of engaging students' families and shared information and resources for teachers to work with families.

In addition to the three guest speakers, an in-class activity featured a "jigsaw" book study, during which participants worked in groups to examine published resources on family engagement and then shared major themes and noteworthy ideas to the entire class. Books featured in this group study included titles based on research in the field of family engagement (Constantino, 2008; Henderson et al., 2007), as well as other texts for educators with ideas for involving and engaging students' families (Boult, 2006; Glasgow & Whitney, 2008; Lucas, 2006; Rudney, 2005).

The teacher candidates used information from the class to compose an introduction letter to parents/guardians of the students in their fieldwork classroom. These letters were written in English, but teacher candidates were

exposed to translation services provided by some school districts for converting correspondence to families' native languages. Although optional, the teacher candidates were encouraged to share their letters with their fieldwork classroom students. Moreover, they were encouraged to use their letter as a template for future letters to their students' families as one way to proactively welcome and communicate with families. Guidelines for the letter assignment are found in Appendix A.

For the semester-long field experience, the teacher candidates attended an assigned placement in their subject—one class period one day per week, for a minimum of fifteen (15) hours total. Placements included middle and high schools in both urban and suburban communities. More data about participants and the placement schools are provided in the following sections.

Participants Profile

The total number of teacher candidates participating in the study was exactly 100. One group (N_S = 60) completed fieldwork in a suburban middle or high school and was designated "suburban teacher candidates;" the second group (N_U = 40) completed fieldwork in an urban middle or high school, designated "urban teacher candidates."

Although the teacher candidates consisted of traditional and nontraditional college students, all were accepted into the teacher preparation program and considered to be in the spring semester of their "junior" year, or second-to-last year. By the next spring, the teacher candidates would student teach full-time and complete the undergraduate teacher licensure program with graduation. The teacher candidates were preparing for secondary education degrees (grades 6–12) with an endorsement in English, history/government, math, or science.

Approximately 95% of the teacher candidates were White (non-Hispanic), and all spoke English as their first language. In the suburban-placed group, 15% of participants were parents of school-age children. Out of the urban-placed group, 10% of participants had school-age children. In the suburban group, 52% were male and 48% female; in the urban group, 34% were male and 66% female.

Field Experience Schools

All placement schools were public middle or high schools in or near a large Midwestern metropolitan area. In this area, suburban schools have an average graduation rate 27.1% higher than urban schools (EPERC, 2009). Suburban teacher candidates were placed in one of eight different schools in communities surrounding the city. Each of these schools was located in communities classified as small suburbs (populations less than 100,000) by the National

Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2006). The suburban schools housed an average of 18% minority students, and an average 21% of the student body qualified for free or reduced-lunch services. Urban teacher candidates were placed in one of five different schools inside the urbanized area classified as a large city, with a population of more than 250,000 (NCES, 2006). The urban schools all had a "majority minority," for an overall average of 64% minority students. The average percentage of students qualified for free or reduced-lunch was 73%. On average, school buildings in the urban setting were 45 years older than the building age of the suburban schools. More information about each school can be found in Appendix B.

Survey Instrument

At the beginning of the semester, all participants completed a short survey about their experiences and ideas about family engagement with schools (see Appendix C). The same survey was completed at the end of the semester (post-survey) for comparison and study of the effects of the course as well as for comparing the impact of suburban versus urban field experience placements. The survey featured open-ended questions to promote extended answers from the participants and draw out their ideas, as opposed to giving them options from a list or multiple-choice questions (Esterberg, 2002). Furthermore, questions did not prompt participants to share a certain number of ideas, but rather allowed them to share as much as they desired or deemed necessary.

The survey inquired about participants' previous experiences and preparation to interact with students' parents/families, as well as what participants wanted to learn more about to enhance their interactions with parents/families. Several questions were phrased to align with the PTA's National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (PTA, 2010), which will be featured in more detail with the discussion of results. For the purpose of this study, only Standard #1 (welcoming all families into the school community) and Standard #2 (communicating effectively about student learning) are featured, as they address two essential ingredients of successful family engagement (Epstein, 2001, 2009; Henderson et al., 2007; Weiss et al., 2005).

Data Analysis

A naturalistic inquiry approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Harry, Sturgis, & Klinger, 2005; Norris & Walker, 2005) was used in qualitative analysis, reflected by the open-ended nature of survey questions and no constraint to participants' responses. In questions related to PTA Standards, participants' responses typically consisted of listing ideas with little or no description. Therefore, analysis involved recording the different ideas shared, as well as counting the total number of different ideas given to each response.

Survey data were disaggregated according to the two different instances of completion: the beginning of the semester (pre), and the end of the semester (post). These two samples provided for comparison of the same teacher candidates to determine effects of their participation in the general methods course and its corresponding fieldwork that semester. Additional analysis compared the post-survey responses of the suburban teacher candidates with the urban teacher candidates. Quantitative tests—repeated measures *t*-test and mixed between-within subjects ANOVA (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 2003)—were performed to compare the number of responses and check for significance in difference between groups.

The mixed-methods approach of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to enhance data analysis and provide insight not readily available through just one technique. With the complimentary methods creating "binocular vision" (Reichardt & Rallis, 1994) of the data, both the quantity and quality of responses can be considered to get a more complete picture.

Results and Discussion

This section highlights the analyses of survey responses from the participants, including noteworthy trends and specific comments. The topics addressed are organized through the survey responses, including Standards 1 and 2 of the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (PTA, 2010).

Preservice Experiences With Students' Families

One question on the survey asked participants to describe the level and scope of interactions they have had with students' families during their preservice program, including practicum/fieldwork experience(s). In the pre-survey for the teacher candidates, the question referred to participants' experiences prior to their current semester placement. Example responses from participants include: "I have had no interactions with parents in my previous practicum placements," "I've heard some teachers talk about speaking with parents but have never personally experienced it," and several answers of "None."

Table 1 summarizes participants' responses about their preservice experiences with students' families. Results indicate that teacher candidates in both groups had little or no interaction or communication with families during their previous preservice placements. One noteworthy consideration is that the teacher candidates of this study are still in their junior year of the undergraduate program and will not assume a full student teaching schedule and experience for another two semesters. Nevertheless, these future teachers reported having no meaningful interactions with students' parents or families since entering into the teacher preparation program.

Table 1. Preservice Experiences With Students' Families (Pre-Survey)

Rank (1 = Most Frequent)	Suburban Teacher Candidates	Urban Teacher Candidates
1	70% = None	95.0% = None
2	15% = Minimal	2.5% = Minimal
3	8% = Observed	2.5% = Conferences
4	7% = Other Work	

Welcoming Families

Aligned with Standard #1 of the PTA's National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (PTA, 2010), a survey question asked participants for their ideas about effective ways of welcoming families into the school community (see Appendix C). Example responses to this question are included in Table 2.

Table 2. Example Responses to Question: What do you think are effective ways of welcoming families into the school community? (Emphases added.)

Teacher Candidates in Suburban School Placements
• "Holding an *open house* at the school. Sending a *letter* home to invite the parents to sit in on your class."
• "Have an *inviting school*; encourage the parents to become a part of the school environment."
Teacher Candidates in Urban School Placements
• "By having *family events* centered around the school and district. Having a parent *newsletter* they get every month with a calendar of events and news and updates about things going on in school."
• "Having school-wide *open houses*, personal *(positive) communication* with parents/families throughout the semester/year, and parent–teacher *conferences*."

As seen in the example responses, participants often gave multiple strategies, and their responses were analyzed through two approaches. The first was to count how many specific actions each participant provided as a response. In this case, responses such as "be inviting" or "be friendly" were considered ambiguous or vague, as opposed to particular actions teachers could take to welcome families. Figures 1a and 1b in Appendix D highlight the two participant groups and the percentages that provided specific strategies as well as no answer or ambiguous replies.

A paired-samples (repeated measures) *t*-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the semester-long course and field experience on all teacher candidates' number of strategies for welcoming parents and families to the school

community. This analysis featured all teacher candidates participating (N = 100), including those in urban and suburban school placements. There was a statistically significant increase in number of ideas from the beginning of the semester (pre, M = 1.67, SD = 1.16) to the end of the semester [post, M = 2.27, SD = 1.52; $t(97) = 7.88$, $p < .01$.]. The eta squared statistic (.39) indicated a large effect size (Cohen, 1988).

A split-plot analysis of variance (SPANOVA), or mixed between-within subjects ANOVA (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), was conducted to compare the impact of different field placements (suburban or urban) on teacher candidates' ideas about welcoming parents and families to the school community. The interaction effect of school placement and time was significant, with a large effect size [Wilks' Lambda = .70, $F(1, 96) = 42.10$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .31], indicating that teacher candidates with urban field placements shared significantly more welcoming strategies than teacher candidates with suburban experiences.

Descriptive statistics for number of ideas for welcoming parents and families into the school community are shown in Table 3. On average, both groups shared one or two ideas on the pre-survey. In the post-survey responses, however, participants with an urban field experience shared an average of almost three ideas, while those in a suburban field experience shared less than two ideas.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Number of Specific Strategies for Welcoming

Group	*N*	Mean Pre	Std Dev	Mean Post	Std Dev
Suburban Teacher Candidates	60	1.63	.99	1.90	1.54
Urban Teacher Candidates	38	1.74	1.39	2.84	1.30

The second approach to analyzing data was examining specific actions shared by participants. Table 4 shows the strategies participants gave for welcoming families to the school community. The percentage listed for each strategy is the percent of participants in that group/survey who gave the particular action in their response. Since participants could give more than one strategy, the sum of percentages for each group of participants is more than 100%. Any strategy with a "--" listed means that 5% or fewer of the group participants mentioned it in their responses.

Table 4 shows a large increase from pre- to post-surveys (more than double in both groups) in participants who mention using a written letter as one method of welcoming families. This is understandable, since writing an introduction letter is one project teacher candidates completed during the semester's

fieldwork setting. Open houses decreased from pre- to post-survey results in both groups, perhaps due to teacher candidates' limited experience with these two events during the spring fieldwork semester. Phone calls as a way of welcoming families into the school community were not mentioned by more than 5% of either group in the pre-survey. However, over one-third in both groups cited this strategy in their post-survey response. This indicates that teacher candidates' fieldwork experience, as well as additional course curriculum and guest speakers, may have increased their awareness of this approach.

Table 4. Strategies for Welcoming Families (PTA Standard #1) Teacher Candidates Gave in Their Open-Ended Survey Responses*

Strategy	% of Suburban Candidates' Pre-Survey Responses	% of Suburban Candidates' Post-Survey Responses	% of Urban Candidates' Pre-Survey Responses	% of Urban Candidates' Post-Survey Responses
Activities/Events	--	--	34% (2)	39% (1)
Open House	55% (1)	37% (2)	42% (1)	29% (3)
Letter/Postcard	18% (2)	40% (1)	11% (6)	24% (4)
Phone Call	--	35% (3)	--	37% (2)
"Invite"/General	13% (3)	28% (4)	34% (2)	18% (5)
Conferences	12% (4)	8% (8)	29% (3)	29% (3)
Newsletters	10% (5)	8% (8)	13% (5)	18% (5)
Email	7% (6)	18% (5)	16% (4)	24% (4)
Meet/Home Visit	--	15% (6)	--	--
Welcoming Building	--	12% (7)	--	--
Internet Tools	--	--	--	10% (6)

*Parentheses indicate rank of frequency (1 = most frequent strategy) found in each group's responses.
--Indicates 5% or fewer of the group participants mentioned it in their responses.

Communicating With Parents/Guardians

A second question on the surveys addressed PTA Partnership Standard #2—effective communication. Again, participants' responses were analyzed both by quantity (how many specific actions) and quality (what kinds of actions). Example responses from participants are found in Table 5. These responses typically featured multiple actions for communicating with families.

Figures 2a and 2b in Appendix D show the two participant groups and the percentages that gave specific actions in pre- and post-survey responses. As

with the previous topic, any response that was vague ("interact," "be polite") was counted among those who gave no response (0).

Table 5. Example Responses to Question: What are some ways to effectively communicate with students' parents/guardians? (Emphases added.)

Teacher Candidates in Suburban School Placements
• "*Phone, email, regular mail*. Especially when the student has done something positive. In other words, don't just send out negative letters."
• "Find out what is the best way for parents—*phone calls, emails, notes*—and then communicate with them on a regular basis, and encourage communication."
Teacher Candidates in Urban School Placements
• "The most effective way of communication is *face-to-face*, but if that is not possible, over the *phone*, through *emails/letters*, or even *questionnaires* students can take home to their parents/families and have them fill out and bring back."
• "Sending home *introductory letter*. Building positive 2-way communication via *telephone* and *email*, especially *positive interactions* (in other words, don't always communicate just bad news)."

Like before, a paired-samples (repeated measures) *t*-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the semester-long course and field experience on all teacher candidates' number of ideas for communicating with parents/guardians. This analysis included all teacher candidates participating and answering the survey (N = 100), including those in urban and suburban school placements. There was a statistically significant increase in number of ideas from the beginning of the semester (pre, M = 2.69, SD = 1.35) to the end of the semester [post, M = 3.11, SD = 1.50; $t(99) = 7.35$, $p < .01$]. The eta squared statistic (.35) indicated a large effect size (Cohen, 1988).

A split-plot analysis of variance (SPANOVA), or mixed between-within subjects ANOVA (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), was also conducted to compare the impact of different field placements (suburban or urban) on teacher candidates' ideas about communicating with parents/guardians. The interaction effect of school placement and time was significant, with a large effect size [Wilks' Lambda = .72, $F(1, 98) = 37.67$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .28], indicating that teacher candidates with urban field placements shared significantly more communication strategies than candidates with suburban experiences.

Descriptive statistics for number of ideas for communicating with parents/guardians are in Table 6. On average, both groups shared between two and three ideas on the pre-survey. In the post-survey responses, participants with a suburban field experience still had an average between two and three ideas, whereas those with an urban field experience shared an average of almost three and a half ideas.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Number of Strategies for Communicating

Group	*N*	Mean Pre	Std Dev	Mean Post	Std Dev
Suburban Teacher Candidates	60	2.72	1.21	2.90	1.48
Urban Teacher Candidates	39	2.64	1.56	3.44	1.50

Specific communication actions shared by participants are shown in Table 7. Phone calls and email were the two most cited actions by all the survey groups, a majority in every instance. As with strategies for welcoming families, the response rate in both groups increased in citing writing a letter home to parents. Other strategies mentioned include meeting parents and families either face-to-face or through a home visit, newsletters, or conferences and general comments such as "invite" the families or be "positive." One strategy that was absent in both groups' pre-survey responses but appeared in their post-survey responses was Internet tools (15% for suburban teacher candidates, 10% for urban teacher candidates). In addition, texting appeared as a strategy only in the post-survey responses of the urban teacher candidates.

Table 7. Strategies for Communicating With Parents/Guardians (PTA Standard #2) Teacher Candidates Gave in Their Open-Ended Survey Responses*

Strategy	% of Suburban Candidates' Pre-Survey Responses	% of Suburban Candidates' Post-Survey Responses	% of Urban Candidates' Pre-Survey Responses	% of Urban Candidates' Post-Survey Responses
Phone Call	66% (1)	78% (1)	64% (1)	77% (1)
Email	66% (1)	70% (2)	59% (2)	69% (2)
Letter/Mail	36% (2)	48% (3)	26% (4)	46% (3)
Meet/Home Visit	27% (3)	25% (5)	21% (5)	38% (4)
Newsletters	24% (4)	6% (8)	21% (5)	21% (5)
General ("Invite," "Positive")	--	28% (4)	21% (5)	21% (5)
Conferences	19% (5)	20% (6)	28% (3)	--
Notes via Student	12% (6)	--	13% (6)	18% (6)
Internet Tools	--	15% (7)	--	10% (8)
Texting	--	--	--	15% (7)

*Parentheses indicate rank of frequency (1 = most frequent strategy) found in each group's responses.
--Indicates 5% or fewer of the group participants mentioned it in their responses.

Implications of Findings on Teacher Preparation

Need for Explicit Learning Experiences in Preservice Programs

As seen in both groups' responses, middle and high school preservice experiences typically lacked substantial preparation for parent/family engagement. Teacher candidates cannot wait for their student teaching semester before they practice and prepare for interactions with families. Preservice programs must provide additional and earlier opportunities to work with students' families.

Comparisons of the pre- and post-survey responses from the teacher candidates show that purposeful instruction embedded in the standard teacher education program can improve teacher candidates' awareness of family engagement. Results indicate that even one semester of exposure and experience can significantly impact teacher candidates' ideas and attitudes about interacting with students' parents and families. In particular, participants in both school placements showed an increase in ideas for welcoming and communicating with students' families, two standards in the PTA's National Standards for Family–School Partnerships.

Furthermore, the number of participants citing an introductory letter to parents as a way to welcome families doubled for both groups between pre- and post-surveys. This is important to note, since in the past teacher education programs have emphasized mostly reactionary strategies (Gray, 2001). Teacher educators may not have the flexibility in their preparation programs to create or add another course dealing specifically with parent/family interactions, as advocated by some (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009). Nevertheless, faculty can insert proactive content into an established class or classes through assignments, discussions, activities, assessments, and guest speakers. Application in fieldwork experiences before the student teaching semester will further solidify teacher candidates' learning and practice of family engagement.

Clarifying Teachers' Roles in Welcoming Families

A large portion of teacher candidates cited open houses and similar school events as the primary means to welcome families to schools. However, many parents are not available for or comfortable with building visits (Benson & Ogletree, 2012). The post-survey results indicate that teacher candidates are much more aware of communication tools like letters to welcome parents. Such communication strategies can be used not only during the school year, but also as one method to engage families from before school even begins.

Since family engagement activities often start prior to the school year, preservice programs could enhance teacher preparation by structuring their fieldwork requirements so that teacher candidates participate in "back to school" events

in placement schools. Welcome events should not be limited to an administrative duty. New teachers must be educated and encouraged to play an ongoing role in welcoming families to their schools—through communication, participation, and more.

Promoting Multiple Communication Methods

Phone calls and emails were largely considered the primary methods for communication with parents/families. Convenience was a common reason for communicating through these tools. Post-survey results show that after their semester experience and exposure to course content and speakers, more teacher candidates were aware of Internet tools as a communication resource with parents (e.g., schoolnotes.com, PowerSchool). Statistical analysis reaffirms this, indicating a significant gain in teacher candidates knowing more specific actions for communicating with parents and families. Awareness of Internet tools may have been a product of teacher candidates' fieldwork experience throughout the semester, during which they observed their mentor teachers using such technology or describing it.

Since not all families have consistent or permanent Internet or phone connections, preservice programs must promote multiple methods of communication for teacher–parent interactions. Teacher candidates need to learn how to use current tools and methods found in schools. Teacher preparation programs can partner with schools to examine these resources and how to meet specific community needs. Further study will also be needed to determine how teacher candidates perceive these methods—as either proactive or reactive strategies—with preparation programs emphasizing both in appropriate situations, as opposed to just the latter (Gray, 2001).

Significance of Field Experience School Placements

Results comparing the two groups of participants (those with urban field experiences and those with suburban field experiences) indicate that the placement school for clinical fieldwork can also impact teacher candidates' development. After a semester, teacher candidates in urban schools showed a greater awareness of tools and strategies for welcoming and communicating with students' families. Improved family engagement is especially noteworthy in urban school settings, where research finds significant impact of parental involvement on student achievement (U.S. GAO, 2002), despite common disadvantages in these communities (EPERC, 2008, 2009; Gamoran, 2001; Marx, 2006).

All of the urban schools in this study received Title I funds, as opposed to only half of the suburban schools. At the time of this research study, schools

were required by law to commit one percent of their Title I money to family engagement activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). An urban school building, therefore, may have already put more procedures in place than the typical suburban school. This indicates that policy decisions and mandates can impact not only the teachers and students in the schools, but also the future teachers training in those buildings.

With typically more diverse populations, urban schools may have also provided teacher candidates with opportunities to explore more avenues for engaging families. Likewise, urban schools may have identified building- or district-wide practices (as well as resources and personnel) to support these endeavors. Schools from all types of communities—urban, suburban, and rural—would benefit from actively identifying and implementing strategies for engaging parents and families. Moreover, teacher candidates placed in such schools for fieldwork will gain additional support and exposure to habits they themselves can enact when they become fully employed in their future schools. In the end, preparation programs can enhance research-supported and proven family engagement coursework (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009; Warren et al., 2011) by providing urban fieldwork experiences for its teacher candidates with experience in direct application.

Conclusions

Although this study is ongoing, findings do provide insight and implications that inform the initial research questions about middle/high school teacher candidates' perceptions of family engagement, examining the impact of a general methods course as well as two different field experience placements—urban or suburban schools. These questions focus on the experiences and perceptions of teacher candidates preparing to work in middle and high schools, whose preservice preparation has historically overlooked family engagement (Epstein, 2001; Giallourakis et al., 2005; Hiatt-Michael, 2001). Furthermore, until now, little has been known about the impact of field experience school placement (suburban vs. urban) on teacher candidates' ideas about family engagement. Even with insight gained from this present study, potential limitations must be addressed, as well as a consideration of future efforts.

Limitations

Despite the statistical significance in comparing the two groups of teacher candidates, the standard deviation is considerable compared to the mean scores. The use of a sample of convenience does make the two groups uneven in number. Even so, Levene's test for homogeneity was upheld in all statistical tests described in the analysis.

Many other aspects may have also influenced the teacher candidates' survey responses. The participants could have gathered additional experiences in other courses, worked in schools as paraeducators, interacted with schools as parents of students, and other variables. All of these experiences, both during the semester and prior to its beginning, could impact individuals' growth. Nevertheless, a significant increase does occur over the course of one semester—just sixteen weeks—in which participants study in a general methods course emphasizing parental/family engagement along with fieldwork one hour a week in schools.

Further Research and Efforts

The results of this study provide insight into the preparation and experiences of middle and high school teachers. These findings inform not only teacher education practice, but also teacher education research. The potential impact of cultural and language differences must be examined further with respect to teachers' experiences and perceptions of parent/family interactions. The teacher candidates in this study participated in a one-semester general methods course infused with explicit instruction and application of parent and family engagement. Other models for preparation—including different courses, course sequences, fieldwork experiences, assessments, and applications—could be studied to determine traits of effective preparation. With this particular study and group of participants, a longitudinal project can provide insight on the long-term impact of such course design on individuals' preparation and initiation to the teaching career.

As with any useful study, the questions outweigh the answers. The present results provide immediate insight and localized assessment. More importantly, these findings inform future decisions and investigations, as well as practical application by all educators. Purposeful action is needed to benefit future and present teachers and, ultimately, students and their families. In teacher preparation programs, the emphasis must be on proactive approaches for positive outcomes from family–teacher interactions.

Whether the preparation is through a single semester course or from an overarching program theme built through a teacher education program, future teachers must learn about the need for family engagement and proven methods. Schools can assist with this preparation during clinical fieldwork, introducing teacher candidates to building and district practices and inviting them to participate in the process. Regardless of the school setting—urban, suburban, or rural—these efforts are necessary to benefit everyone involved—future and current teachers, teacher educators, students, their families, and their communities.

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Appendix A. Assignment Guidelines for Introduction Letter to Parents/Guardians

Purpose

Introduce teacher candidate to the role of parental communication and involvement in the successful education of middle and secondary-level students through the composition of an information letter to share with students' parents/guardians while in practicum setting.

Task

Write a brief (1-page) letter to the parents/guardians of students in your practicum classroom that includes the following components:

1. **Introduce yourself**—significant information about your practicum teaching position (which cooperating teacher you are working with), your background, experience, interests, professional goals, etc.
2. Share some of your **goals for the students**. What do you want them to learn and develop by the end of their time spent with you?
3. Describe your **plans and procedures for ongoing communication** with the students' parents/guardians. How will you contact them? How often? For what reasons?
4. Describe potential **opportunities for the parent/guardians' involvement** with their students' learning during this semester. What can they do to help with the content learning, assignments, and projects? What events or programs will you use with the students in which the parents/guardians can participate?
5. **Invite** the parents/guardians to share any concerns, feedback, or questions to you at any point during the semester. Share appropriate contact information (school phone number).

After your letter draft has been evaluated and returned to you . . .

1. Print the letter on the provided letterhead.
2. Make copies and give to each student in your practicum classroom (optional).

Appendix B. Placement School Information

School (Grades)	Year Building Built	Student Enrollment (2010–2011)	%White (Non-Hispanic) Students	% Minority Students	Title I School	% of Students Qualified Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
Suburban Schools						
S-A (9-12)	2001	828	88%	12%	No	10%
S-B (6-8)	1996	627	85%	15%	No	6%
S-C (7-8)	2010	410	82%	18%	Yes	16%
S-D (7-8)	2002	389	78%	22%	Yes	29%
S-E (6-8)	1958	564	81%	19%	Yes	58%
S-F (9-12)	1996	1,525	79%	21%	No	13%
S-G (6-8)	1983	753	79%	21%	Yes	21%
S-H (6-8)	2009	791	81%	19%	No	11%
Averages	*1994*	*736*	*82%*	*18%*	*50%**	*21%*
Urban Schools						
U-A (6-8)	1957	857	49%	51%	Yes	78%
U-B (9-12)	1961	1,558	41%	59%	Yes	51%
U-C (6-8)	1939	529	17%	83%	Yes	83%
U-D (9-12)	1929	1,960	25%	75%	Yes	81%
U-E (9-12)	1959	1,501	48%	52%	Yes	73%
Averages	*1949*	*1,281*	*36%*	*64%*	*100%**	*73%*

*Percentage of school buildings receiving Title I funding

Appendix C. School/Parent Involvement Survey Instrument

(with annotations for post-survey modifications)

NAME (optional): _____ SEMESTER/YEAR: _____

SUBJECT ENDORSEMENT(S)/GRADE LEVEL(S): _____

COURSE: _____ PRACTICUM PLACEMENT: _____

1. Describe the level and scope of interactions and communication you have had with students' parents during your PREVIOUS preservice practicum/field experience(s).

Rephrased Question #1 on the Post-Survey for Teacher Candidates:

1. Describe the level and scope of interactions and communication you have had with students' parents during THIS preservice practicum/field experience.
2. What do you think are effective ways of welcoming families into the school community? [*Aligned with PTA National Standard #1 for Family-School Partnerships: "Welcoming all families into the school community—Families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are doing in class" (2010, p. 1).*]
3. What are some ways to effectively communicate with students' parents/guardians? [*Aligned with PTA National Standard #2 for Family-School Partnerships: "Communicating effectively—Families and school staff engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about student learning" (2010, p. 1).*]
4. What role do parents play in supporting students' success? [*Aligned with PTA National Standard #3 for Family-School Partnerships: "Supporting student success—Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively." (2010, p. 1).*]
5. What would you like to learn in order to enhance interactions with students' parents/guardians?
6. Are you currently a parent/guardian for any school-aged children?
7. If you answered "Yes" to number 6, how many and in what grade(s)?
8. In what ways does the school(s) encourage you to be involved with your child(ren)'s education?

Appendix D. Charts of Percent of Participants and Number of Actions Shared in Survey Question Responses

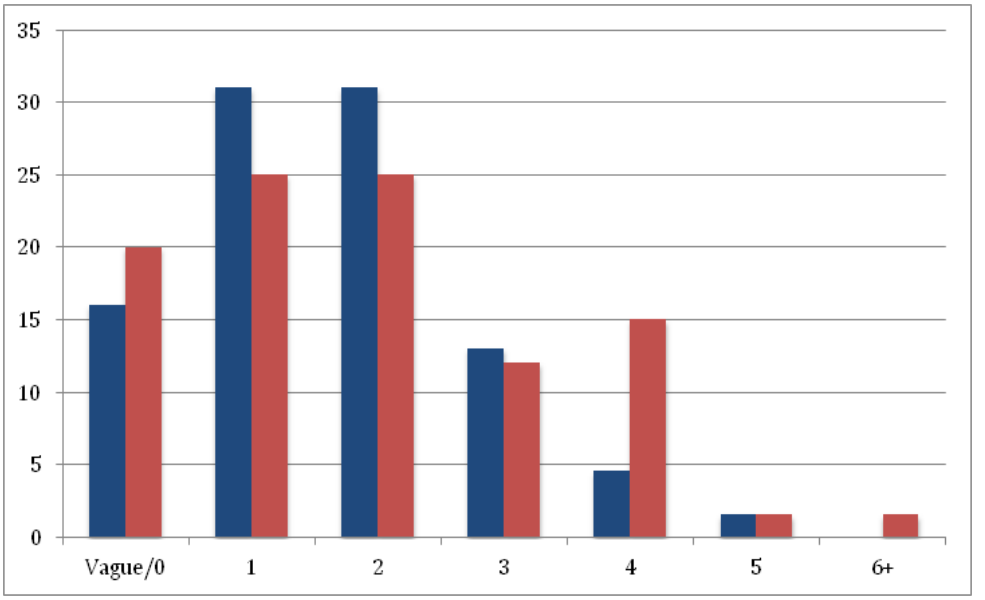

Figure 1a. Number of specific actions to welcome families into the school community given by teacher candidates in SUBURBAN field experience schools. (% of respondents vs. # of specific actions). **BLUE** = pre-survey; **RED** = post-survey

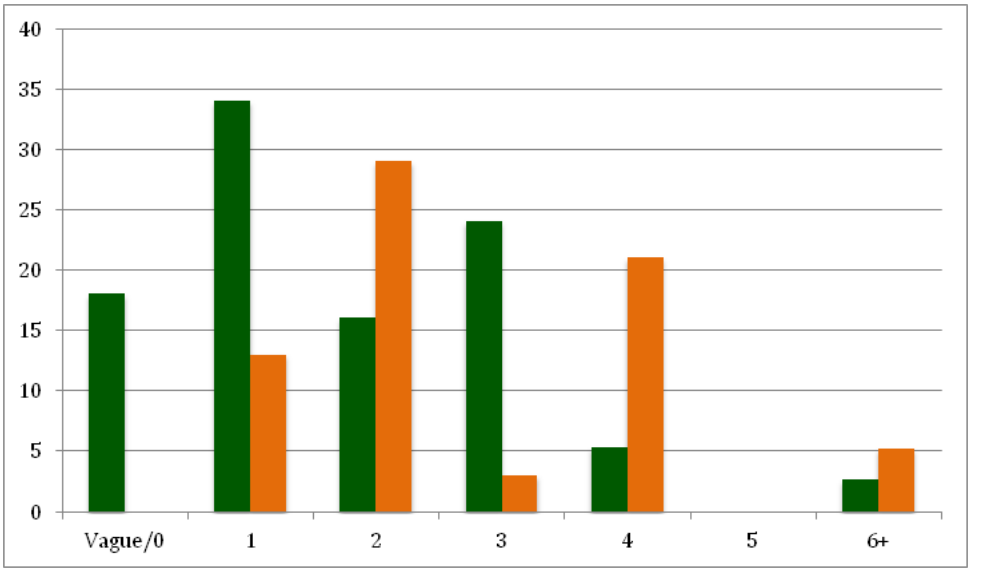

Figure 1b. Number of specific actions to welcome families into the school community given by teacher candidates in URBAN field experience schools. (% of respondents vs. # of specific actions). **GREEN** = pre-survey; **GOLD** = post-survey

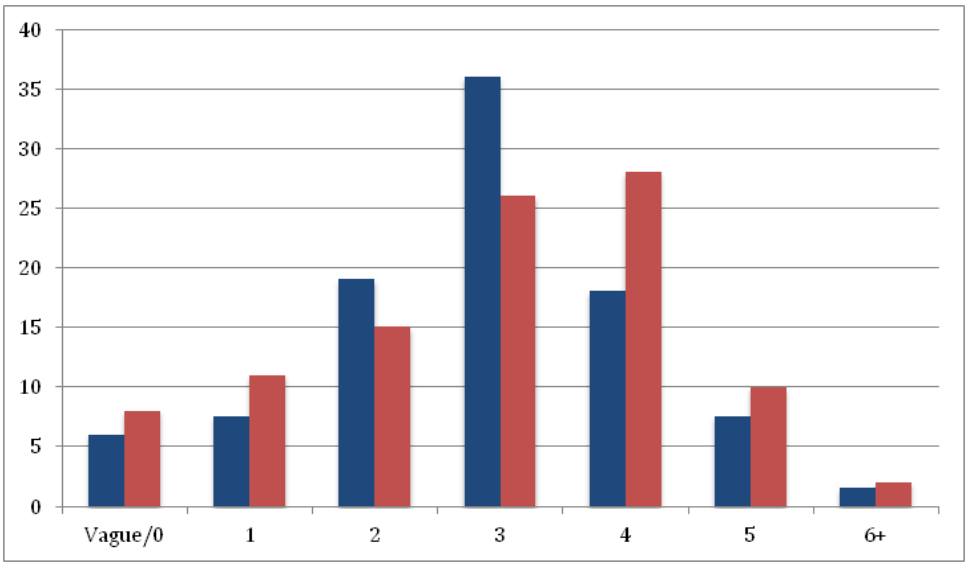

Figure 2a. Number of specific actions for communicating with parents/guardians given by teacher candidates in SUBURBAN field experience schools (% of respondents vs. # of specific actions). **BLUE** = pre-survey; **RED** = post-survey

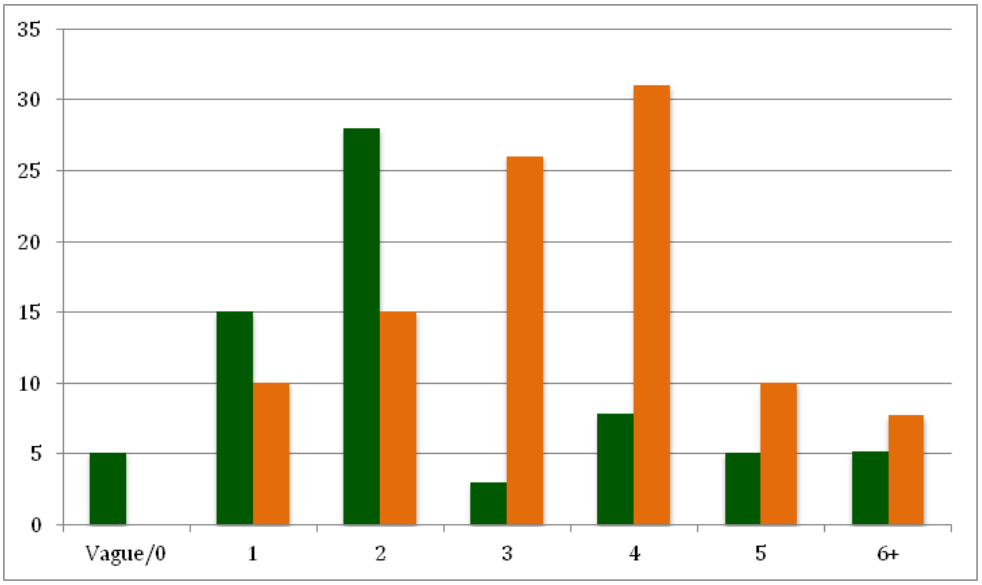

Figure 2b. Number of specific actions for communicating with parents/guardians given by teacher candidates in URBAN field experience schools (% of respondents vs. # of specific actions). **GREEN** = pre-survey; **GOLD** = post-survey

Exploring Parental Involvement Strategies Utilized by Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams

Chris Robbins and Linda Searby

Abstract

Adolescents present a unique collection of characteristics and challenges which middle school interdisciplinary teams were designed to address. This article describes a research study which explored parental involvement strategies employed by interdisciplinary teaching teams from three very different middle schools: an affluent suburban school, a mid-level rural school, and a high-poverty urban school. A multiple-case study approach was used, and interdisciplinary teams at each middle school were interviewed, responded to journal questions, and were observed at parent nights and related events. Parents were also included as participants through focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and written questionnaires. The researcher identified themes within each setting, as well as four cross-case themes. All of the interdisciplinary teams in this research study utilized strategies grounded in a belief regarding the essential role parental involvement plays, maintained an open and approachable attitude toward parents, served as a resource to parents, and approached problem-solving opportunities as a team. The findings of this study serve as a bridge between what is known about adolescent development, best middle school interdisciplinary teaming models, and the essential nature of parental involvement in education.

Key Words: middle schools, junior high, parental involvement, interdisciplinary teams, parents, family, strategies, multiple case study, teachers, teaming, roles, developmentally appropriate, conferences, welcoming

Introduction

Middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers have available to them a unique "table of opportunities" (Rottier, 2000, p. 214) with great potential to engage students and parents with multiple and varied methods of curricular design, instructional methods, and development and training strategies. However, many middle school interdisciplinary teams across the U.S. are settling for "hors d'oeuvres" (Rottier, 2000, p. 214), only scratching the surface of what can be done to engage parents as partners in their child's education. One of the primary purposes of middle school interdisciplinary teams is to communicate and engage parents while developing and implementing curriculum based on an adolescents' developmental needs (Conley, Fauske, & Pounder, 2004). Throughout the notoriously turbulent time of adolescence, the adolescent–parent relationship becomes a regular source of stress in many families, and many schools have recognized the need to reengage parents as a resource for adolescent support (Richardson, 2004).

The Carnegie Corporation of New York issued *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (1989), focusing middle level educators on the unique nature and developmental needs of early adolescent students. In this publication, middle school interdisciplinary teams were identified as a necessary mechanism to support the adolescent and involve the parent in the educational process (Carnegie Council, 1989). Tonso, Jung, and Colombo (2006), when speaking of middle school interdisciplinary teaming, cited communication with parents as an organizational practice most likely to result in achievement gains and viewed the middle school interdisciplinary team as an effective tool to engage parents. Effective middle school interdisciplinary teams engage parents as partners in education, and strategies to accomplish this goal should be intentionally orchestrated and systematically implemented (Carnegie Council, 1989). Yet organizing teachers into groups, labeling them a team, and expecting them to engage parents in the schooling process will not automatically produce positive outcomes without implicitly and intentionally training teachers to utilize the full measure of their team structure (Boyer & Bishop, 2004; Rottier, 2000; Tonso et al., 2006).

Research clearly outlines the connection between involved parents and student achievement. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) composed a theoretical model of the parental involvement process to connect parental involvement with student achievement. The model is composed of three major constructs of parental motivation: parental role construction (perceptions regarding how they are supposed to interact), parental self-efficacy (perceptions regarding their personal abilities to affect positive change), and opportunities and

barriers for involvement (perceptions of invitations for involvement from students and teachers and perceived life context variables; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Green, Walker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). Specifically, they aimed to uncover the answers to three primary questions: (1) Why do parents become involved in children's education? (2) What do they do when they get involved? and (3) How does their involvement influence the student's outcomes? (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model addresses general parental motivations for becoming an involved parent and clearly ties parental perceptions of educational involvement with outcomes.

However, there appears to be a gap in the current research. The available research tends to focus on general parent–teacher communication benefits and strategies, with a rare emphasis on middle school interdisciplinary team teacher parental involvement strategies (Erb, 1997; Gulino & Valentine, 1999; Hill & Tyson, 2009). After a thorough review of the literature, it appears that only a modest amount of literature specifically addresses how an interdisciplinary team approach to involving parents alters the face of parent–teacher communication and benefits adolescents.

Theoretical Framework for Parental Involvement

The model of parent involvement chosen for this study was the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1995, 1997, 2005) which focuses on the motivators behind parents' decisions to become involved in their child's educational process (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The model describes three motivations for parental involvement: motivational beliefs, perceptions of invitations, and perceived life context (see Figure 1).

Middle school interdisciplinary teams are capable of acting as a positive support for parents in each of the three areas outlined in the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model. By clearly defining parental roles and aiding parents to increased levels of efficacy, middle school teams can potentially create confidence in a parent's ability to support their middle school child. The second factor, parents' perceptions of invitations from others, is another factor that middle school teams can affect for positive change in levels of parental involvement. When a parent experiences perceived increases in invitations for involvement from the school, teachers, and students, their involvement is very likely to increase. The last factor is parental perceived life context, which is composed of parental perceptions of time, energy, skills, and knowledge. Middle school teaming structures have the potential to increase a parent's skill and knowledge base of middle-school-specific, home-based strategies which may aid in increasing a student's achievement. In each of these three areas, middle school

interdisciplinary teams can positively impact the level of parental motivation for involvement.

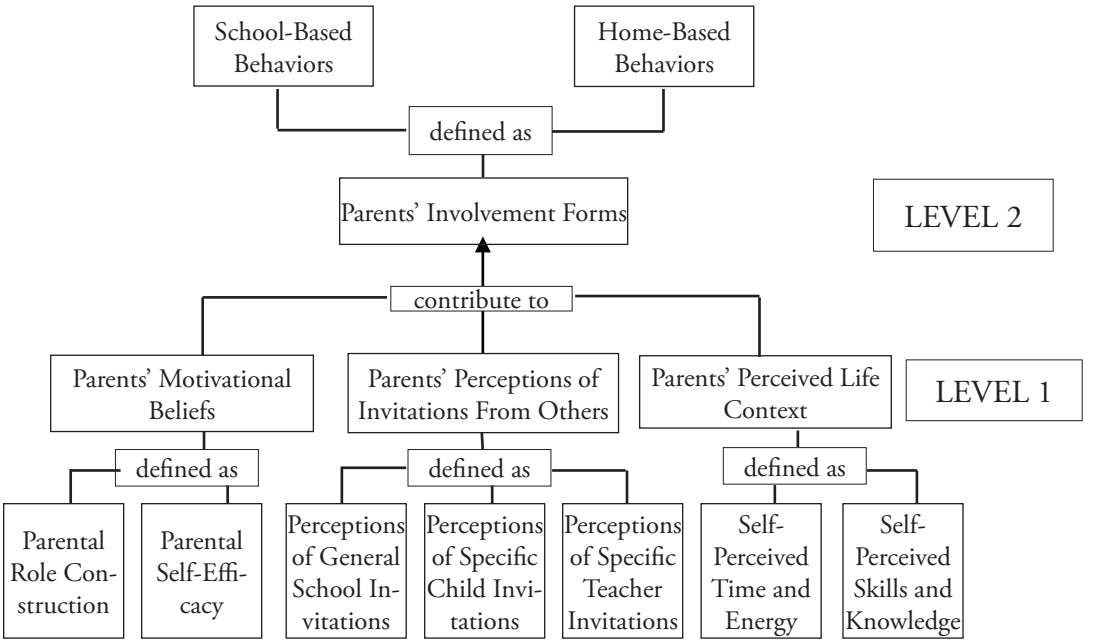

Figure 1. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (2005)

Family culture also factors into parental involvement decisions. In the framework, researchers stated that schools "must respect and respond to family culture and family circumstances in order to access the full power of parental support for learning" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, p. 116). From the perspective of school staff, many family cultures may appear to contain ineffective support systems, such as first or second generation immigrants, those with limited parental educational background, cultural or situational poverty, or other culturally limiting factors (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). However, support systems may vary depending upon cultural backgrounds, parental experiences, skills, and knowledge. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (2001) and González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) emphasize the importance of educators becoming intimately familiar with the culture of a student's household, country of origin, background, and available support systems through constant communication and home visits. As Shumow (2011) states, "researchers have repeatedly documented that parents with low income, limited education, or minority status are just as likely to help their children with homework as other parents" (p. 77). Dramatic positive shifts take place in school–home relationships when

educators take the time to uncover the strengths of culturally diverse families (González et al., 2005; Moll et al., 2001).

Parent involvement varies in its form and structure and may change over time and from area to area. Epstein (1995) outlines six different categories of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community. Parental involvement may shift from primarily home-centered forms to largely community and whole-school methods. However, all effective parental involvement necessitates contributions from the parents toward the scholastic success of their child (Epstein, 1995).

Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams

The middle school interdisciplinary team may be the ideal middle school fit for improved implementation of the factors that contribute to parental involvement according to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement. Interdisciplinary team teaching is a "signature practice of the middle school design" (Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993, p. 49). Wallace (2007) described middle school interdisciplinary teaming as "the root of most of the successful middle level programs today" (p. 1).

The overarching purpose of the middle school interdisciplinary team is to engage an adolescent learner in ways that an individual teacher is less capable of doing—creating smaller and more supportive learning communities within the larger context of the middle school (Wallace, 2007). The structure of an interdisciplinary team of teachers may vary from two-teacher teams to five-teacher teams, depending upon financial resources, school size, grade level structure, and state certification challenges (MacIver & Epstein, 1993). In general, however, four teachers (math, science, social studies, and language arts) compose an interdisciplinary team and share between 90 and 120 students in the same grade level (Clark, 1997; Crow & Pounder, 2000; Hackmann et al., 2002). Teachers from other content areas (e.g., electives, exploratory classes, physical education) may be integrated into these teams (Crow & Pounder, 2000). Additionally, the middle school support staff—such as counselors, special education teachers, and administrators—may participate with the core interdisciplinary teams in a consultative role to aid in addressing student issues. Middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers are central to addressing the challenge of educating adolescents by addressing the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of their students.

Methodology

Research Question and Method

A qualitative multiple case study approach was utilized to answer the research question: What are the strategies utilized by interdisciplinary middle school teams to effectively involve the parents of their students in the educational process? In order to maximize the insight gleaned from the participants, three middle school interdisciplinary teams were purposefully selected as cases to participate in this study from three different Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW) certified middle schools in Alabama: one suburban middle school (labeled Alpha Middle School), one rural middle school (labeled Beta Middle School), and one urban middle school (labeled Gamma Middle School). These MMGW schools maintain their MMGW certification through a displayed commitment to research-based middle school best practices, which include having a rigorous academic core, holding student achievement in high regard, using data-driven decision making, collaboration with interdisciplinary teams, exhibiting strong school leadership, and emphasizing parental involvement and support.

The case selection process began with a complete list of all 131 MMGW certified schools in the state of Alabama. Utilizing this list, the researcher narrowed down the sites based upon geographical proximity to central Alabama and their classification as urban, suburban, and rural schools. The researcher discussed these sites with the director of MMGW Alabama in order to solicit her selections for central Alabama MMGW middle schools that have established highly successful teaming models. Next, the researcher gained all necessary district- and school-level written permissions to conduct research. The researcher conducted a selection meeting with the principal at each research site. During this meeting, the principal was responsible for two major tasks. First, the principal reviewed a list of research-based characteristics of effective middle school interdisciplinary teams. Next, the principal selected one interdisciplinary team of teachers that, based upon the principal's experiences and observations of the team, most resembled these research-based characteristics. After the principal selected the team of teachers, the researcher met with each of the selected middle school interdisciplinary teams to introduce the purpose of the research and review the research process. Upon acceptance of research protocols and obtaining informed consent, data collection procedures began at each data collection site. By allowing site selection to take place by an outside expert in the middle school field, the researcher attempted to obtain local school sites which most effectively employed MMGW research-based, standard middle school practices. The purpose of these case selection procedures was to obtain a participant

sample of teams that exhibited high levels of knowledge and implementation of effective middle school interdisciplinary teaming strategies and had already demonstrated their strategies and abilities to work as a middle school team to involve parents to a high degree.

Data Collection

Qualitative case study research typically gathers data from multiple sources in order to gain the most complete and thorough exploratory picture of the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, 2008; Yin, 2009). Over the course of nine weeks (August–October), the researcher in this study continuously collected data from multiple and varied sources including: (a) multiple team interviews; (b) multiple team meeting observations; (c) ongoing team document review; (d) multiple teacher email prompts; (e) a parent questionnaire; and (f) multiple parent focus groups. From these data, emerging themes were outlined, analyzed, and explored further.

Team Interviews

Throughout the course of the research project, the researcher conducted multiple interdisciplinary team interviews. Team interviews occurred during the team's regularly scheduled weekly team meeting period. All interdisciplinary team members were present in the interview, and previously created interview protocols were followed. The interview questions were derived from the seven components of parental motivations for involvement from the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1995, 1997, 2005; see Figure 1). The interviews were semi-structured; the researcher took notes as the questions were asked and responses were offered. With the permission of the participants, the team interviews were audiorecorded and later transcribed. For the sake of anonymity, participants and schools are identified by pseudonyms throughout this study.

Team Document/Regular Correspondence Review

The researcher gathered school and interdisciplinary team-related documents or other documents described as regular school–home correspondence. These items included: (a) school letters and bulletins; (b) class syllabi; (c) team introductory letters; (d) parent night PowerPoint presentations; (e) field trip forms; (f) parent update emails; and (g) individual notes to parents regarding team business.

Teacher Email Prompts

The researcher requested that each of the team teachers respond to weekly parental involvement email prompts. Examples of email prompts include, "In

what ways do you invite parents to be involved in your team?" and "How does a middle school team make parents feel more welcome to be involved in their children's education?" The email prompts were derived from questions relating to the seven components of parental motivations for involvement from Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1995, 1997, 2005; see Figure 1). The researcher emailed the teachers with an email prompt, and the teachers responded on an individual basis with their thoughts, impressions, interactions, successes, failures, strategies, and frustrations relating to parental involvement.

Parent Questionnaire

The researcher issued one anonymous researcher-generated parent questionnaire to the parents of all of the students on each middle school interdisciplinary team. Epstein's (1995) six types of parental involvement and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1995, 1997, 2005) served as the basis for the questions contained on the questionnaire. Data collected through the questionnaire were utilized to further identify themes related to effective parental involvement strategies and perceptions of effective parental involvement. A total of 367 parent questionnaires were distributed across the three middle schools; 107 were returned (an overall response rate of 29.2%). Recent response rates of similar survey types distributed throughout other school districts revealed similar response rates; therefore, the researcher believes the response rates from this study are typical. For example, the Fort Worth Independent School District's 2011–2012 Parent Survey report indicates a response rate of 28.3% (Morrissey & Yuan, 2012); the Los Angeles Unified School District's average parent response rate in 2012 was only 18% (LAUSD, 2012).

Parent Focus Groups

The researcher conducted two parent focus groups at each site during the data collection period, a total of six parent focus groups. Although labeled as "parent" focus groups, multiple students were actually represented at the focus groups by caregivers such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents instead, indicating a guardianship situation in the child's home. All of the parents from the team were invited to attend; however, team teachers were not invited to attend. Epstein's (1995) six types of parental involvement and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1995, 1997, 2005) served as the foundation for the focus group questions. With the permission of the parent participants, the focus groups were audiorecorded and later transcribed. The focus of the data collection within the parent focus groups was to gauge

parents' perceptions of effective involvement, as well as to explore the level of parents' satisfaction with current parental involvement practices. A total of 21 parents were included in focus groups across all three middle schools. Of the 21 total parents, 8 were from Alpha Middle School (suburban), 10 from Beta Middle School (rural), and 3 were from Gamma Middle School (urban).

As expected, the cultural makeup of the parent focus groups varied between research sites. The suburban research site, Alpha, was mostly composed of upper-middle-class Caucasian families, although several minority parents (African American and Middle Eastern) were included in the focus groups. The focus groups at the rural research site, Beta, was evenly composed of working-class Caucasian parents and African American parents. The urban school site, Gamma, did have the highest percentage of minority parents, including African American and Latino parents, with only one Caucasian parent included. The Gamma research site had the highest poverty rate of the three middle schools. These parent focus group differences reflect the same general demographic makeup of the overall school population at each research site.

Data Analysis

Consistent with qualitative multiple-case study protocols, data analysis occurred throughout the course of the research study (Stake, 1995, 2006). Immediately following the team interviews, team meeting observations, and the parent focus groups, the researcher prepared the data for analysis by transcribing the recordings into textual formats. The researcher read through the data to obtain a general sense of the material. Next, the researcher analyzed and reviewed the transcribed text a second time for accuracy. In order to begin identifying emerging themes, the researcher reviewed the interview data within a case to begin the coding process, categorically aggregating the data by locating textual segments and assigning code labels. The team documents, teacher email responses, and parent questionnaire data were coded similarly for categorical analysis. The data were coded twice—once for descriptive purposes and once for textual themes. This analysis process was cyclical in nature and occurred simultaneously with other instances of data collection.

Emergent themes were categorized by case, keeping separate the emergent themes from rural, urban, and suburban cases. At the completion of the data collection, coding, and thematic analysis portions of the research study, case themes were analyzed for similarities and differences. Data triangulation was utilized by the researcher to increase validity. Cross-case analysis produced rich and descriptive comparative results between the different cases.

Results

A within-case analysis was conducted first, which yielded themes that represented the methods through which the interdisciplinary team of teachers attempted to maximize and manage parental involvement on their team, in their schools, and in their communities, for the students. Due to the specific demographic differences in the schools and communities in the study, the three teams had major differences in their approaches toward parental involvement. However, when a cross-case analysis was conducted, four common themes emerged. It should be noted that even though the three effective middle school teams used some common strategies, they used them in different ways. Table 1 describes the four themes that were common to all three teams, followed by the descriptions of each of the themes with the correlating supporting strategies.

Table 1. Research Cross-Case Themes

	The Three Effective Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams:
Theme 1	Believe that parental involvement is essential to student success.
Theme 2	Are open and approachable to parents.
Theme 3	Serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents.
Theme 4	Approach problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team instead of individuals.

Theme 1: Effective middle school teams believe that parental involvement is essential to student success.

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study believe that parental involvement is essential to student success. The three middle school teams are all persistent in making parental contact because they believe it is important to do so. Whether in the form of many emails a day, phone calls to work places, notes sent home, e-newsletters, webpages, waiting for parents in the carpool lanes, or catching a hard-to-reach parent in the office, the teams are dedicated to getting as much information to parents as possible and attempting to engage the parent in the educational process.

Not surprisingly, the three middle school teams conduct parent conferences as often as possible. The teams creatively and effectively schedule their days and weeks in order to maximize opportunities to meet with parents. The teams have a built-in parent conference period during the day, and they also are willing to creatively step outside of that conference time in order to gain access to a parent (either another period or outside the school day). Two of the middle school

teams require students and parents to utilize a variety of forms of communication, including frequent emails to and from the parents, student planner signing, or a student performance contract. The urban team, due to extremely low levels of parental involvement, actually steps into the role of the parent by providing many students with parent-like advice, guidance, accountability, and mentorship. Without bypassing or ignoring the valuable contributions of the parents, they reflect their belief that the role of the parent in student success is an essential piece.

Table 2. Description of Theme 1

Effective middle school teams believe that parental involvement is essential to student success.		
Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
Therefore, they: • Are persistent in making parental contacts, primarily through technology (email, webpages, e-newsletters). • Conduct parent conferences often during their conference period or whenever the parent is available to meet. • Require students to utilize various forms of communication with parents, such as student planners and student contracts.	Therefore, they: • Are persistent in making parental contact through face-to-face conferences and phone calls. • Conduct parent conferences often during their conference period or whenever the parent is available to meet. • Require students to utilize various forms of communication with parents, such as student planners.	Therefore, they: • Are persistent in making parental contact through face-to-face conferences and phone calls. • Conduct parent conferences whenever parents arrive at school or over the phone. • Attempt to make up for very low parental support in the community by supporting students with parental guidance.

Theme 2: Effective middle school teams are open and approachable to parents.

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study are open and approachable to parents. The teams establish and advertise very clear open door policies to parents, inviting them regularly and through many different methods to contact them with questions, concerns, and issues relating to their child. The teams are also intentionally friendly and welcoming in their interactions with parents. During parent nights, throughout conferences, while writing emails, or when talking over the phone, the teams are keenly aware of the verbal and nonverbal necessities that help make themselves and their team seem open and approachable. The Alpha Middle School team motto, team

spirit, and team theme—promoted weekly in the e-newsletter—are an additional method of establishing the perception of openness and approachability. Parents perceive that their child is in a welcoming and student-centered environment when the team provides students with a guiding theme for the year.

Table 3. Description of Theme 2

Effective middle school teams are open and approachable.		
Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
Therefore, they: • Establish a clear "open door policy" through technology, team availability, and a team spirit. • Are friendly and welcoming with their words and actions.	Therefore, they: • Establish a clear "open door policy" through emails, phone calls, and parent nights. • Are friendly and welcoming with their words and actions.	Therefore, they: • Establish a clear "open door policy" through a schoolwide consistent policy. • Are friendly and welcoming with their words and actions.

Theme 3: Effective middle school teams serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents.

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents. First and foremost, the interdisciplinary teams possess extended knowledge of the unique nature of an early adolescent's social, emotional, and cognitive development. They are always able to frame the particular challenges faced by their students through the lens of appropriate adolescent development. Furthermore, the teams are able to communicate these adolescent characteristics to the parents when necessary and appropriate. The teams possess and convey very clear proactive and reactive suggestions to parents for home-based interventions for struggling students. The teams do not hesitate to share what they feel should take place at home in order for parents to intervene positively.

In addition, the teams clearly outlined their own expectations for parents in terms of student accountability. The team from Alpha Middle School feels that most of their parents are more than capable to aid at home when their student is struggling. Additionally, the team from Alpha Middle School conveyed their overall belief that the parents of students on their team effectively establish regular expectations and procedures at home through which students may be more successful, such as a set homework time in a quiet location and environment, and so on. Beta and Gamma Middle School Teams are less optimistic about the parental efficacy represented on their team, citing that less than half

of the parents on their team have the skills and knowledge to provide support at home. Furthermore, neither of these teams express confidence that the parents of their students set regular hours and expectations for their middle school students to work on academics. These team teachers did not expect the parents of their students to be content experts and tutors—their greatest hope was for the parents on the team to be facilitators of the positive factors that contribute to effective home interventions. All three teams, however, recognize that many parents are not automatically aware of these factors or the appropriate interventions that can take place at home when a student is struggling. Therefore, the teams ensure that parents are aware of specific steps they can take to help their child be more successful in school.

Table 4. Description of Theme 3

Effective middle school teams serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents.		
Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
Therefore, they: • Exhibit a clear understanding of the unique nature of adolescent development through ideas and strategies for success they suggest parents implement at home. • Clarify the role of the parent in facilitating middle school success.	Therefore, they: • Exhibit a clear understanding of the unique nature of adolescent development through ideas and strategies for success they suggest parents implement at home. • Clarify the role of the parent in facilitating middle school success.	Therefore, they: • Exhibit a clear understanding of the unique nature of adolescent development through ideas and strategies for success they suggest parents implement at home. • Clarify the role of the parent in facilitating middle school success.

Theme 4: Effective middle school teams approach problem-solving opportunities as a team rather than as individuals.

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study approach problem-solving opportunities as a team rather than as individuals. The teachers on the teams studied are all avid proponents of the middle school team concept. All three interdisciplinary teams meet regularly each week and utilize this time to problem-solve student issues and plan appropriate interventions. Participants work together to implement the interventions as a team, including the team teachers, the student, and the parents, providing greater accountability to the student and a crossover of supportive expectations.

These team teachers nearly always conference with parents as a team instead of as individuals, lending strength and credibility to their ability as a team to influence changes in student behaviors. The team from Gamma Middle School

was the only team to entertain the option of meeting one-on-one with parents, since many of their parent conferences take place in an unplanned and impromptu manner. However, they work hard to meet with parents as a team when possible, keeping in mind that a parent conference with four teachers at once may be perceived as an intimidating environment for an unsuspecting parent. In response to this, the teams as often as possible prepared the incoming parent for this arrangement and explained its purpose. The teams from Alpha and Beta Middle Schools take teaming to the next level by establishing team procedures and expectations for behavior and academics and communicating these to the students and the parents. Only the team from Alpha Middle School, however, presents these team policies, expectations, and procedures within the context of their team goals and spirit.

Table 5. Description of Theme 4

Effective middle school teams approach problem-solving opportunities as a team rather than as individuals.		
Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
Therefore, they: • Meet regularly each week as a team during a designated team meeting time. • Develop team approaches to student issues and convey the team plan to parents. • Conduct all parent conferences as a team. • Create team procedures, policies, and expectations and communicate them clearly within the context of team goals and objectives.	Therefore, they: • Meet regularly each week as a team during a designated team meeting time. • Develop team approaches to student issues and convey the team plan to parents. • Conduct all parent conferences as a team. • Create team procedures, policies, and expectations.	Therefore, they: • Meet regularly each week as a team during a designated team meeting time. • Develop team approaches to student issues and convey the team plan to parents. • Conduct a majority of parent conferences as a team.

Discussion

Research clearly ties high levels of parental involvement in schools to increased levels of academic achievement and overall student competence (Carr & Wilson, 1997; Griffith, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). Specific parental involvement strategies for teachers and schools

have been clearly associated with increased student motivation for academic success (Bronstein, Ginsburg, & Herrera, 2005). However, definitions of parental involvement vary between parents, students, and teachers, as well as schools and geographic locations. Barge and Loges (2003) stated, "an implicit assumption in the existing research is that parents, students, and teachers hold similar conceptions of what counts as parental involvement" (p. 142). Involvement levels are heavily impacted when there is a disconnect between what schools perceive as effective parental involvement versus the perceptions of their parents on effective parental involvement (Baker, 1997a, 1997b; Barge & Loges, 2003). Middle school interdisciplinary teams will benefit from a clearly outlined and established set of parental involvement strategies constructed for middle school teams to utilize with the parents of adolescents. This current research endeavored to elucidate those strategies.

Table 6. Interdisciplinary Team Parental Involvement Strategies Categorized by Level One of the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model (1997, 2005)

Level One Descriptor	Involvement Strategy Utilized by the Interdisciplinary Team:
Parents' Motivational Beliefs	Teams educate parents regarding adolescent-specific developmental characteristics and needs. Teams explicitly suggest and follow up on at-home strategies for parents to implement.
Parents' Perceptions of Invitations From Others	Teams maintain an open and approachable attitude toward parents. Teams actively and continuously invite parents of struggling students to face-to-face parent conferences. Teams create plans of improvement requiring parent–student interaction at home.
Parents' Perceived Life Contexts	Teams understand the challenges unique to their community's socioeconomic status. Teams attempt to serve as a resource to parents who lack the time, energy, skills, or knowledge to become involved by providing specific intervention strategies.

This research study has confirmed the three contributing factors toward parental involvement as described by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 2005). Their model of parental involvement is teacher- and school-centered, focusing on broad school attempts or specific teacher's efforts to involve parents by considering parental motivational factors, parent perceptions of invitations from others, and parents' life contexts. However, the results of this study extend beyond the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model and break new ground

by specifically identifying strategies employed by effective middle school teams in order to involve parents. As indicated in Table 6, there is a direct alignment of the involvement strategies utilized by the middle school teams and the level one descriptors in the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1997, 2005, see Figure 1). In conclusion, the researcher has used the results of this study to apply the Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1997, 2005) parental involvement model specifically to middle schools (see Figure 2).

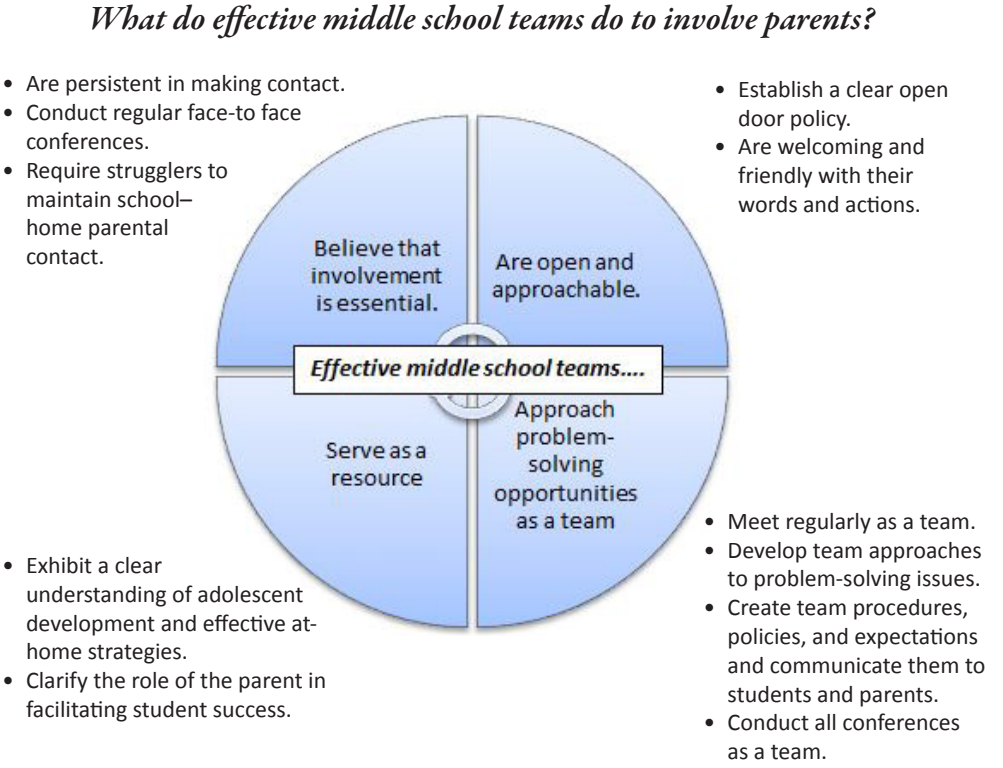

Figure 2. Model for Middle School Interdisciplinary Team Parental Involvement Strategies

The overlapping and ongoing nature of the specific parental involvement strategies utilized by the interdisciplinary teams in this study can be best represented in the cyclical model in Figure 2. The strategies did not occur in isolation or on a specific team or school timeline. The middle school teams adopted and exhibited the four overall characteristics or beliefs outlined in the central area of the model. The parental involvement strategies, located in the surrounding area of the model, emerged as evidence of their dedication to these four characteristics. As a result, four primary thematic categories were identified in this research study, and multiple strategies were listed within each

area. The creation of this middle-school-specific parental involvement model (see Figure 2) may significantly impact the current parental involvement practices of middle school interdisciplinary teams.

Interpretation of Findings

The researcher encountered several "aha" moments throughout the data collection and analysis processes. First and foremost, though, the lack of parental interest in the research study was more than noticeable. All of the parental participants included in this study were gracious, friendly, honest, and helpful. The parental focus groups and interviews were full of laughter, food, and open dialogue. However, the difficulty in getting parents to become official participants in the research study was frustrating and staggering. Without a doubt, the questionnaires were the most successful means through which parental participants were engaged. Creative means of parental participant recruitment had to be utilized. Through persistent advertising throughout the data collection period and using creative incentives, such as offering gift cards, meals, and even cash prizes, the researcher was able to recruit parents for focus groups and one-on-one interviews. Even Alpha Middle School, located in a suburban community nearly notorious for an overflow of parental involvement, was a surprisingly difficult site from which to recruit focus group participants. Out of a total of nine parent focus groups conducted across three schools, four of the focus groups had zero parents show up to participate. This phenomenon may be due to an overall lack of interest in the researcher's study, parents placing low priority on the offer, and parental time and schedule restraints. The suburban community had families that had overbooked schedules already; therefore, participation in a research study was not high on their list of priorities.

Secondly, there was an extraordinary lack of knowledge among parents regarding the overall purpose of the middle school concept. This fact was largely evident through the statements made on the parent questionnaires and through the discussions during parent focus groups. Parents viewed interdisciplinary teaming as a means to manage a large population of students and bring down class sizes, rather than serving a developmental need or providing opportunities for crosscurricular ties in lesson planning. "Make the classes smaller" and "Help make the school smaller" were common responses from parents regarding the purpose of teaming in middle schools. However, the middle school concept offers specific benefits for students and teachers, and it would behoove parents to be knowledgeable in these areas. Overall, middle school interdisciplinary teams are tied to increased parental involvement, improved work climate, increased job satisfaction, and increased student belongingness (Erb, 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; Quine & Restine, 1995; Wallace,

1997; Warren & Payne, 2001). Middle school teams can take the lead in educating parents about the purpose of middle school teaming.

The third realization was the connection between poverty and middle school team parental involvement strategies, specifically the impact that technology has on levels of involvement, even at the school with the lowest socioeconomic status. "There is no email ever," a Gamma team parent expressed in frustration. "They have got to get email going…lots of folks got it, and it's a good way to keep people up [to date]." "I got it at work and could email if I need to," another Gamma team parent exclaimed. The parent questionnaires from Gamma revealed the same frustration with lack of technology as well. Gamma parents indicated that if technology was utilized by the school (i.e., consistent email access, updated school webpage regularly), their sense of involvement with the school would increase. If Gamma Middle School had the same technological framework within their school system and the community that Alpha Middle School had, the face of parental involvement would be drastically altered. Admittedly though, the exact reliability and availability of technology in the Gamma Middle School students' homes or with their parents' personal devices may be restrictive in these efforts. However, in an age when technology impacts every facet of our lives, schools must keep pace.

Lastly, middle school teachers and parents struggled with finding a balance between student responsibility/independence versus forced accountability. Parents noted their own struggle to know "where the line is," as one parent from Alpha Middle School described it. The teachers in this study longed for parents to hold their children responsible daily for assignments at home. "The parent has to take the initiative," one teacher stated. However, the parents desire to teach responsibility to their children. "I want them to have their independence," an Alpha team parent stated, which is a common statement from a middle school parent. "We're trying to force our kids to make their own way with the teachers," one parent added. "Well, you can't be there when they graduate from college….They need to start growing up," stated an Alpha team parent. As a result of these attitudes, many parents remained hands off until the child proved he/she could not handle the responsibility on his/her own, which frustrated teachers and caused students to fall behind.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Implications for Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams

Teachers are, many times, frustrated with the lack of involvement of many of the parents of their students. Middle school teachers, although often organized into unique team structures, rarely receive specific training regarding strategies that effectively involve parents. The data resulting from this study

may inform middle school teams regarding effective parental involvement strategies and may springboard interdisciplinary team teachers toward implementation of proven and effective parental involvement strategies (see Figure 2). If middle school interdisciplinary teams implement the strategies utilized by the effective middle school teams selected for this study, middle school students and their parents may benefit from the increased effectiveness of parental involvement strategies utilized by the team teachers.

Additionally, the parents of middle school students in this study consistently voiced a struggle between holding the student accountable and teaching them personal responsibility. "I think it's time for her to grow up, so I am trying to back off," one Beta Middle School parent stated. Another asked, "Where is the line?" "I don't want to be one of those 'helicopter parents,'" one Alpha Middle School parent claimed. The findings of this study emphasize the middle school team's role in educating parents regarding appropriate home-based boundaries, involvement, and accountability. Many parents from this study knew that it was important for them to be involved at home, recognized their child's need, but did not know how to do so appropriately. Middle school teams, when equipped with these interventions, can take steps to train parents on appropriate home-based interventions and strategies to support their children's educational progress.

Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

Additionally, teacher preparation programs may benefit from using this data to inform their own curricula regarding middle school teaming and the importance of parental involvement. "I didn't learn this in college," one teacher stated about strategies to involve parents; "it's on the job training," she continued. The teachers across all three schools consistently referred to experience and time as the best teacher of parental involvement strategies. Teacher preparation programs can address these issues directly before the teacher even enters the classroom by implementing specific learning goals for their preservice candidates related to parental involvement strategies. Specifically, teacher preparation programs should gear middle-school-specific strategies toward their candidates who are most likely to begin their careers in the middle school classroom. Learning to involve parents does not have to be "on the job training." Teacher preparation programs can work proactively to teach these strategies.

Implications for School Administrators

The results of this research study will also aid middle school administrators in the process of creating professional development opportunities for middle school interdisciplinary team teachers to work together to involve parents in the educational process. Additionally, the data may serve as a critical component

of middle school improvement initiatives and may serve as the foundation for newly formed middle schools in creating a climate of excellence through teaming opportunities and expectations.

In order to maximize the impact of this study on the middle school interdisciplinary team structure and parental involvement, middle school teachers and leaders should consider using this data to create or continue the following initiatives:

- Middle school teachers and leaders should make every effort to educate their parents regarding the middle school concept and philosophy and the overall purposes of the middle school structure;
- Middle school teachers and leaders should evaluate the effectiveness and usage of technology in communicating with parents, as well as take full advantage of available technology grants or business partnerships for funding;
- Middle school teachers should reflect on the potential benefits of increasing the role of parental involvement at the middle school level;
- Middle school teachers and leaders should reflect on the current operational state of their middle school interdisciplinary teams;
- Middle school teachers should reflect on the current state of implementation of parental involvement strategies in their interdisciplinary teams;
- Middle school administrators should ensure that their teachers are knowledgeable about adolescent-specific cognitive, social, and emotional developmental characteristics and the challenges associated with each;
- Middle school leaders should create appropriate middle school team training opportunities for newly formed or dysfunctional middle school teams;
- Middle school administrators should train their current middle school teams with the specific strategies utilized by effective middle school teams to involve parents; and
- The Making Middle Grades Work Middle School Improvement Initiative should evaluate the parental involvement component of the program by ensuring that the middle school interdisciplinary team is the primary means through which parents are involved.

The implications for this study may extend to middle school teams, school administrators, and teacher preparation programs and have the potential to bridge the gap that often exists between middle school interdisciplinary team practices and parental involvement. However, the data from this study is limited to these three cases in these three schools and is not necessarily generalizable to every middle school teaming format, situation, and demographic setting. The strategies identified in this study as effective for involving parents may vary from year to year, grade level to grade level, or between demographic areas.

These middle school teaming strategies were identified by this study's participants as effective and may serve as a foundation for further research regarding middle school best practices.

Summary

There is tremendous potential for middle school improvement when the unit of focus is the interdisciplinary team. Wallace (2007) described the middle school team as the heart of the middle school concept; improvement in parental involvement initiatives at this level must focus on the implementation of team-related strategies. Research has clearly tied positive parental involvement in school to increased levels of academic achievement and overall student competence (Carr & Wilson, 1997; Griffith, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). This study uncovered the middle-school-specific strategies that interdisciplinary teams utilized to in order to involve the parents of their students. Effective middle school teams believe that parental involvement is essential, are open and approachable to parents, serve as a resource to parents, and approach problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team. Middle school teams, acting as a unit and implementing these specific strategies, have the potential to impact students, parents, and families in lasting and substantial positive ways.

Parents who are motivated to be involved, feel invited to be involved, and are empowered with specific strategies through which they can become involved are a powerful force in the life of an adolescent. Adolescence is often a difficult developmental time, and the adolescent–parent relationship is a regular source of stress in many families (Richardson, 2004). During a developmental time in which parents typically retreat, middle school teams have the potential to turn this tide by making lasting impressions on middle school students and their parents. This article began by stating that middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers have available to them a unique "table of opportunities" but often settle for "hors d'oeuvres" (Rottier, 2000, p. 214), only sampling what can be done to engage parents as partners in their child's education. When middle school teams simply go through the motions of their structure, not fully realizing their potential, they can become stagnant. Parents become an untapped resource, and students continue down regular and worn educational paths. However, through the implementation of these parental involvement strategies specific to middle schools, teams will not have to settle for "hors d'oeuvres." Middle school teams, their students, and the students' families will feast on lasting academic progress and quality relationships upon which many years of success can be built.

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Are We in This Together? An Analysis of the Impact of Individual and Institutional Characteristics on Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

The current study addresses certain limitations in prior analyses of teachers' perceptions of parents' involvement in education. In our analyses, we draw on teachers' responses to the School Community Survey (SCS) as well as information on school characteristics to address two limitations in prior studies. The SCS is a descriptive tool that describes the school community from the viewpoint of parents, students, teachers, and principals. Prior studies have relied on responses to the SCS collected from communities in a limited number of areas. In the current study we assess the generalizability of measures of teachers' perceptions developed within the SCS. Specifically, we assess the internal consistency of nine subscales as well as a complete index of teachers' perceptions developed in prior analyses. In addition, we explore the association between the demographic characteristics of teachers, institutional (i.e., school) characteristics, and teachers' perceptions. Our findings suggest that measures included in the SCS consistently gauge teachers' perceptions and that multiple measures can be combined to form summary measures of distinct elements of overall perceptions. In addition, our linear regression analyses using robust clustered standard errors suggests there are important variations in both the individual and institutional level correlates of elements of teacher perceptions.

Key Words: school community survey, teachers' perceptions, individual, institutional characteristics, parents, students, homework, family involvement

Introduction

Many factors influence the educational success that children have in school. Parental education, household income, physical fitness, diet, student motivation, and the quality of the learning environment are just a few of the external variables that may impact student success (Pirog & Magee, 1997; Potter et al., 2011). In addition, a student's relationship with his or her teacher and school is one of the more powerful connections that youth may experience during their education. Just as there are many explicitly identifiable factors that impact the overall educational success of students prior to entry into the classroom, there are also less noticeable, implicit variables that influence how well children do in school. Variables such as a student's confidence in the teacher and the teacher's perceptions of a student are key to addressing various aspects of student learning (Tyler & Boelter, 2008). Teachers' perceptions may be impacted by a number of factors outside a specific student. In the current study, we explore how teacher and school characteristics impact teachers' perceptions.

Being a quality teacher has much to do with efficacy, knowledge of current research, and teaching from multiple perspectives. However, teachers are likely to have a certain perception or perceptive value placement on the children they teach based on their own characteristics and those of the neighborhoods in which they teach. Perceptive value placement on the American public educational system has been changing dramatically over the past decade (Garcia, Arias, Murri, & Serna, 2010; Pianta et al., 2005). Societal ills that teachers face may impact how they evaluate the development of their students based on the neighborhoods in which the children reside, and a student's relationship with his or her teacher is one of the most critical facets of learning (Garcia et al., 2010; Monzó & Rueda, 2001; Pianta et al., 2005). Noddings (2001) purports that caring is a basic need grounded in relationships in which an individual's needs and perspectives are acknowledged and nurtured. Students define a caring teacher as one that knows the subject matter, teaches for understanding, maintains high expectations, provides constructive feedback, and models a caring attitude (Adler, 2002; Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008; Wentzel, 1997; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). Although teacher care has been identified as a powerful force in success, current national reform initiatives have shifted priorities from developing informed, responsible citizens through caring to arming learners with test-taking knowledge (Schussler & Collins, 2006).

Purpose and Significance

This study aims to examine teachers' attitudes about the communities of children they teach by using the teacher section of the School Community

Survey (SCS), which is one component of the School Community Index (SCI) instrument created by the Academic Development Institute. The SCI is a descriptive tool that describes the school community from the viewpoint of parents, students, teachers, and principals. It enables school communities—including administration, faculty, parent organizations, the school board, and other interested parties—to understand the impressions of three essential populations (parents, students, and teachers) at a particular point in time.

Education is important to parents, teachers, students, and general community members within school districts across America. Take a look at the local evening news, and most weeks there is at least one story that focuses on one school district matter or another. Although contentious at times, this passion among all involved is one reason why the authors of this article decided to take the pulse of teachers' attitudes. Our goals in the current study are two-fold: first, we assess the generalizability of prior measures of teachers' perceptions to a new and diverse school district; second, we add to the extant literature on teachers' perceptions by exploring how individual and institutional characteristics differentially impact distinct elements of teachers' perceptions of different aspects of the learning community.

Implications

A core social work belief is that the design and delivery of services clearly must proceed from a full understanding of an individual's needs, a principle known as starting where the client is. With regard to education, the clients (in this case, students) are byproducts of the neighborhoods in which they reside (Bourdieu, 1977; Hepworth et al., 2010). This research assesses the reliability of previously established measures of teachers' perceptions and investigates the predictors of distinct elements of such perceptions (Redding, 1996, 2001, 2008). In affirming the generalizability of indicators and summary measures of teachers' perceptions drawn from the SCS, the current study provides evidence that such measures can and should be utilized in diverse settings. In addition, our results suggest it is critical that future researchers and those conducting school assessments consider that individual and institutional characteristics may not have a universal effect on teachers' perceptions. Instead, it is critical to investigate correlates and predictors of distinct elements of perceptions.

Literature Review

Teacher Perceptions and Attitudes

The prior literature on teacher perceptions indicates that teachers, knowingly or unknowingly, exhibit different behaviors to students according to

socioeconomic class or status of the parents (Cakmak, Demirkaya, & Derya, 2011; Campbell, 2003; Redding, 1997). This literature also suggests that how well students perform in class influences teacher perceptions and attitudes (Cakmak et al., 2011; Campbell, 2003). The expectations of teaching professionals have been found to be constant predictors of performance outcomes for K–12 students (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Rubie-Davies, 2010). Despite the fact that much research has been done in this area, there is not a consensus on the specifics as to why this phenomenon actually occurs (Tyler & Boelter, 2008). Since the purpose of this study is to examine teachers' perceptions of different aspects of their learning communities, it is worthwhile to understand how they feel about teaching students who may come from residential neighborhoods that may be socioeconomically diverse compared to the neighborhoods in which the teachers reside.

School communities are quite complex, with several factors to consider: average home value in the neighborhood, percentage of single-parent homes, educational attainment of community members, and the overall parental involvement with the school (Little & McLaughlin, 1993). In a study that examined factors that encouraged teachers to be more connected to their community, Little and McLaughlin (1993) identified factors primarily focused on support and collaboration with the school and their peers. Based upon interviews and surveys, they found that teachers work better in school communities that are more associated with the environment. That is, if teachers are more knowledgeable of the neighborhood context and the children they serve, they are more likely to have a positive relationship with their students. Kranz (1970) examined the relationship between teachers' perceptions of pupils and their behavior toward those pupils. She found that teachers were more engaged and taught more substantively to students whom they perceived to have a high achievement level but engaged in less substantive behaviors toward students that were perceived to be average or low achieving.

Teacher Care and Parental Involvement

Teachers' perceptions and behaviors may also be linked to how much they care about student success (Shaunessy & McHatton, 2008). Caring teachers who perceive the school to be a positive force in the neighborhood promote respectful relationships with students. Teachers with a positive perception of the community also foster stronger classroom environments by valuing the diverse strengths of students without placing more value on academic performance and encouraging students to honor diversity (Noddings, 2001) and demonstrate mutual respect (Schussler & Collins, 2006). In school communities where learners feel engaged, feel that teachers care, and parental involvement

is highly supportive, teachers' perceptions of students and the community interact to maximize student performance. Patel and Stevens (2010) examined how perceptions of teachers, parents, and students concerning students' academic performance affected parental involvement and teachers' facilitation of school programs in two low-income urban schools with high Latino populations. They found that as perception differences increased between parents and teachers or parents and students, the parents tended to be less involved and teachers tended to facilitate fewer programs for parental involvement.

The School Community Index

Three studies have been conducted by the Academic Development Institute (ADI). From 1996–1998, the SCS was administered to approximately 7,600 parents and 1,869 teachers in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and Illinois. Prior studies investigated the relationships among various socioeconomic factors, institutional characteristics, a school community, and student learning outcomes. Findings suggested that socioeconomic factors, institutional characteristics, and collaborative school communities were positively correlated with improved average daily attendance, reading scores, and math scores, but negatively correlated with poverty levels (Redding, 1998, 2001).

From 2001 to 2003, ADI investigated the effects of Solid Foundation®, a comprehensive parent engagement program, on student learning outcomes in 129 Illinois elementary schools with high poverty levels (Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004). Parent engagement strategies designed to increase parental involvement with their children's education included:

- Parent participation in decision making at the school
- Alignment of the school's policies and procedures regarding homework and parent–teacher conferences with rubrics of research-based practices
- Explicit discussion of the roles of parents, teachers, and students around compacts, learning standards, and homework policies
- Reading school–home links aligned with state standards and in-class instruction
- Parent education focused on home reading and study habits
- Outreach through home visits, family nights, and a family resource library (Redding et al., 2004, p. 3)

To examine the impact of parent–teacher engagement, the investigators analyzed statewide assessment scores for each school with matched controls. They found that increasing the cohesiveness between teachers and parents helped to improve the overall learning environment of schools. By that means, student success was also positively influenced. The schools that participated in the Solid Foundation® parent–teacher engagement program demonstrated a

1.9% achievement gain over other Illinois elementary schools with identical beginning test scores. Solid Foundation® schools increased their pass rate from 51.9% in 2001 to 56.3% in 2003—an increase of 4.4%. Schools that were not a part of the program only increased their pass rate of 51.9% in 2001 to 54.4% in 2003—an increase of 2.5% (Redding et al., 2004).

Finally, ADI investigated how parents and teachers view their school communities (Redding, 2008). Specifically, this study examined which aspects of the school community parents and teachers viewed as generally strong or weak, on which areas parents and teachers had divergent opinions, the extent to which the parents' race or ethnicity influenced their own perceptions of the school community, and how parents' and teachers' perceptions about their school communities point to promising paths for improving schools and better educating children (Redding, 2008). From 2003 to 2006, the SCS was administered to 1,571 teachers and 12,364 parents in 63 elementary and middle schools in 5 states (Illinois, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia, Wisconsin). Forty schools were in urban settings, and 23 were in rural areas or small towns. The findings suggested that teachers and parents had similar opinions about academic achievements for students. However, they differed in their perceptions of parents. Teachers' perceptions of the parents were more negative than the parents' perceptions of themselves (Redding, 2008).

The Current Study

The extant literature suggests teachers exhibit different behaviors to students, particularly along socioeconomic status lines (Cakmak et al., 2011; Campbell, 2003). Teachers' perceptions and expectations have also been found to be associated with student performance outcomes (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Rubie-Davies, 2010). The purpose of the current study is to address certain limitations in prior studies by assessing predictors of teachers' perceptions of students, parents, and the learning community. Specifically, we draw on teachers' responses to the SCS and information on school characteristics to assess the generalizability of indicators of teachers' perceptions of parents, students, and the community developed within the SCS. In addition, we examine the internal consistency of nine subscales and a summary index of teachers' perceptions. Next, we explore the association between the characteristics of teachers, institutions (i.e., schools), and teachers' perceptions. We expect that certain characteristics of teachers and schools will be strongly associated with a summary measure of teachers' perceptions. Moreover, we investigate whether such characteristics have differential effects on distinct elements of teachers' perceptions.

Data, Measures, and Methods

The current study explores data collected from 199 educators from 23 schools within a single school district in a mid-sized southern metropolitan city. Approximately 1,000 teachers were invited by email to participate in an online survey to gauge their perceptions of parents, students, the school, and the community.[1] A response rate of about 20% is less than ideal but comparable to prior studies using web-based surveys (Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2000; Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004). This is, in part, a reflection of a general decline in survey response rates since the 1970s (Curtin, Presser, & Singer, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2004). However, the moderate response rate likely does not influence our results as prior studies have shown that response rates are not significantly associated to nonresponse bias (Curtin et al., 2000; Keeter, Kennedy, Dimock, Best, & Craighill, 2006)

The survey was comprised of a number of demographic questions as well as the 65-question "teacher section" of the School Community Survey (SCS). The SCS was explicitly developed to examine the perceptions of both parents and teachers regarding their learning communities. The SCS is one component of the School Community Index that enables various entities in the school community to gauge impressions of parents, students, and teachers at a particular point in time. While characteristics of teachers are likely to influence their perceptions, it is equally plausible that perceptions are influenced by the contextual environment in which they work. As such, we explore the association between certain school characteristics and teachers' perceptions of students, parents, and the community. Data on schools in the district was collected and made publicly available by the state's department of education (DOE).

Characteristics and Perceptions of Teachers

Teachers' perceptions of students, parents, and the community were analyzed through their responses to the 65-question "teacher section" of the SCS. Respondents were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert-style scale: (1) uncertain; (2) strongly disagree; (3) disagree; (4) agree; and (5) strongly agree. Consistent with prior analyses (Redding, 2008), responses were recoded into dichotomous measures: (0) strongly disagree/disagree/uncertain, and (1) agree/strongly agree. The binary indicators were used to gauge teacher perceptions across nine perception categories. Since all of the items were constructed to have a positive valence for measure of school community, a value of "1" for an item indicates positive perceptions (Redding, 2001). The following is a breakdown of the SCS perception categories: roles of parents and teachers (questions 1–6); responsibilities and opportunities (questions 7–12); studying and homework (questions 13–19); character development (questions 20–26);

reading (questions 27–32); academic development (questions 33–38); school–home communication (questions 39–47); common experience/school climate (questions 48–57); and association/relations of school community members (questions 58–65).

The nine subscales and a full summary index of perceptions serve as the outcome measures in the analyses that follow. Scores were computed using the formula:

$$\text{Score} = \frac{\text{Number of items scored 1}}{\text{Total number of items}} \times 100$$

This formula results in a potential range of values from 0 through 100, with higher scores indicating a higher percentage of agreement (Redding, 2001). Descriptive statistics for each of the perception scales are presented in Table 1. The mean values for each scale indicate the average level of agreement to the questions included in the scale. The scale mean is an average of the respondent specific mean scores for the questions in a respective scale. The mean of 68.42 for the overall scale indicates that, on average, respondents agreed or strongly agreed with more than 68% of all questions in the SCS. The average level of agreement for the scales ranged from a low of approximately 56% for the character development scale to a high of 78% for the responsibilities and opportunities scale. Overall, mean levels of agreement across the perception scales suggest teachers in the school district have rather favorable perceptions of their students and the general learning environment.

Demographic Characteristics of Teachers

In addition to the perception questionnaire, teachers provided demographic information. Means and standard deviation for these measures are also presented in Table 1. Gender (female) is a binary measure, and the mean of .83 indicates that approximately 83% of respondents were female (males = 0; females = 1). Marital status (married) is another dichotomous measure and the mean of .58 indicates that 58% of respondents were married (non-married = 0; married = 1). A majority of respondents (72%) defined their racial identity as White (Non-Hispanic). African Americans comprised the next largest group of respondents (25%). Race (Non-White) is thus measured as a binary measure, and the mean of .28 indicates that 28% of respondents were Non-White (White = 0; Non-White = 1). Respondent's education level ranged from some college to professional degree with most teachers having earned either a four-year (39%) or master's (57%) degree. The mean of 5.6 indicates that the average education level for this sample was between a four-year and master's degree. Finally, teachers were asked to indicate what grade level they were currently teaching. Approximately 44% taught in elementary school (K–5th), 15% in middle school (6th–8th), and 41% in high school (9th–12th).

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for All Measures

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Full Index	68.42	18.97
Roles	67.19	27.19
Responsibilities/Opportunities	78.02	25.01
Studying/Homework	66.39	31.13
Character Development	56.36	25.12
Reading	64.74	24.36
Academic Development	69.43	31.61
Communication	71.45	19.67
School Climate	75.39	23.55
Association	60.93	26.01
Female	.83	.38
Married	.58	.49
Non-White	.28	.45
Education	5.60	.60
Grade	7.50	3.81
Years Taught	5.12	2.26
Staff Assaults	.30	.86
% Students Eligible for Free/ Reduced Cost Lunch	71.65	21.45
Attendance	94.72	2.66
% Teachers with MA Degree	56.66	9.85
Literacy	.23	.43
Math	.54	.50

Institutional Characteristics

We include institutional characteristics in our analysis to explore how the contextual environment impacts teachers' perceptions of students, parents, and the community. Characteristics of the 23 school environments included in this sample were obtained from the state's DOE. Because violence is likely to have a negative impact on teachers' perceptions, we control for the number of staff assaulted by students. Staff assaults ranged from 0–5, however, more than 76% of schools reported no assaults. In addition to controlling for an individual teachers' level of education, we control for the overall level of education of teachers in the school. Specifically, we include a measure of the percentage of

teachers that have earned a master's degree. Direct measures of the economic circumstances of students are not available. However, the state does record the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-cost meal plans. While not a direct measure of economic status, this is a reasonable proxy for levels of poverty among student's families (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Thomas, Lemieux, Rhodes, & Vlosky, 2011). On average, more than 71% of students in the sample are eligible for free or reduced cost meal plans. This measure varies considerably from school to school, with a range of 20% to 98% of students eligible for such plans. Finally, we include measures of student performance, both in terms of attendance and proficiency in literacy and math. Compared to national averages, attendance rates are quite high in this sample, ranging between 82% and 99% with an average of nearly 95% (Stillwell & Sables, 2013). Such rates are, in part, the result of a districtwide attendance incentive program that rewards and recognizes students with few absences. We include binary indicators of whether schools currently meet proficiency standards established by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for proficiency in literacy or math.[2] Only 23% of schools in this sample satisfy state standards for proficiency in literacy, while 54% meet proficiency standards in math. For comparison, national averages are 32% for literacy and 31% for math (Peterson, Woessmann, Hanushek, & Lastra-Anadon, 2011).[3]

Analytical Technique

In the analyses that follow, we explore teacher and school level predictors of a summary index of teacher perceptions as well as nine perception subscales. These data are not well suited for traditional ordinary least squares regression techniques because the 199 teachers in the sample are nested within 23 schools. As such, the data violate the independence assumption. Ideally, hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) techniques would be used to simultaneously explore the impact of individual and school level measures on teachers' perceptions. However, the traditionally accepted cutoff for HLM analyses is 30 level two units (i.e., schools), which these data do not meet. As a compromise, we use a linear regression technique and, to account for potential non-independence in school-level data, we utilize robust standard errors adjusted for the clustering of teachers within schools.

Results

We begin our analyses by assessing the internal consistency of the entire range of perception indicators as well as the nine subscales developed in prior studies (Redding, 1996, 1998, 2008). That is, we explore whether each of the

65 perception indicators are measuring a single latent construct and if this latent construct can be subdivided into the previously delineated nine subscales. Prior analyses of teachers' perceptions using the SCS have been limited to a few states, primarily located in the northern and northeastern regions of the U.S. As such, the current study adds to the extant literature by exploring the applicability of prior findings to diverse samples of teachers and communities in distinct regions of the U.S.

The examination of Alpha values is an accepted means of assessing the internal consistency or reliability of scales or indices that include a number of measures (George & Mallery, 2003). Alpha values greater than .9 are indicative of excellent scale reliability, while values between .6 and .7 are questionable but acceptable. Alpha values for each of the scales are provided in Table 2. Before combining individual items from the SCS into scales, we first assessed correlations between all measures. In every instance, the perception indicators exhibited positive correlations with all other indicators, and the vast majority of the correlations were statistically significant. When combined into a single index, it appears that all of the perception indicators are measuring an underlying latent construct. An index including all measures exhibits an Alpha value of .939, which indicates a high degree of internal consistency or scale reliability.

Table 2. Assessment of the Internal Consistency of Scales

Scale	Alpha
Complete Index	.939 - E
Roles of Parents and Teachers	.650 - Q
Responsibilities and Opportunities	.698 - Q
Studying and Homework	.811 - G
Character Development	.695 - Q
Reading	.661 - Q
Academic Development	.793 - A
School–Home Communication	.705 - A
School Climate	.763 - A
Association of School Community Members	.754 - A

The nine subscales also appear to be consistent and reliable indicators of distinct components of teachers' perceptions. Alpha values for the subscales range from a low of .650 to a high of .811. Further, the subscales are significantly positively correlated with all other subscales (.4 to .7) and the complete index (.6 to .8). While we follow the lead of prior studies and transform the

Likert scaling of the responses to the SCS questions to binary indicators (Redding, 2001), we also explore the impact of this measurement strategy on the reliability of the scales. When the full range of the Likert scaling for the perception indicators is utilized (i.e., five response options), the internal consistency or reliability of the indices increases. The Alpha value for the complete index increases from .939 to .961, while Alphas for the subscales increase to a range of .738 to .853. These results suggest that the indicators of teachers' perceptions developed in the SCS are consistent and reliable. Moreover, these results provide evidence of the generalizability of the perception indicators and scales among populations and communities in diverse regions of the U.S.

In the second component of our analysis, we explore the individual (i.e., teacher) and institutional (i.e., school) level predictors of teachers' perceptions. The results of our linear regression analyses utilizing robust standard errors adjusted for the clustering of teachers within schools are presented in Table 3. In model 1 of Table 3, we explore the predictors of variation in the full perception index across teachers. The results indicate that teachers with advanced degrees and those who teach higher grades are significantly more likely to have negative perceptions of their students, their work environment, and the school community. In addition, minority and more experienced educators are significantly more likely to have positive perceptions of their students and the school community environment. A number of institutional characteristics are also associated with the complete index of teachers' perceptions. Compared to other schools in the sample, the perceptions of teachers concerning their students and the school community environment are significantly lower in schools with a higher rate of staff assaults as well as those with higher attendance rates and math proficiency scores. Moreover, the results suggest that teachers in schools in which relatively more students are impoverished, as measured by those eligible for free or reduced cost lunches, have significantly lower perceptions of their students and the school community environment. This is disconcerting but consistent with prior research indicating teachers treat students differently along socioeconomic status divisions (Cakmak et al., 2011; Campbell, 2003). Overall, the predictors examined in this analysis explain 42% of the variation in overall scale of teachers' perceptions.

In models 2 through 10 of Table 3, we examine the predictors of the nine perception subscales. While all indicators from the SCS are gauging the same latent construct, teachers' perceptions of the school community environment, there are a number of distinct elements of this environment. As such, it is critical to highlight both the consistencies and inconsistencies in the predictors of teachers' perceptions of these distinct elements of the school community environment. In model 2 of Table 3, the outcome measure is the index

tapping teachers' perceptions of their roles. Questions in this index gauge whether teachers believe their opinions count, if they make a difference in school operations, and if they know what the community expects of them. Unlike the overall perception index, the only individual-level characteristic associated with teachers' perceptions of their roles is education. More educated teachers have lower perceptions of their role in the school and community. In addition, only two school-level measures influence teachers' perceptions of their roles. Such perceptions are significantly lower in schools in which staff members are more likely to be assaulted and those with higher attendance rates. Overall, the predictor measures explain only 15% of the variation in teachers' perceptions of their roles.

In model 3, the outcome measure is the index of teachers' perceptions of the responsibilities for and opportunities available to students. Questions in this index measure perceptions of whether community members encourage students to do their best, behave properly, and encourage them to participate in activities. The results highlight important gender and other differences in such perceptions. Females, minorities, and more experienced educators have significantly more positive perceptions of the responsibilities and opportunities of students. As for institutional characteristics, such perceptions are lower among teachers in schools with relatively more staff assaults as well as higher attendance rates and math proficiency scores. However, teachers in schools in which more of their peers have advanced degrees and students perform better on literacy proficiency exams have significantly more positive perceptions of the responsibilities and opportunities of their students. Overall, teacher- and school-specific characteristics considered in this analysis explain 23% of the variation in teachers' perceptions of student responsibilities and opportunities.

In model 4, we examine predictors of perceptions of studying and homework. Questions in this index center on perceptions of whether students are taught to study, if parents expect children to do their homework, if teachers regularly assign homework, and whether homework practices are consistent across teachers. Minority and more experienced teachers have significantly more positive perceptions, while more educated teachers and those that teach advanced grades have lower perceptions of support for and consistency in studying and homework. In addition, teachers in schools with more staff assaults and those in which students scored higher on math proficiency exams have lower perceptions, while teachers in schools in which their peers are more educated and students perform better on literacy proficiency exams have significantly more positive perceptions concerning topics of studying and homework. Overall, the measures explain nearly half of the variation in teachers' perceptions centered on studying and homework.

Table 3. Regression Models Predicting Teacher Perception Scales (robust clustered standard errors in parentheses)

	Model 1 Full Index (*N*=100)	Model 2 Roles (*N*=148)	Model 3 Resp./ Opp. (*N*=141)	Model 4 Studying / Homework (*N*=150)	Model 5 Character Dev. (*N*=138)	Model 6 Reading (*N*=139)	Model 7 Academic Dev. (*N*=149)	Model 8 Communica-tion (*N*=139)	Model 9 School Climate (*N*=148)	Model 10 Relations (*N*=141)
Female	-.44 (4.53)	-.81 (5.21)	9.58** (3.37)	3.26 (6.22)	11.05* (4.86)	2.19 (4.96)	3.11 (7.73)	3.55 (5.36)	-.76 (5.05)	5.21 (4.35)
Married	3.76 (3.77)	1.28 (7.28)	-4.78 (4.25)	-.00 (3.99)	6.40+ (3.70)	-.07 (3.04)	4.68 (6.33)	3.17 (3.79)	1.99 (3.31)	1.90 (4.79)
Non-White	4.61+ (2.44)	-.15 (4.48)	6.74* (3.19)	15.00** (4.74)	1.30 (3.58)	8.05** (2.47)	2.47 (3.54)	5.41* (2.60)	7.34* (2.92)	4.29 (3.81)
Education	-9.87* (4.25)	-7.71* (3.77)	-5.50 (4.49)	-10.69* (4.20)	-.76 (3.78)	-6.49+ (3.82)	-10.68* (4.49)	-5.01* (2.38)	-8.23* (3.37)	-3.32 (3.89)
Grade	-2.24** (.63)	-2.09 (1.27)	-.77 (.84)	-1.66+ (.93)	-1.34 (1.03)	-2.33** (.76)	-2.40+ (1.33)	-2.20** (.56)	-3.12* (1.28)	-2.43* (.67)
Years Taught	1.79** (.64)	-.09 (.86)	2.50** (.87)	1.33* (.62)	1.85* (.78)	1.67 (1.01)	1.43 (1.16)	.83 (.94)	1.25+ (.73)	.72 (.81)
Staff Assaults	-10.35** (1.49)	-7.19** (2.61)	-10.02** (1.79)	-15.51** (1.79)	-8.27** (1.89)	-5.44** (1.67)	-14.25** (4.10)	-6.81** (1.25)	-15.11** (3.24)	-5.44** (1.90)
% Students Eligible for Free Lunch	-.16** (.06)	.09 (.14)	-.11 (.10)	-.10 (.11)	-.34** (.12)	-.05 (.13)	-.46** (.13)	-.26** (.05)	-.25+ (.13)	-.30** (.11)
Attendance	-2.05** (.52)	-2.59* (1.06)	-1.83* (.73)	-1.12 (.71)	-1.79** (.61)	-1.38* (.59)	-2.96* (1.37)	-1.57** (.33)	-3.89** (1.31)	.11 (.59)
% Teachers with MA Degree	.13 (.15)	.25 (.33)	.63* (.27)	.59** (.22)	-.30 (.26)	.37 (.32)	.52 (.35)	.09 (.15)	.24 (.34)	.19 (.21)
Literacy	7.04 (4.69)	3.45 (10.00)	14.62* (6.42)	28.86** (6.83)	14.74 (8.83)	9.69 (6.26)	13.55+ (7.62)	2.14 (4.78)	2.23 (5.46)	15.28* (5.98)
Math	-5.88+ (3.03)	-2.69 (6.72)	-14.73** (5.15)	-23.99** (4.60)	-4.63 (5.48)	-13.55** (4.36)	-20.62** (7.43)	-5.89 (3.69)	-4.47 (6.49)	-11.89** (4.12)
Constant	330.25** (61.33)	351.31** (108.36)	247.08** (75.75)	216.95** (72.76)	259.85** (65.64)	225.21** (68.06)	430.11** (140.72)	271.99** (32.49)	514.08** (133.25)	91.92 (68.73)
R^2	.42	.15	.23	.48	.33	.27	.28	.28	.40	.34

*$p \leq .05$; **$p \leq .01$; +$p \leq .10$

In model 5, we assess predictors of teachers' perceptions of the character development of parents and students. Questions in this index gauge whether parents and students are respectful and responsible. Female, married, and more experienced educators perceive parents and students to be more respectful and responsible. However, teachers in schools with more staff assaults, higher attendance rates, and those with more impoverished students have significantly lower perceptions of the character development of students and parents. Interestingly, the relative prevalence of impoverished students does not significantly influence perceptions of roles, opportunities, or studying but does have a negative association with perceptions of respect and responsibility among parents and teachers. Overall, the predictor measures explain 33% of the variation in teachers' perceptions of the character of parents and students.

Model 6 examines teachers' perceptions of whether parents, fellow teachers, and members of the community encourage students to read for pleasure. Minority teachers perceive the school community environment as more supportive of reading for pleasure, while such perceptions were lower among teachers with more education and those that teach advanced grades. Further, teachers that work in schools with a higher staff assault rate, higher attendance rates, and those meeting standards in math proficiency exams have significantly lower perceptions concerning community support for reading. In model 7, we turn our attention to teachers' perceptions of the academic development of students. More educated teachers and those working in advanced grades have significantly lower perceptions of the academic development of their students. A number of institutional characteristics also impacted perceptions of student academic development. Such perceptions are higher among teachers in schools meeting standards in literacy proficiency but significantly lower among teachers in schools with higher staff assault and attendance rates and those meeting standards in math proficiency. Further, teachers in schools with relatively more impoverished students have significantly lower perceptions of the academic development of their students. In model 8, we examine predictors of teachers' perceptions of their communication with parents. Minority teachers have significantly more positive perceptions of their communication with parents, but those with advanced degrees and those working in advanced grades have significantly lower perceptions of communication. In addition, perceptions of communication patterns with parents are significantly lower among teachers in schools with more staff assaults, high attendance rates, and those with relatively more impoverished students. Overall, these predictors explain 27–28% of the variation in teachers' perceptions of support for reading, academic development, and communication.

In models 9 and 10 we turn our attention to teachers' perceptions of the general school climate and relations between parents and teachers. Minority and more experienced educators have significantly more positive perceptions of the overall school climate. Conversely, teachers with higher levels of education and those teaching advanced grades have significantly lower perceptions of their school's general climate. Further, those teaching more advanced grades have significantly lower perceptions of general parent–teacher relations. In regards to institutional characteristics, teachers in schools in which staff assaults are more prevalent and relatively more students are impoverished have significantly lower perceptions of both the overall school climate and parent–teacher relations. In addition, teachers have negative perceptions of the school climate in institutions with higher attendance rates, while perceptions of parent–teacher relations are significantly more positive in schools meeting standards for proficiency in literacy. However, perceptions of parent–teacher relations are significantly lower in schools meeting standards for proficiency in math. Overall, these characteristics of teachers and schools explain 34–40% of the variation in teachers' perceptions of the general school climate and parent–teacher relations.

Discussion

Prior studies have documented the association between teachers' perceptions and differential academic expectations and outcomes for students, associations between teachers and parents, parent participation in the education process, and the overall school climate. However, few studies have simultaneously examined the individual and institutional predictors of teachers' perceptions. The purpose of this study was to address this limitation and advance the literature by examining variation in the individual and institutional level predictors of distinct elements of perceptions.

We gathered data from about 200 teachers within a single school district in a mid-sized southern metropolitan city. In addition to providing demographic information, teachers' perceptions in a number of areas were measured using the "teacher section" of the School Community Survey. While individual's characteristics are likely to influence perceptions, it is equally plausible that perceptions are influenced by the contextual environment, particularly school characteristics. To explore this possibility, we obtained data on school characteristics from the state's department of education. Ideally, such data (teachers nested within schools) would be analyzed using multilevel modeling techniques, however, data limitations precluded such an approach. Instead, we used a linear regression technique and report standard errors adjusted for clustering within schools.

Consistent with prior studies, our analysis suggests that all 65 perception indicators are measuring an underlying latent construct. All indicators were positively associated with one another and most correlations were statistically significant. In addition, an Alpha value in excess of .9 indicates that a single scale is an internally consistent and reliable index of teachers' perceptions of students, parents, and the overall learning community. Our regression analysis revealed that this comprehensive index of teacher perceptions is influenced by a number of individual and institutional characteristics. Perceptions did not vary significantly across gender or marital status lines; however, perceptions were significantly more positive among minority and experienced educators. Further, teachers with more extensive education and those teaching advanced grades exhibited significantly lower perceptions of their learning community. In terms of the impact of institutional characteristics, violence against staff members, relatively more impoverished students, higher attendance rates, and attaining NAEP standards for proficiency in math were associated with significantly lower perceptions of the overall learning community.

One limitation of a comprehensive perception index is that combining many indicators into a single scale limits our ability to examine variations in perceptions of distinct components or elements of the learning community. For example, there may be critical differences in factors that influence teachers' perceptions of their students reading ability compared to the overall school climate. Consistent with prior research, we divided the perception indicators into nine correlated subscales measuring distinct components of perceptions of the learning community. Our analysis revealed a number of important distinctions in the predictors of the perception subscales.

The individual and institutional measures explained between 15% and 48% of the variation in the perception subscales. While the predictor measures, when significant, were consistently in the same direction, only our measure of school violence was associated with every index. A teacher's level of education and the grade they teach were consistently related to lower scores on the different perception indices. However, neither factor influenced perceptions of the responsibilities and opportunities or the character development of students and parents. An educator's experience, on the other hand, was significantly associated with fewer than half of the perception indices but is positively related to perceptions of the responsibilities and opportunities as well as the character development of students and parents.

While a teacher's race was marginally significantly associated with the overall perception index ($p \leq .10$), minorities were found to have significantly more positive perceptions in a number of key areas. Race was not a factor in variation in teachers' perceptions of their roles, student character, academic

development, or parent–teacher associations. However, race was a key correlate of perceptions of student responsibilities and opportunities, studying, reading, communication with parents, and the overall school climate. Such results are promising and, considering the high proportion of minority students in the school district, likely indicate that minority educators are more familiar with the attitudes, values, and beliefs of their students and parents. Further, minority teachers likely utilize interpersonal association and teaching styles better suited to the population they serve, thus increasing the inclusiveness of the learning community. As such, minority teachers in the school district may be able to establish stronger bonds with the learning community, which leads to positive teacher perceptions and student outcomes.

There was also considerable variation in the effect of institutional characteristics across the perception indices. Staff assaults and attendance rates were consistently associated with negative perceptions. While it is logical that violence would lower perceptions of the learning community, it is somewhat perplexing why increased attendance rates would be associated with negative perceptions. The current analysis cannot definitively answer this question, but there are potential explanations. The results may be linked to restricted variation in attendance rates across schools in the sample. Rates varied between 82% and 99%, with the majority of schools having attendance rates in excess of 92%. Such rates are notably higher than national averages (Stillwell & Sable, 2013; UNICEF, 2008) and are likely a product of both calculation methods and a districtwide attendance incentive program that rewards and recognizes students with few absences. As such, the results may not accurately capture the influence of attendance or truancy on teachers' perceptions at the national level. Further, in the context of exceptional attendance, teachers are consistently in contact with the vast majority of both advanced and developmentally delayed students. In contrast, when attendance rates are low, the least committed and most challenging students comprise the majority of truant students (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998). Under such circumstances, teachers' perceptions of students, parents, and the learning community may be more positive.

Teaching in a school that meets standards for proficiency in literacy did not significantly influence the full perception index, however, literacy proficiency is related to significantly more positive perceptions of student responsibilities, studying, academic development, and teacher–parent associations. This finding would be overlooked in an analysis of only a single summary perception index, underscoring the importance of examining indices tapping distinct elements of perceptions. In contrast, teachers' overall perceptions and their perceptions of student's responsibilities, studying, academic development, and parent–teacher

associations were significantly lower in schools meeting proficiency standards in mathematics. It is unclear why meeting standards in literacy and math would differentially impact teachers' perceptions. Schools in this sample are doing significantly better than the national average in math proficiency. This is, in part, due to the efforts of dedicated teachers who work with their students both after school and during the summer. In fact, the school district has made a concerted effort to support sustained participation in structured and well-implemented out-of-school academic activities (AOSN, 2009). While such efforts have been integral to student success, prior literature suggests such extra assistance may be viewed by other teachers as a function of the low ability of the students, which may explain the association between higher math achievement and lower teacher perceptions (Graham & Barker, 1990). In addition, it is possible that teachers feel their extensive efforts are not being matched by students, parents, or the general learning community. To the extent that teachers feel their efforts are not being matched, they are likely to harbor negative perceptions.

Finally, our results suggest teachers' perceptions are significantly lower in schools that serve relatively more economically disadvantaged students. When a greater proportion of students are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches, teachers have significantly lower perceptions of the character and academic development of students, communications and associations with parents, and the overall school climate. These findings support prior literature in suggesting that socioeconomic status is a critical predictor of teachers' expectations and perceptions of families (Redding, 1997). However, it is possible that such findings are the result of a selection effect by which teachers with a more negative outlook or those less adept at working with socially and culturally diverse populations are more likely to secure employment in economically disadvantaged schools. Further, teachers serving disadvantaged populations may not be meeting their own career expectations which manifests as negative perceptions of their school, students, and parents.

There are certain limitations of this research that should be addressed in future studies. The response rate of 20% is not optimal but is comparable to prior studies utilizing web-based surveys (Cook et al., 2000; Kaplowitz et al., 2004). Future research should assess similar questions utilizing larger samples of educators and schools. Such data would allow for more detailed multilevel analyses of additional individual and institutional characteristics. Future researchers should also explore potential nonlinear and conditioning effects. It is possible that individual and institutional characteristics interact to create unique effects that would advance our understanding of teachers' perceptions. Future research would also do well to simultaneously examine perceptions of additional stakeholders in the learning community to elucidate the interwoven

nature of teachers', students', and parents' perceptions. Overall, the current study contributes to the extant literature by identifying important differences in the key predictors of distinct elements of teachers' perceptions. While the data are limited, the results nonetheless suggest a line of research questions that should be examined in future studies.

Endnotes

[1]Teachers were recruited through email messages sent to a listserv including all teachers in the district as well as certain staff and administration personnel. Between 900–1,000 of the email recipients are full-time district teachers.

[2]Students are assessed in 4th, 8th, and 12th grades, and proficiency standards are publicly available through the National Center for Educational Statistics.

[3]Additional measures available through the DOE were explored, including school level (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school), whether a school was state directed, student on student assaults, and alternative indicators of teacher education and student proficiency in literacy and math. These measures were not significantly associated to the perception scales or the results did not differ substantively from those presented.

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"Remember, It's a Pilot": Exploring the Experiences of Teachers/Staff at a University-Assisted Community School

D. Gavin Luter, Jessica Nina Lester, and Robert F. Kronick

Abstract

With roots in community development and the work of Dewey, a compelling case has been made for universities to be involved in urban school reform. Further, with increasing demands placed on universities to become responsive to community needs, university partnerships with K–12 schools are one means by which institutions of higher education have become involved in local educational issues. One particular type of community–school–university involvement approach is a University-Assisted Community School (UACS). Much of the research related to such school–university partnerships has focused on describing what a UACS "looks like," with little attention given to the day-to-day experiences of those that work within a UACS. In this paper, we present findings from a qualitative study examining the experiences of teachers and staff who have participated in the development of and/or taught at a UACS afterschool program. Findings highlighted (1) the challenges and transitions associated with being a pilot effort; (2) the felt differences between universities and schools as they relate to on-the-ground implementation; and (3) the potential of the UACS model as a collaborative vehicle for accomplishing tasks that neither institution can accomplish alone. We point to implications related to school–university partnerships and directions for future research.

Key Words: university-assisted community school, partnerships, collaboration, implementation, teachers, after-school program staff, afterschool, urban

Introduction

With increasing economic and social changes, more demands are being placed on K–12 schools and universities to become responsive to community needs and demands (Stanton, 2008). Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett (2007) have made a compelling case for universities to be involved in urban school reform, with roots in community development and the work of John Dewey (1902, 1910). Drawing on previous work, Benson and Harkavy (1991) called for institutions of higher education to act as anchors or "community-rooted" institutions. Such institutions, they argued, "simultaneously: (a) have firm bases in, attachments to, identifications with particular geographic communities; (b) regard themselves as 'citizens of the world;' (c) aspire to practice and help achieve universal humane values, contribute to the 'relief of man's estate' [and] the betterment of humanity" (p. 12). Boyer (1990) challenged faculty in higher education to remain relevant to society at large and to seriously attend to the very meaning of being a "scholar." He maintained that academics have a role to play in using their knowledge to solve social problems; further, he cautioned that the focus on research-just-for-the-sake-of-research serves to limit the academy's relevance within the larger community. He called, then, for a radical reorientation in higher education; one in which the needs of the local community are placed at the forefront.

University partnerships with K–12 schools are one means by which institutions of higher education have become involved in local educational issues. One particular type of community–school–university involvement approach is a University-Assisted Community School (UACS; Benson & Harkavy, 1994; Harkavy, 1998), an approach in which schools are seen as the focal points for community life and are believed to "function as environment-changing institutions if they become centers of broad-based partnerships involving a variety of community organizations and institutions" (Harkavy, 1998, p. 36). The UACS model not only focuses on assisting schools in meeting needs outside of their traditional scope, but also on reorienting the university toward community-based problem solving. This approach comes with a commitment to advocacy-based scholarship and serves to push the university outside of its potentially isolating ivory tower.

While there has been much writing on what a UACS looks like, far less research has systematically examined the experiences of those who participate in a UACS. In this paper, we present findings from a qualitative study examining the everyday, lived experiences of administrators, teachers, and staff members who participated in the development of and/or taught at a UACS extended day program (i.e., afterschool program). We were particularly interested in

examining both the challenges and successes inherent to developing an after-school UACS, recognizing that whether described in the literature or not, both challenges and successes do exist. We begin first with a brief discussion of the relevant literature, highlighting primarily seminal work.

Literature Review

As early as 1902, educational philosopher John Dewey lectured on "the feeling that the school is not doing all that it should do in simply giving instruction during the day" and suggested "that it shall assume a wider scope of activities having an educative effect upon the adult members of the community" (p. 76). Following in his tradition, Jane Addams put into practice the idea of "school as social center" by developing her Hull House model. One of Dewey's students, Elsie Clapp (1971), also studied examples of such schools. Until the 1970s, this perspective on schooling was not widely popular. Yet by virtue of various policy directives at the state and national level, schools were increasingly expected to have guidance counselors and nurses on staff in hopes of meeting noncurricular barriers to learning (Tyack, 1992). In 1994, Joy Dryfoos identified several schools that were meeting the nontraditional needs of students and their families. Her concept of "full service community schools" played into the larger national movement related to schools meeting the needs of families, children, and communities.

For the last 20 years, scholars have studied the community school movement's impact, beginning with an early 1990s evaluation of the national Communities in Schools model (Dryfoos, 2000; Keith, 1996; Kronick, 2005; Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997). From local communities to federal policy to the funding priorities of foundations, advocacy activity has grown around community schools (Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003; Hoyer, 2011; Khadduri, Schwartz, & Turnham, 2008). At the same time, another line of research has focused on the capacity of universities in the context of being more responsive to local educational problems, while also revitalizing the civic mission of universities (Benson & Harkavy, 1991; Benson et al., 2007; Johnson, Finn, & Lewis, 2005; Stanton, 2008).

A manifestation of Dewey's community school and Harkavy's focus on university involvement in public school reform can be seen in the writings of Goodlad (1993), the father of "school–university partnerships as a strategy for school improvement" (p. 25). Goodlad and a myriad of other researchers, including the Holmes Group (Holmes Group, 1986), contributed to creating, sustaining, and critiquing the Professional Development Schools (PDS) movement (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1994). The Holmes Group

(1986) is "a consortium of education deans and chief academic officers from the major research universities in each of the fifty states" (p. 3), with a primary aim of improving the quality of teacher education programs. Goodlad (1993) identified several key issues that create boundaries between schools and universities, stating that the

> concept of universities and schools joining symbiotically in the simultaneous renewal of partner schools and the education of our future teachers in them presents daunting challenges. Nonetheless, it is possible to squeeze out of them a potentially useful implication: innocence regarding what we do and how to do it is widely shared on both sides. (p. 30)

The above quote highlights that both parties, universities and schools, hold an important key to improving schools. Neither universities nor schools hold the monopoly on effective school reform strategies, and bringing them together is worth the challenges inherent to the partnership. Goodlad's contribution to the school–university partnership literature is centered on his examination of how two very distinct institutions (i.e., K–12 schools and universities) go about working together. Harkavy and Hartley (2009) examined what is needed to sustain those community–school–university partnerships founded on democratic principles, postulating that there are three important components to such an orientation to school–university partnerships:

1. Purpose: Democratic and civic purposes must drive higher education partnerships that are in the "public good."
2. Process: Community-driven—as opposed to top-down/hierarchical/intensely bureaucratic—decision-making processes must be in place in order to create meaningful relationships, yielding true change for democratic and civic purposes.
3. Product: Generally, improving the quality of life for those in the community should be the product of democratic partnerships for public good.

These tenets of democratic partnerships are rooted in an aspiration to reform the academy, resulting in more community-engaged scholarship and real-world, contextualized problem solving. Yet, such partnerships often result in felt tensions, as these two unique institutions may run in opposition to one another. Eckel and Hartley (2008) also explored interorganizational relationships between universities and private and public sector partners, concluding that the relational aspects (e.g., trust, mutual interest) of these partnerships are the most critical components.

Lindhal (2006) examined how organizational cultures impact school improvement, calling for school leaders to align their school culture with the desired changes. Deal and Kennedy (1982) highlighted organizational

challenges faced by schools, low morale, fragmentation, inconsistency, emotional outbursts, and subculture values that supersede shared organizational values. Such challenges can sometimes stand in the way of organizational improvement. Halpin and Croft (1963) and Moos (1980) developed some of the first scales around school and classroom climate that were later studied by Kronick (1972, 2005). They maintained that the organizational culture of schools and classrooms can contribute to the academic success of children. Partnerships between schools and universities could have implications, then, for changing classroom and school environments.

While historically universities have connected with schools, little is known about the experiences of those on the "ground"; that is, those people working in the midst of such partnerships. Much of the writing around the UACS model and other community–school–university partnerships has been presented in a "show and tell" format (Grim & Officer, 2010; Taylor & McGlynn, 2010), most often with only the successes being shared. Far less exploration has occurred around the process by which schools and universities go about collaborating and the school improvement results achieved when they form collaborative structures. In this paper, we report findings from a study exploring the everyday experiences of staff, teachers, and administrators involved in a UACS project in the southeast region of the U.S.

Theoretical Framework

Within this study, we were informed by Kronick's (2005) description of how to go about creating and sustaining university-assisted community schools. His framework includes a focus on (1) prevention, (2) collaboration, and (3) systems change. He suggested that (successful) university-assisted community schools focus on prevention efforts such as keeping children and families out of the criminal justice or mental health systems of care. Further, it is only through collaboration resulting from input from the community, the day school staff, and other outside partners that partnerships are established and maintained. Finally, drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, Kronick's framework points to the ways in which children deal with a variety of overlapping social forces that impact their ability to learn within and outside of the school building. Thus, within this framework, there is a focus on systems change. The interconnection of health, education, and wellness undergird this framework and call for the system of schooling to change to account for the variety of systems that impact a child's learning. As we analyzed the data, we explicitly looked for evidence of actions that worked to "prevent" failure, while pursuing collaboration and systems change.

Method

Within this qualitative study, we attended closely to what this particular UACS sought to address in light of what the key stakeholders identified as the overarching goals of the program and the everyday challenges and successes. We aimed to maintain a reflexive stance (Pillow, 2003) and assumed that our presuppositions, biases, and cultural and political commitments shaped the way that we made sense of the data. We begin by briefly presenting our roles and presuppositions, acknowledging that who we are influenced the way we collected and interpreted the data set (Noblit, 1999).

Research Roles

Throughout this research study, we remained cognizant of the ways in which our own participation and beliefs about a UACS in general shaped how we collected data and engaged with the data set. The first author's involvement with this particular UACS afterschool program included his ongoing participation as a volunteer during the course of one year. The second author's involvement included working as a teacher and teaching assistant during the course of one year. The third author was the primary university faculty member who began the school–university partnership. His work around community schools began well over a decade ago, and even today he remains the primary university member involved in this ongoing work.

During the course of this study, each of the authors spent many of their afternoons and evenings at the afterschool program, interacting with the children, their parents, and the school staff. The third author also spent a great deal of time at the school site during the regular school day, working to develop services that spanned across the regular school day and afterschool program. We thus positioned ourselves as quite involved participant–observers, recognizing that we carried with us contextual understandings that we would not have acquired apart from the extensive time we spent at the research/school site. Furthermore, across the research study, we each presumed that the UACS had the potential to provide systemwide services that were responsive to the needs identified by the students, families, and community at large. However, throughout our work, we also assumed that such collaborations require time and patience. As we approached the research process, we recognized that our interpretation was partial and positional (Noblit, 1999), and we invited others to question and critique the interpretations we proffered.

Participant and Site Description

The population for this study included the coordinator of the UACS afterschool program, the principal of the elementary school, the assistant principal

of the elementary school, three elementary school teachers, and thirteen afterschool staff teachers. This particular UACS afterschool program started after a local businessman provided three years of funding to a university education faculty member (Kronick) for an afterschool program. Initially, funding allowed for 55 students to participate in the afterschool program. However, additional funding was secured, resulting in 75 children now participating in the afterschool program.

The faculty member, who had been working with principals and local elementary schools for well over 10 years, collaborated with one elementary school principal who wanted to expand the services her school was offering by developing an afterschool program embedded within a community school model. Together, they hired an afterschool coordinator, while also coordinating the involvement of various university departments (e.g., art, philosophy, educational psychology and counseling, and recreation and sports) and community agencies (e.g., local nature center, Boys and Girls Club, adult literacy center, counseling center) and more than 50 university students and community member volunteers. A national search was conducted to hire the afterschool coordinator with five finalists selected. Previous education background and work experience were considered when selecting the finalists. The coordinator was unanimously hired by a committee, which included the school principal, assistant principal, a university faculty member, and three central office staff members. Throughout the first year of the UACS afterschool program (and the time that has since followed), professional development was provided to the UACS staff, including workshops about therapeutic approaches to discipline and lesson planning.

This particular UACS afterschool program grew out of the ongoing work of Kronick, an education professor who has been collaborating with Title I elementary schools across the southeast region of the United States since 1998. The selected Title I school included grades K–5, with a total of 320 students. At the time of this study, the school had a 34% mobility rate, and 90% of its students received free or reduced-fee lunch. Across the student population, 23 different countries and 19 languages were represented. The school employed 30 full-time teachers.

Prior to beginning the UACS afterschool program, the school and university had collaborated extensively, with services such as counseling and mentoring provided to students throughout the regular school hours. University pre-med and nursing students had also worked to convert a school closet to a health clinic, providing basic health services during the regular school hours. The principal at this school desired to extend the services provided and the hours during which they were available. Thus, she sought to collaborate further

with the university in developing an afterschool program that included additional services (e.g., counseling for families, laundry service access, dinner for families, GED classes for adults, ESL courses). At the time of this study, the afterschool program was operating five nights a week until 7 p.m. each evening during the regular school year and five days a week until 2:30 p.m. during the summer months.

Data Collection

For the purposes of this study, the elementary school principal and the afterschool program coordinator invited their staff members (i.e., elementary teachers and afterschool staff) to participate in this study. The potential participants were given contact information and encouraged to contact us if they were interested in participating in an individual interview or a focus group. While we invited all of the elementary school teachers, only three day teachers agreed to participate. We invited all 18 members of the afterschool staff to participate, and 13 agreed to participate. The three administrators (principal, assistant principal, and afterschool program coordinator) also agreed to participate. While parent involvement was a key focus of the development of the UACS afterschool program, for the purposes of this study, we focused on the everyday experiences of the school and afterschool staff members. Nonetheless, since the completion of this study, the perspectives of participating parents and students were collected and will be reported in a future study.

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval, two of the researchers conducted six individual interviews with the participating administrators and teachers, and four focus groups with the participating afterschool staff. During the interviews and focus groups, we followed a semi-structured interview/focus group protocol. All of the interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and stored on a password-protected computer prior to the transcription process. The individual interviews lasted from 20 to 60 minutes each, and the focus groups lasted from one to two hours.

Data Analysis

Over the course of the data collection and analysis process, the research team met regularly (face-to-face and via Skype™) to share our own experiences working and volunteering at the UACS afterschool program and to collaborate throughout the data analysis process. We utilized an interpretive and emergent approach to thematically analyze the data (Saldana, 2009). We used Atlas.-Ti™ to organize the data set and systematically go about the analysis process, annotating with memos and applying the coding features. More specifically, we carried out six broad phases of data analysis, with several subphases/steps

included within each phase: (1) transcription of data; (2) repeated reading and initial theoretical and analytical memos; (3) selection, organization, and further analysis of key patterns (codes) across the data set; (4) multiple iterations of line-by-line coding of the data set; (5) generation of overarching themes; (6) reflexive and transparent sharing of findings.

After two of the researchers completed the transcription process and sanitized the data (i.e., pseudonyms were applied throughout and used within this article as well), we each individually added analytical and theoretical memos to the data set, then met to share and review the initial memos. Each researcher maintained a list of these initial codes. We next organized our initial memos into categories, moving to the level of coding. We applied both in-vivo and sociologically constructed codes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Upon developing a coding scheme based on our initial memos and theoretical framework, we individually coded the data line-by-line. Next, we organized the data into categories and subcategories, noting relationships within and across the data set. Drawing upon our initial and subsequent levels of coding, we eventually developed abstract themes. With a joint commitment to engaging in social science as "an activity done in public for the public" which acts "to clarify, sometimes to intervene, sometimes to generate new perspectives" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 166), in this study we shared our interpretations with the participants as a means of opening up communication and deepening understanding. Thus, all of the participants were given copies of our emergent themes, as well as the final description of the findings. We asked the participants to review the findings and incorporated their feedback into the final iteration of this work. Finally, we aimed to reflexively report our findings and reflect upon the ways in which our assumptions shaped the analysis process.

Findings

One of the major findings of this study centered on the challenges and transitions associated with being a pilot effort. Some of the participants expressed the importance of learning to become comfortable and patient with the program's development as it was launched. Participants discussed in detail the differences between universities and schools as they relate to on-the-ground implementation issues. Our findings suggest that universities and schools often approach issues differently, from behavior management philosophies to the handling of timesheets. These differences often created frustration among participants, while also holding promise for using resources within the university to more comprehensively address social issues. Finally, participants illustrated the potential of the UACS model as a collaborative vehicle for accomplishing

tasks that neither institution can accomplish alone. As participants discussed the need to build collaborative structures that could make working together easier, the promise of collaboration for improving schools was highlighted.

Theme One: This is a Pilot Program—Progress and Growth

The first theme, *This is a Pilot Program—Progress and Growth*, reflected how the participants viewed the afterschool program as being an open system full of changes and new developments, particularly as the "bumps" in the road were worked out. *Progress* and *growth* were oriented as simply being part of developing this new partnership/program. As one afterschool staff member noted, "Since October, we've been through a lot of transitions." While curricular and staff changes were experienced often, many of the participants expressed *not* being surprised by the ongoing alterations, viewing them as necessary. The lack of surprise was frequently coupled with the description of the afterschool program as a "pilot." This notion of a "pilot" was illustrated well with the words of Kelly, the principal of the elementary school:

> I don't think [anything has surprised me] because we knew it was a pilot and everything was gonna be, um, a work in progress. I mean, I've done pilots before, and they're never like they look on paper. I mean you always lay out a plan, and it's a lot of changes. I mean, you know, we started off with a game plan, and immediately things changed and evolved, and I think, a lot of times people that haven't worked in the pilot program don't realize how in flux it's gonna stay…you've gotta work out all the kinks that are gonna come up.

Kelly's words were similar to what the majority of the participants viewed as inherent to the afterschool program—change. In the above quote, Kelly emphasized that "a lot of times people…don't realize" the degree of "flux" within a pilot program. This acknowledgement of being "in flux" also pointed to one of the initial challenges—retaining staff members unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with the "in flux" nature of pilot programs. Larissa, an afterschool staff member, described the felt consequences of inconsistent staffing, stating:

> I guess the first couple months we worked, it felt like there were different staff people with the kids every day of the week, and the kids didn't have relationships with the people. And so it depended on who the staff was that day as to whether you'd get anything done in your class...and whether the kids had any relationship or any respect for them. I think the staff that's here now, and has been for the last several months, has just been really great. People are here very consistently, and kids clearly have relationships with them, and they're effective.

In the above quote, Larissa made evident the challenge of having inconsistent staffing, while also pointing to the changes that occurred with time, as now "people are here very consistently." The participants, particularly those who had worked in the afterschool program since its beginnings, talked about the importance of consistent staffing. One of the noted shifts in the program was the hiring of staff that could be present every day, allowing for the students, parents, and day school teachers to become familiar with them. This particular change was often described as adding the "consistency" that the children "needed."

All of the participants we interviewed (five of whom had been working at the afterschool program since its beginnings) described the program, like Kelly, as a "work in progress" that required "tweaks and adjustments." Acquiring a more consistent program, however, did not happen overnight. As Joseph (the director of the afterschool program) noted, a well run and consistent afterschool program was ultimately achieved through a "trial and error" process. Joseph stated:

> I think, just because we were the pilot program and there's trial and error, we dealt with a lot of, uh, chaos, and honestly, there was some dysfunction early on and getting things in place and getting things on board and communication. I think we've been the entity to experience the good and the bad, and we now have ironed it out.

Joseph's description of the early "chaos" points to the initial challenges, yet his words also highlight that the "trial and error" nature of the program was eventually "ironed out." Further, the "dysfunction" and "unpredictability" of the program were frequently coupled with the initial weeks and months, as Sue, one of the afterschool staff members, noted:

> We really did hit the ground running with like, "Okay, we have this idea, let's go with it," and not really a lot of plans beforehand.…I think at first everybody was like, "Why are we doing this?" The kids especially, they were like—they had no idea. They saw it as just daycare. Where, like myself and Matthew [another afterschool staff member], we took a course at [the university] telling us about community schools and what it should be. And then we got there and thought, "Okay, this isn't quite what we thought it was gonna be, but we can get there." And so that's kind of what I've been telling myself since October, "Okay, this is a process, and we're gonna get there—to where we need to be."

The process of "getting there" was described by many of the afterschool staff as requiring leadership that listened to their concerns, understood their interest in engaging parents, and supported their efforts.

While the majority of the participants talked about the need for further growth and progress, many of the participants centered their discussion of "further growth" on discipline and parent involvement. Day staff, afterschool staff, and administrators alike emphasized the early challenges around discipline, noting that the approaches to classroom management and dealing with behavioral concerns were inconsistent and changed depending upon who was working on a given day. Even after the program became more consistent, discipline practices were positioned as being something that required further refinement. The participants also expressed a desire to see more families involved in the afterschool program. Yet, at the same time, parent and community involvement was also noted as an area in which progress and growth had been experienced. Stephen, an afterschool staff member, stated:

> I think another big success is that the program has diversified in terms of, GED program...um, the ESL...the laundry thing, getting parents to come for meals, coordination with International Night. There's a great fluidity between the regular school...like with the International Night... and with our program. It's a fluid connection. That's a big success to find other ways of involving the community of parents.

Much about Stephen's description highlights the progress of the program ("diversified") and the ways in which connectedness to the community at large was essential in order to move from the initial "chaos" and "dysfunction" to being "fluid." The school principal and afterschool coordinator, in particular, also described the growth and development of the program as resulting in changes in the students' attitudes, behaviors, and performance in the classroom.

Theme Two: School–University Cultural Differences

The second theme, *school–university cultural differences*, represented how the participants oriented to the cultures of the university and the elementary school as divergent, even contentious at times. Across the data, we noted that the afterschool staff employed by the university and the day school staff employed by the local education agency (LEA) held different perspectives. As Kelly, the principal, noted:

> The hardest thing, I think, is getting everybody from the university and the school district on the same page, to come together with certain agreements.…I mean, you've got two completely different organizations working together.

Kelly's words highlighted the challenge of "getting everybody…together," as the two institutional contexts often had different agendas and approaches. At some point in the data collection process, each participant noted the challenge

of working for two different organizations, both aiming to have a successful project delivery. When we invited the participants to talk about these challenges, we noted points of difference in relation to disciplinary approaches (e.g., different classroom management approaches used by day teachers and afterschool staff), logistical items (e.g., paperwork across two contexts), and perceptions of the university's role. We discuss these differences in detail below. Reminiscent of Goodlad's (1993) account of school–university partnerships, these challenges are to be expected when bringing them together; as he noted, "universities and schools are not cut from the same cloth" (p. 31).

Discipline Plan

The participants spoke of disagreements, lively discussions, and vivid memories about the discipline and behavior plan used within the elementary school and afterschool program. Many of the participants described initial uncertainty about what counted as "appropriate" discipline, with the elementary school's discipline plan being perceived as different from the approach used within the afterschool program. Even day school teachers not a part of the everyday afterschool program delivery spoke of these disagreements, as illustrated by the following quote from Katherine:

> I think some of the challenges at first were, [that the volunteers and instructors] weren't really sure how to...do, have good behavior management. I know that they did have a meeting, and they were given a sheet, and, you know, points and that sort of thing. And then that's when I sat in on the two classes and just kind of helped them, you know…and so now they're, it's just like second nature to them now. It's so much better.

Katherine's words highlight the initial challenges that surrounded discipline, while also pointing to the growth of the program (e.g., "It's so much better."). Many of the participants spoke at length about the different philosophical positions that surrounded "appropriate" discipline. The elementary school employed a point system to reinforce desired behaviors. Many of the afterschool staff members expressed being uncomfortable with this more behaviorally oriented approach, preferring to use what they viewed as a more humanistic approach (Maslow, 1968).

With the afterschool program located at the school, there was an increased sensitivity to aligning with school policies. Yet, the afterschool staff and program directors sought to provide something different than what was provided during the school day, requiring administrators from the university and elementary school to work to find a "happy medium." Joseph described the desire and challenge of finding a middle ground as follows:

> You want it to be in line in some ways with the regular school day, with the school district, with what's expected of the kids behavior-wise….and with the point system, and how they give rewards and consequences, and how they handle discipline….We're the university. We're providing this program to supplement the students and the staff and the schools, but still, we're the university. We need to do things a little differently, because if the kids are in the program because of discipline [issues], because of the attendance, because of the grades...something's, something needs to altered a little bit. Obviously. Because it wasn't working, or they wouldn't be chosen to be in the program to begin with.

These felt tensions were eventually worked out through transparent communication and collaborative in-services with the LEA's behavior specialists and university professors who study therapeutic methods of behavioral management. Even though some afterschool staff still felt that the school system was "coming down on them" for using the "wrong discipline strategy," ongoing meetings and more open conversations around "helpful" and "unhelpful" discipline approaches provided support as the participants struggled to work through the "bumps." All parties involved eventually recognized that the discipline approaches would likely look different. The issues surrounding discipline, however, remained a point of difference that required ongoing discussion.

Logistical Items and the University's Role

Many of the afterschool staff expressed being unsure of how to "get things done" while working between the two institutions. Both organizations were described as being large "bureaucracies" and "difficult" to navigate. Some of the cited challenges included figuring out how to "file paperwork," "purchase materials," and "get permission to carry out activities." Judy, one of the afterschool staff members, illustrated these logistical challenges, stating:

> In the beginning, it was hard to get coordinated with how I was going to get my timesheet [to the university] every week to get paid because they needed the hard copy, but I couldn't bring it down to them because I was coming here afterschool. And I didn't have time to take it to them down there. And then, initially, just taking the application or whatever, my driver's license. Number one, the directions that they gave me were incorrect, and I got a parking ticket.

On a deeper level, though, sometimes the afterschool staff felt torn because they wanted to give the students particular resources and programming opportunities, yet working between two institutions seemed to make this more difficult. Bonnie, an afterschool staff member, described this difficulty:

> The university wants this program to be at a certain level, but I feel like it's hard for us as teachers to get it to the level where the university wants it to be, because I don't have the materials, I don't have any resources.… We don't have like, you know, when the school district's ladies don't pull books for us, I don't have any books to help my kids read right now, because I don't know, I don't know where to get the books from….I mean, if I want to do an art activity, there's no materials available. You know, unless I go purchase it myself, which is fine. I appreciate all the cooperation between the school district and everything, and everyone's volunteered…but it is a little bit difficult at times, I feel like, for us to give the kids what they need, because we're not given enough resources.

Like Bonnie, the majority of the afterschool staff spoke about the difficulties of working between a university and a school in relation to sharing classroom space, purchasing materials, making copies, and carrying out other small tasks associated with running a full-fledged program.

Day school staff members generally reported that having the university—a resource-rich institution with a good reputation—working on their behalf was a good thing. They described how sometimes the university could make things happen for their students that would be nearly impossible for them to make happen during the regular school day. For example, when discussing the budget, Angela, the elementary school assistant principal, commented, "I actually feel as if it's a lot easier to go through the university hoops to get things done than [the school district]." Other participants also recalled how the availability of university-trained counseling professionals was an asset not previously available to the elementary students. In some ways, because the university functioned outside of the school system, a certain degree of freedom was felt within the afterschool program. The university was described as being capable of raising money and getting student volunteers at a quicker pace than the K–12 school district. Angela illustrated the differences in the "timeline" and process well, stating:

> We still have to go through the school district to get certain thing approved for legality purposes or confidentiality purposes. And so it gets hard, too, because you just want to say, "Yes" to these wonderful people from the university, like, "Alright! We want to do that!" and then it's like, "Uh oh!" Step back, there might be something in [the] school district we need to know about before we move forward with the project.…It makes the timeline much longer because you're trying to coordinate all these efforts.

While the day school staff perceived the university as helpful, generous, and well positioned to provide resources to students, the afterschool staff seemed

to question the capabilities and true investment of the university when it came to running the community school project. Some of the staff members, because they felt underresourced, questioned whether or not the university was truly invested in the project. Other staff members went further by positioning the coordinating faculty member as being separate from the university—the "rogue" faculty member and "an exception to the rule"—with the university as a whole described as rarely expecting faculty members to be involved in the community.

In contrast to this more skeptical orientation to the university's involvement, one afterschool staff member oriented to the university in a positive light. When asked about what surprised her about her experience thus far, she stated:

> I have to say what surprises me about the university coming in to do this, is the relationships that they have with the community! That was completely surprising, that they could find somebody to fund it for three years, and that they could, because the effort is, when you sit back and think about it, it's a pretty grand effort. It's not like writing a 100-page thesis to get your Master's degree and whatnot. It's nothing like that. It's meaningful. So that's surprising. I know that sounds a little bad (laughed). I didn't mean it that way. But that the university would be useful is nice.

The fact that a local university would get involved in a project embedded in the community seemed to be out-of-sync with her traditional notion of universities. This afterschool staff member seemed to be pleasantly surprised with the university's community-engaged work. Embedded in this commentary is the idea that there are conflicting missions of the university (Alpert, 1985) and the various higher education stakeholders (Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008).

Certainly, when groups as different as university-employed afterschool staff and LEA day school teachers and administrators commit to working together, the differences between institutions become evident. Yet, through collaboration, the differing perspectives were brought together to produce something useful for the students and community at large.

Theme 3: Creating Switzerland With Collaborative Structures

The third theme, *creating Switzerland with collaborative structures*, reflected what the participants identified as essential: collaboration. The place of collaboration across institutions and the community at large was positioned as critical, often being referenced in relation to the "in flux" nature of the program (Theme 1) and the institutional cultural differences (Theme 2). This collaborative framework, positioned as foundational to the partnership, allowed the

school to offer activities that were typically beyond the scope of their program delivery. Further, it was collaboration that allowed for the university and elementary school to work through their differences, refining the afterschool program and establishing consistency.

A UACS intentionally brings together two institutions in order to provide resources, services, and programming that neither institution could provide on its own, something that all of the day school staff members noted. Schools offer a certain set of activities and expertise. Similarly, universities bring particular skills and resources. Many elementary schools offer academic instruction in highly structured environments and have protocols for how to deliver content and assess student learning. Universities have the potential to bring inquiry, research, and flexibility to the table. The participants described how these differences eventually resulted in meeting the needs of the students and community in a more comprehensive way. Angela, the assistant principal, captured this idea well, sharing:

> The university is also able to go beyond just the academics and only the [state standards]….I mean, we do have part of the program that focuses on that, but…the university is able to, uh, really provide a lot of culture to the students, and many of them have never been out of [this] area. They're getting to see and do and experience things that they never have before.

In this way, working *together*, the institutions collaborated to provide children who were already learning in school with opportunities for cultural and social enrichment that neither institution could have provided alone.

The day school staff overwhelmingly stated that their capacities were limited. Tracy, an elementary school teacher, stated:

> Children come to school with lots of needs…we have children who come in, and they may have an abscess tooth, and nothing's been done about it. And having somebody to talk to, um, even helps that child to feel better—that they have somebody that they can communicate that to…I don't think the teachers in any school can provide everything that children come to school needing. And this [school–university partnership] helps.

While differences between the institutions were viewed as evident and consequential, some of the participants were surprised at the degree to which the school leaders welcomed creative interventions. Douglas, one of the afterschool staff teachers, noted:

> I'm surprised at how great the administrative team from the school is. I felt, you know, I've been in some situations in some magnet schools

> where I've worked in the past, where people have given me a lot of latitude….But whenever I've worked in straight-on schools, this, this is a straight-on school. This isn't a magnet school. This is a local elementary school. I really am pleasantly surprised with the principal and the assistant principal and with the staff in general. They're not provincial. They're not trying to perfect, protect their territory. They don't feel threatened by our presence; by and large, they're supportive.

The afterschool staff generally viewed their role as not only providing opportunities for cultural and social enrichment, but also as a way to support students with their academic work by providing more individualized attention. For example, the afterschool staff members discussed being willing to complement the academic work undertaken by day school staff, with one stating:

> One thing I would really like to see happen that really, really, really needs to happen is communication between the Kindergarten teachers of our students…it's essential, crucial, that we need communication with the second grade teachers, and the third grade teachers.

When asked, "So you're thinking [you want] more intentional connections between day school teachers and you all, based on the kids that you have of theirs?", the participant continued:

> Yeah, it doesn't have to be anything really…because I know sometimes we're like, the kids read their book, and they drew a picture of what they read, and then they wrote a sentence about what they read, and I don't necessarily know that that relates any way at all to what they were doing in the classroom. You know, so for like the first grade teacher that came up, and said, "Hey, here are these spelling words, there are these Word Wall words, and this is what we're working on. If you all could at some point during the week, help us out, you know."

The above quote highlights the general sentiment that collaboration was seen as essential for supporting the growth of the students. This collaboration demanded transparent conversations and a willingness to "give and take." Joseph, the afterschool coordinator, built upon this notion of "give and take," highlighting the importance of appeasing both "sides" (university and school).

> Nah, just trying to appease both. You know, you kinda gotta be a, you got to be Switzerland, almost. You gotta be neutral on things being said and done because you've got a lot of different beliefs of what's best for the kids, and you get some people who, who get upset if things aren't going the way they want. I mean, you gotta try to be very neutral to both sides.

In this way, collaboration meant keeping partners "happy" while seeking to more fully meet the needs of the students attending the UACS. Collaborative

structures took time to build, but once in place, the community afterschool project was able to work alongside the public school in order to provide students with opportunities beyond those which each individual institution could provide alone. Creating collaborative structures was described as time intensive and uncomfortable at times but ultimately viewed as worth the struggle.

Implications/Discussion

Lewin (1951) stated that the best way to understand something is to try to change it; theory plus action equals education. A UACS project follows in this tradition as it attempts to simultaneously partner with schools, communities, and the university. We suggest, then, that this study holds important implications for scholars and practitioners alike who undertake similar tasks in public education.

Time Is Necessary to Build and Maintain Partnerships

Collaboration is important in the development of a UACS (Dryfoos, 1994; Kronick, 2000). Trust is a key element within any collaboration and, indeed, takes time to develop. At the beginning of the project, since most staff members were new to the school, time was needed to build trust between school and university officials. Both the afterschool coordinator and the principal credit each other's ability to work together as important for the success of the program. As trust was developed, staff were more apt to share thoughts and perspectives about changes needed in the UACS afterschool program. Interactions between the school and university staff helped to move the program forward.

Time to Develop an Infrastructure

Lawson (2010) described the UACS model as a "complex intervention" (p. 8) and provided a theory of change model for both schools and universities. Participants in our study referred to the "in flux" nature of the program and the patience needed when dealing with a pilot program. While it is always preferable to practice what one is about to do, especially when you are introducing a new program, in the case of the UACS of focus, this did not occur, as the principal noted the quick turnaround associated with the program's launch. The contingency of funding required start up after only a short period of time. Eighteen months later, with the addition of new funding streams, the infrastructure is still developing.

Time to Develop a Philosophy

The major philosophical difference talked about by the participants, especially at the outset, was that university staff liked discussing issues, while school staff preferred finding a solution more quickly. School and university

staff experienced tension that was eventually "ironed out" after having time to adjust to a new way of doing things, with compromise required across the two institutions. As discussed previously, discipline was a major source of difference between the university and school staff. The day school adhered to a point system that carried over into the next day. The extended day program started a child off with a clean slate each day. These varied approaches were often in conflict. There is no question that a uniform discipline policy would make matters easier. Yet, there is something to be said for healthy disagreement and taking the time needed to develop a shared philosophy.

The UACS Permeating the School Culture

Does the UACS philosophy (really) permeate the entire school? No, yet progress toward a seamless organization is being made. More importantly, the participating school staff viewed the UACS project as an asset that helped them to accomplish academic goals and objectives with particular students being served by the UACS afterschool program. Further, the project, at the time of this study, had only been able to serve 50 students; thus, it was likely difficult for the staff to orient to the project as more than a targeted intervention for a few students. Additionally, comprehensive school improvement was not indicated as a clear goal from the beginning, so it is not surprising that this goal was not achieved by the UACS project and therefore not mentioned by participants. As much potential as the UACS model may have for comprehensive school improvement, such a goal cannot be realized without school and university partners making it an explicit shared target. One teacher's comment highlighted this phenomenon well: "I don't know much about the UACS project because I don't have any students in the program." As such, there must be sustained, intentional discussions with school and university-based staff regarding how the UACS project supports the school's improvement goals.

Impacts on the University

Community–school–university partnerships hold promise for transforming higher education, but institutional leaders must be at the table when planning the effort. There was discussion among afterschool staff about whether or not the university was truly invested in the partnership or if it was just the university "being nice" for a period of time. We suggest, then, that a "partnership infrastructure" should be created not only for the on-the-ground operational issues at the school, but also for the university's leadership, beginning with the College of Education. Our findings suggested that the university was not fully integrated across the project, apart from the faculty member who was willing to take a "risk," as one participant said, on this project. In one afterschool

staff member's words, "But I don't see the evidence that the university as an institution is willing to take risk to push the ideas." As a result, the university appeared not to experience organizational learning. Because the UACS intervention is a complex one (Lawson, 2010) and its theories of change can be broadly applicable to schools/universities/communities, a particular infrastructure should be created in order to take the lessons learned from the real-world model and apply them to the university's scholarship and teaching.

Conclusions and Future Research

Universities have a choice to assist and support schools in improving or to sit on the sidelines. From our findings, we highlight the ways in which universities and schools can function together, as they embark on the challenging and lengthy process of working through "chaos" and philosophical differences. This study, however, does not chart impacts on individual students, families, or community members. Future research should seek to examine the extent to which the UACS model can impact these important stakeholders because, at the end of the day, the UACS model will be assessed on its ability to engage students, improve and support student learning, and support the neighborhood and community in which it is situated. Research is also needed to understand the extent to which the UACS model does in fact result in systemic changes that result in a coordinated human service delivery system. In particular, future research might examine the extent to which the university has the capacity to convene diverse stakeholders in communities to address the "wicked" problems associated with inner-city distress (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The university could hold a key and be a supportive player in such a neocollaborative framework, working alongside communities to address neighborhood concerns and participate in school improvement (Taylor, 2010). In the words of former University at Buffalo president William Greiner, "The great universities of the 21st century will be judged by their ability to solve the city's most urgent problems" (as cited in Taylor, 1992, p. 21).

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Locating Common Ground: An Exploration of Adult Educator Practices That Support Parent Involvement for School-Age Children

Catherine Dunn Shiffman

Abstract

This article explores linkages between adult educator practices and the parent involvement needs of adult students with school-age children. A comparative case study examined the knowledge, experiential, self-efficacy, and social capital dimensions of adult educator practices that inform parent involvement efforts. One English as a Second Language (ESOL) program and one Adult Basic Education (ABE)/General Educational Development (GED) program served as the cases. Data sources include observations, semi-structured interviews with instructors and program leaders, and program and school district documents. Both explicit and implicit connections between adult education and parent involvement are identified. The degree to which these connections are recognized and encouraged is determined by the program emphasis, characteristics of the student population served, and the adult educator. Individual educator's understanding and efforts to make connections are framed by how each defines his or her role, language, social networks, and prior experiences with K–12 schools.

Key Words: parents, involvement, adult basic education programs, students, children, social capital, self-efficacy, ESL, ESOL, ABE, GED, family, educators, schools, English as a Second Language, General Educational Development, other languages, conferences, case study

Introduction

The push to engage parents and families is reflected in school mission statements, federal and state policy, national standards for teachers and school leaders, and the adult education profession (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2002; Stein, 2001). Adult students themselves frequently cite supporting a child's education as a motivator for enrolling in adult education courses (Comings, 2007; O'Donnell, 2006). Parent involvement in a child's education yields many benefits—most notably, increased student achievement, positive attitudes towards school, and persistence to graduation (Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). Yet, providing effective parental support is a complex undertaking. (Note: The author uses the term "parent" or "parents" to refer to the primary adult caretaker(s) of a child.) School-age children operate in a formal system of education that holds substantial expectations of students and their parents for learning. Effective parent involvement requires understanding and negotiation among parents, teachers, and school leaders regarding how children should be educated, the role parents should serve, and the access to and mobilization of resources required to support these efforts. With state adoption of college- and career-ready standards (most notably the Common Core), parents will be called on to assist their children to master an increasingly sophisticated curriculum that requires use of higher order skills in coming years (Council of Chief State School Officers & the National Governors Association, 2012).

Adult education programs offer promising contexts for strengthening the involvement of parents who did not complete high school and those with limited English proficiency. Coursework in Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Educational Development (GED), and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) can provide parents with access to experiences, resources, and knowledge to navigate a child's school curriculum, instructional practices, and educational opportunities. Greater understanding of how participation in formal adult education informs parent involvement can enhance individual parent's efforts and strengthen strategies of K–12 schools and adult education programs to engage parents.

This article analyzes data collected during the first stage of a comparative case study that explores the relationship between adult education participation and parent involvement beliefs and practices for parents of school-age children in an ESOL program and an ABE/GED program. The article is guided by two research questions: (1) How do adult education programs support a parent's role in a child's education? and (2) What factors inform how and the

extent to which programs approach this parent role? Data sources include observations, program documents, and interviews with instructors and program leaders from the two adult education programs and the coordinating organization providing support for English literacy instruction.

Connecting Adult Learning and Parent Involvement

Parent involvement in education encompasses a range of processes, activities, and beliefs associated with sending a child to school prepared to learn, setting and voicing expectations, supporting a child's out-of-school learning, advocating on behalf of a child, communicating with school staff, and maintaining a presence at the school (Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Drawing from ecological systems concepts, this study postulates that parents' lives at home, work, community, and school are interconnected in ways that inform how parents understand and enact their role in their child's education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This perspective is consistent with the premise that adult learners hold multiple roles as family members, workers, and citizens, for which adult education programs tailor instruction (Stein, 2001).

The association between parental educational attainment and children's educational outcomes is widely recognized (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2007). However, less is understood about the relationship of parents' additional schooling to changes in parent involvement beliefs and practices and resulting impacts on a child's educational trajectory. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Magnuson (2007) found increases in children's achievement when mothers with low levels of education completed additional education. Beder's (1999) research review spanning the 1960s to the 1990s included several studies that identified self-reported increases in parent involvement in homework and attendance at school events. A meta-analysis that examined the relationship between various parent involvement programs and student achievement found a nonstatistically significant but positive effect for the school-based ESL teaching programs included in the analysis (Jeynes, 2012). To explore how adult ABE, GED, and ESOL programs may inform parent involvement beliefs and practices, this literature review section examines the knowledge and experiences associated with learning in a formal setting, social capital, and the transfer of learning self-efficacy to parent involvement self-efficacy.

Knowledge and Experiences

The research literature points to difficulties parents with less formal education or limited English proficiency face in securing the maximum benefits

available from schools that reflect the dominant culture's values, assumptions, and practices (e.g., Auerbach, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Lareau, 1989). Formal adult education courses offer parents knowledge and experiences to support a child's education (Comings, Reder, & Sum, 2001). These courses may provide parents with content knowledge, information about the learning process, and practical information about school norms and strategies to advocate on behalf of the child. For example, the adult education curriculum may parallel a child's school-based curriculum in ways that provide parents with content knowledge that is useful for assisting with homework, as in the case of an ABE or GED course (Bingman & Ebert, 2000; Shiffman, 2011). The GED tests measure the "skills and knowledge typically developed in a four-year high school education program" (GED Testing Service, 2012, para. 1) in math, language arts, social studies, and science. Adult ESOL programs provide parents with grammar and vocabulary instruction, but also with information about communication styles and cross-cultural and civics-related knowledge that can help immigrant parents navigate their child's educational experience (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010).

Participation in an adult education program may also provide parents with experiential knowledge about the learning process, varied learning strategies, and applications of learning that are relevant to understanding and supporting their child's learning. For example, leaders in the field contend that instruction for adult learners should be contextualized, learner-centered with a focus on student goals, and differentiated (Chisman, 2011; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2003; National Research Council, 2012). The question that emerges is this: How might exposure to the knowledge and experiences associated with ideas about learning and learning strategies acquired in an ABE/GED or ESOL program provide parents with information about a child's learning and the school-based assumptions about learning and use of learning strategies?

Social Capital

Through social networks, parents acquire information about schools, teachers, and programs, as well as practical supports (Coleman, 1988). Participating in an adult education course provides access to two types of networks potentially useful in navigating a child's education: that of the educator, and those of fellow students.

Enrollment in an adult education program connects students to the expertise of individual educators and their network of professionals. These educators are situated to provide parents with support and advice about children's education when the instructor–student relationship is characterized by familiarity

and trust (Albertini, 2009; Shiffman, 2011). A well-connected organization with strong ties to the community is also positioned to link students to a range of people and resources (O'Donnell, Kirkner, & Meyer-Adams, 2008; Shiffman, 2013).

To activate such social capital, the educator must recognize and make connections that support parent involvement roles. Therefore, it is helpful to know something about adult educators and how they make decisions. Adult education programs rely heavily on volunteers and part-time employees with varying degrees of formal preparation and credentials to teach in both group- and tutor-structured learning environments (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Chisman, 2011; National Research Council, 2012; Sandlin & St. Clair, 2005). Many instructors have a background in K–12 education but have less preparation to teach adult learners (Chisman, 2011; Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009). Research is limited regarding the influences on adult educators' instructional decisions. Ziegler, McCallum, and Bell (2009) concluded that prior experience in teaching played a larger role in instructor knowledge and preparation than the instructor's status as paid staff or volunteer. Belzer (2006) found that volunteer literacy tutors in her qualitative study made instructional decisions based on many factors beyond the information they gleaned in volunteer training sessions, such as acting on what they believed was needed, trial and error, and prior knowledge.

A second network exists among fellow students. Studies have found that classmates can offer important learning and emotional support for isolated adult students (Drago-Severson, Cuban, & Daloz, 2009; Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). A few studies have found access to fellow parents' resources, information, and advice helped to support a child's education (Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011; St. Clair, 2008; Shiffman, 2011).

Self-Efficacy

In the context of parent involvement, self-efficacy is the degree to which parents believe they can positively influence their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). These beliefs inform parent decisions about whether and how to be involved in their child's education. For example, a parent who does not feel she has strong literacy or math skills may be anxious about assisting her child with those homework assignments (Civil & Bernier, 2006).

Participation in adult education may foster linkages between self-efficacy acquired through the course and self-efficacy associated with supporting a child's education. A learner's self-efficacy is considered an important determinant of program completion in adult basic education programs and thus a priority for

the field (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999). In some studies, parents attributed a heightened self-efficacy to assist with homework and communicate with teachers to their ABE or GED participation (Bingman & Ebert, 2000; St. Clair, 2008; Shiffman, 2011).

Method

A comparative case study (Yin, 1994) was conducted to explore relationships between adult education and parent involvement in the education of school-age children. Cases were selected to represent common types of programs for adults with less formal education and/or limited English proficiency based on the premise that these parents often face difficulty supporting a child's education in formal school systems. The researcher selected typical adult education programs rather than programs with a specific focus on fostering parent involvement in education for school-age children. The researcher sought to develop a picture of how typical adult education programs conceptualize and address parent involvement in education in courses as groundwork for future study.

The Learning Initiative, a nonprofit coordinating organization for English literacy programs, assisted the researcher in identifying prospective programs that might serve as the cases. (Note: Names of places, organizations, and individuals are pseudonyms.) Two of the five programs contacted agreed to participate. The Elm Project provides basic ESOL instruction. The Iris Center offers several instructional programs including ABE/GED courses.

This article focuses on data collected between spring and fall 2011. Data gathered during the first stage include observations, documents, and semi-structured interviews with adult education instructors and program leaders. Semi-structured interviews examined course goals, instructional approaches, student–instructor interactions, perceptions of parent involvement in a child's education, and linkages between adult education classes and parent involvement practices. Observations focused on interactions among students, instructors, and staff and how course material was presented.

The eight interviewees included two program leaders and five instructors affiliated with the two programs and one program leader affiliated with the Learning Initiative. The 12 observations included Elm class sessions and ceremonies, ABE/GED class sessions at the Iris Center, and a two-day professional development workshop offered by the Learning Initiative. Documents analyzed included program reports, policy statements, field notes, and curricular and other program materials from the two programs and the Learning Initiative. The researcher also reviewed publicly available reports and materials

produced by the public school system and state and county agencies. In addition, the researcher met with practitioners in the region to discuss general impressions of linkages between adult education programs and parent involvement and to explore emerging themes the researcher identified in the data.

Table 1. Data Sources

	Elm Project	Iris Center	Learning Initiative	Total
Interviews	1 program leader (*Susan*) 4 instructors (*Betty*, *Deborah, Joan, & Mary*)	1 program leader (*Helen*) 1 instructor (*Gloria*)	1 program leader (*Cynthia*)	8
Observations	5 classroom sessions 1 program celebration	4 classroom sessions	2-day workshop	12
Artifacts and Documents	Textbooks, flyers, and class materials	Textbooks, program brochure, GED materials	Workshop materials, reports, resources	

Data analysis was guided by the study's theoretical propositions (Yin, 1994). Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded according to themes identified in the literature and those that emerged during the study. The coding process identified characteristics of adult students; parent involvement beliefs and practices; programmatic and curricular features; instructors' beliefs and actions; interactions among instructors, students, and program leaders; and ways in which resources, ideas, and connections are shared. The researcher developed individual descriptive case studies of each program and then conducted a comparative analysis of the two cases to identify themes.

The Setting: Stevens County

Stevens County Maryland is located in a large metropolitan area. Residents are diverse in native language, country of origin, income, prior formal education, and citizenship status (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The overwhelming majority of adults over 25 have a high school degree. Stevens County has a large public school system that serves a highly diverse student population in terms of race and ethnicity, native language, and family income.

The adult education offerings in Stevens County are numerous and varied yet do not fulfill demand. ESOL and ABE/GED programs are available through the community college, religious organizations, local chapters of national literacy organizations, workplace programs, family service initiatives, and neighborhood-based groups. According to the Learning Initiative, an estimated 1,500 paid and volunteer instructors teach literacy and ESOL in the county. The Learning Initiative provides coordination for English literacy programs and capacity-building through training, grants, and other resources.

Elm ESOL Program: Instruction Focused on Student Goals

The overarching focus of Elm's ESOL program and individual instruction is on meeting the needs of primarily low-income adults living in the community who wish to improve their English in accordance with broadly defined goals for work, education, and family. The program serves over 200 men and women ranging widely in age and formal education. The majority are Spanish speakers from Central America; a smaller proportion is from Ethiopia and Haiti. Classes are offered at night in a public school. The program uses a combination of paid and volunteer instructors. Instructors are primarily White female professionals or retirees who do not speak a language other than English. Course texts are designed for a general audience and organized by units reflecting routine communication needs at work, schools, health facilities, shops, and on public transportation.

Practices That Explicitly Address Parent Involvement

While supporting parent involvement is not the driving focus of this ESOL program, there are three types of practices that overtly expose parents to knowledge and resources that support their role in their child's education. These practices include responses to specific student-identified needs, discussions about participation in school activities, and the use of education topics as instructional material for practicing English.

Elm activates its social capital to connect students to resources *as needs arise*, including parent involvement. According to Susan, the ESOL Coordinator, "we try to help with whatever resources are available within the system" when students have problems. For example, one instructor activated the program's network to assist a student whose high school-age son was getting into trouble at school. The instructor contacted Susan who in turn notified an Elm board member who happens to be the high school's Latino liaison. The Elm Project and Susan provide this kind of timely connection to resources for a wide range of student challenges, from preparing citizenship papers to securing housing and food.

Structured efforts to support parent involvement for school-age children center on encouraging parents to participate in formal school events such as parent–teacher conferences and back-to-school nights. These efforts are consistent with state priorities to provide adult ESOL learners with knowledge of cultural norms that help them navigate their role as family members in American society (MD Dept. of Labor, Licensing, & Regulations, n.d.). Susan explained that they stress the "importance of going to the parent–teacher conferences and not being embarrassed that they need an interpreter." She believes

they need to emphasize this because for many Elm students "there's no history in their background of participation." A board member who is a native Spanish speaker leads workshops on parent involvement to let parents know about the PTA and English programs in the schools. In the ESOL classes, teachers allot time to discuss parent–teacher conferences. During one observation the week of districtwide parent–teacher conferences, the instructor (a former teacher) and her assistant (a former school librarian) discussed parent–teacher conferences and worked with the students to generate a list of questions they might ask teachers during these meetings.

A third type of explicit connection between the Elm ESOL classes and parent involvement practices occurred as part of one lesson observed. Joan and her students reviewed a newspaper story about the school district administration. She facilitated a discussion about district governance and the role of administrators, making reference to the fact that "we vote for" the school board members. Such discussion is aligned with state ESOL standards to increase knowledge about the education system and community resources (MD Dept. of Labor, Licensing, & Regulations, n.d.) and provides parents with a preliminary introduction to the public school system's governance structure.

Practices With Implicit Implications for Parent Involvement

Several Elm instructor and leader practices that build adult learners' cross-cultural awareness and metacognitive skills also hold implicit implications for parent involvement in a child's education in American public schools. These can be found in ideas communicated about interaction styles, the nature of learning, types of learning activities employed, and the experience of learning in the physical space of a public school classroom. Such connections may remain latent. It is up to the parent and the instructor or staff member to recognize and cultivate connections between these types of knowledge and experiences and the ways in which children learn in Stevens County schools.

A challenge voiced by Elm educators is that students with limited formal education "don't know how to learn." Instructors discuss beliefs about learning with their adult students that are commonly expressed in American education. Deborah talks to her class about different learning styles, making distinctions between visual and auditory learners. Mary explains the important role of making mistakes in the learning process to her students. To model this, she purposefully makes errors and waits for her students to correct her. Such discussions can lay the groundwork for reflecting on their child's learning and recognizing assumptions about learning embedded in local school practices.

Similarly, the Elm instructors focus on setting and monitoring learning goals with their students. This may be a new practice for students who grew

up in a different educational system. Cynthia at the Learning Initiative believes "not everyone has been trained to set goals for themselves." The question that emerges is how parents' work with goal setting and monitoring might inform the ways in which parents set and monitor goals for their child's learning and might also help them understand how their children and the school system set and monitor goals. Cynthia postulates, "if you do that for yourself, I think you're also going to do it for your children and help them with setting and achieving goals."

The types of activities Elm instructors use to teach the course content expose students to a variety of ways of learning and practicing new knowledge and skills. In the classroom, Elm instructors employ such nontraditional learning techniques as throwing a ball to students in a circle to answer questions, playing Bingo and other games, and using find-and-fix exercises in which students identify and correct the mistakes in sentences. Consistent with the emphasis on the real-world application of learning in state ESOL standards (MD Dept. of Labor, Licensing, & Regulations, n.d.), instructors encourage students to think of their community as a laboratory. They label as "learning" those efforts to initiate conversations with shopkeepers, scan product labels at the supermarket, read the weekly free newspaper, and obtain a library card. Deborah tries to "make them aware of how they can be learning…sitting on the bus." Exposure to these varied learning activities offers parents alternative ways to think about and support children's learning outside of school.

Elm's adult ESOL students have the experience of spending extended periods of time in a public school in a way that would not typically be possible. Susan believes the location is important:

> I made the case with the school system that it was important for us to be in a school because I think that then gives both the parents and the little kids who come a comfort level with going into a public school, not seeing it as threatening, and making that connection that they'll be able to do that when their kids get older.

These classrooms provide parents with visual information about technology equipment such as interactive white boards and use of instructional space from desk arrangements to reading corners. When the school holds evening events, the building springs to life as a school. Administrators are a physical presence, directing student and parent movements.

Iris Center ABE/GED: Instruction Focused on Parenting, K–12 Content, and Differentiation

The ABE/GED program is one service of many provided by this community-based program that takes a holistic approach to family well being and early childhood development. Iris offers one day and one evening combined ABE/GED course. Classes are kept intentionally small, with approximately eight students per class—the majority of whom are young and female. The population served by Iris is approximately 50% Latino. The ABE/GED instructional staff includes one full-time adult education instructor, Gloria, and volunteer tutors. Gloria is African American and a former public middle school teacher. Volunteer tutors assist Gloria in the evening ABE/GED class by working one-on-one with students. The evening tutors observed are White and range in age from college- to late middle-age.

As a program for families with young children that emphasizes school readiness, Iris actively focuses on the role of parents in their child's education and draws connections between adult learning and supporting a child's learning. According to Helen, the program director, "We tell them that they have a responsibility to learn because eventually their kids are going to be doing the exact same materials, and they are going to need to know for their kids."

There are clear parallels between the curricular focus on K–12 content knowledge and skills and those studied by school-age children. During class observations, adult students worked on basic math skills encountered in elementary and middle school including fractions, decimals, and percentages. Students were also observed practicing essay responses to GED prep questions. Gloria believes the time spent on fractions and other basic math in her class will help parents support their child's efforts to master this material, although for most students this will happen in the future when the children are in school.

The program is characterized as a "one-room schoolhouse," offering a differentiated instructional approach. Gloria tailors tasks and the pace of student work according to individual needs. Like the Iris program, the emphasis on monitoring student progress and differentiated instruction is a core practice in the Stevens County K–12 system. As such, parent exposure to monitoring their own learning and receiving differentiated instruction offers an opportunity to build awareness of this as an instructional approach to recognize this method in their child's school and to support their child's learning.

Learning Strategies and Tasks

Iris students gain knowledge of and experiences with a variety of learning strategies and tasks that can inform parents' understanding of a child's school

assignments and expand their repertoire of strategies to assist with homework. During one observation, a tutor worked with a student on writing persuasive essays. The tutor suggested that she and the student each write a response to the question and then discuss their answers. As the two compared their responses, the tutor explained her strategy for structuring a response. Another tutor, a college student new to tutoring at Iris, shared her memorization tricks with another adult student.

In preparing to take the GED tests, Iris students practice distinct types of learning tasks that are also employed by the Stevens County school system. For example, a student and tutor worked on completing "brief-constructed responses" or BCRs during one observation. BCRs appear on the state's annual assessment tests for school children (MDK12.org, 2012). Children practice these short answer response questions beginning early in elementary school. Like county students, the Iris students also practice their skills using computer-based instructional programs.

Consistent with the contextualized approach to learning valued in the adult education profession, the Iris Center generally and the ABE/GED program in particular encourage parents to recognize and seek out learning opportunities in the community for themselves and for their children. Gloria uses everyday life occurrences to highlight topics she teaches, such as integrating a life skills curriculum with the ABE/GED content. Iris Center staff members actively encourage parents to view the community as a source of learning for their children and point to the critical parent role in exposing children to these opportunities. Helen and her staff urge parents to take their children to the library: "It's free. It's teaching your kids. It's making your kids ready for school." Such practices emphasize application of content knowledge and skills to daily life, awareness of learning as something that can occur beyond the formal classroom, and the availability of community resources.

Developing a Student Persona

The Iris program seeks to foster student orientations to learning in a formal classroom environment that have parallels to dispositions encouraged in K–12 schools. Gloria, a former middle school teacher, imparts the mindset she believes students need to be successful learners through verbal messages and the way in which she structures the classroom environment:

> Teaching them how to be a student is my No. 1 thing. Being a student involves taking notes,…being an independent worker, and not relying on the group setting. Just, you know, holding them to deadlines and homework and class work and attitude.

She stresses, "You have to become reliable." For Gloria, part of being a student is acting in accordance with classroom norms for behavior that are reminiscent of public school classrooms. She expects her students to stay on task. "That's a rule. If you walk in that door, there's only one thing to do and that's work. Everything else is out of the door." Students must exit the program if they do not conform to these expectations.

Self-efficacy as a learner is also a critical component of student success from Gloria's perspective: "The number one thing is: build that confidence to make them realize that they can be good students and that whatever happened in the past is the past." In this arena, she sees no difference between her current adult students and her former middle school students.

Relationships to Support Learning and Parenting

Navigating relationships is an important consideration at the Iris Center. Gloria and Helen monitor relationships within the courses in ways that will facilitate peer support while avoiding interpersonal conflicts that could impede learning or ostracize a student. During observations, interactions among students were quiet and focused exclusively on the assigned tasks, suggesting limited opportunities during the ABE/GED class to draw on peers' social capital to address parent involvement needs. At the same time, the staff encourages parents to view one another as sources for child care support and companionship on parent–child excursions. These are often difficult steps for Iris parents.

Gloria, a former middle school teacher, also urges her students to reexamine relationships with former teachers in the K–12 system:

> They always say that [teachers] didn't care, and they were just pushing them out, but I also talk to them about, "But that's your behavior. It's what you did. A teacher doesn't just not like a student. They…don't like your behavior. When your behavior gets progressively worse, they don't like that, either. So why are they going to show the same attention to those who want to learn [as] those who don't and don't get the attention?"

In this, she encourages parents to consider a different perspective about how teachers and students relate to one another that could prove useful in parent interactions with their child's teachers.

Explanatory Factors

Four factors help to explain how and the extent to which the adult education instructors connect the knowledge and experiences, social capital, and self-efficacy acquired in their classes with parents' involvement in the education

of their school-age children. These factors include characteristics of the program and the student population served, the perceived roles and backgrounds of individual educators, and the nature and use of social networks.

Program Emphasis

Program emphasis is an important determinant of the extent to which instructors and program leaders make connections between adult learning and parent involvement in a child's education. The Iris ABE/GED instructor and texts teach content, learning strategies, and standardized assessment practices that have numerous parallels to those found in the local school system. Furthermore, the organization's dual focus on parent and child development makes the link between the education of parents and children organic. In contrast, Elm's ESOL courses focus on developing generalized English language skills for everyday use and responding to students' identified needs. The textbooks support this broad focus. Instructors teach vocabulary and grammar; however, connections between this content and a child's learning are not emphasized or viewed as particularly relevant by the instructors interviewed.

Adult Student Characteristics

In both programs, the adult student population also informs the nature of connections instructors and program leaders make to parent involvement practices. Elm's ESOL classes serve a broad cross-section of adults with goals ranging from employment and educational advancement to basic survival. Elm instructors must calibrate their lessons to meet the diverse priorities and interests of parents and nonparents. This is consistent with the learner-centered approach and emphasis on student goals advocated by the adult education profession (Chisman, 2011; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2003; National Research Council, 2012). In contrast, Iris serves a more homogenous group of students with young children and challenges in family functioning preparing to take a standardized battery of tests—the GED. Thus, Iris staff and tutors target instruction toward shared and fairly specific learning goals and can reference parent-related topics without the risk of alienating students who are not parents.

Language and familiarity with American cultural norms are also factors in the ease with which instructors discuss parent involvement issues and foster connections between the adult class and supporting a child's school-age education. At Elm, the language barrier between the majority of instructors and their students makes nuanced conversations about parent involvement difficult. This leaves instructors to rely more heavily on inferences to determine the nature of and priorities for parent involvement among their students who have

school-age children. In contrast, Iris students are generally strong, if not fluent, in English, and many attended American public schools. As a result, the Iris instructor, tutors, and ABE/GED students have the advantage of a shared language and cultural foundation to hold more nuanced discussions about parent involvement.

Instructor Role Definition and Background

The instructors also understand and focus on parent involvement efforts based on how they define and enact their role and make sense of their own experiences with K–12 schools. At the Elm Project, instructors conceptualize their role as providing ESOL instruction. Beyond that primary role, each instructor makes different choices based on a combination of beliefs about the appropriateness of topics and strategies for relating to students. For example, Mary explains, "I don't see that as my job as the instructor to know about students' children unless they bring it up." At the same time, Elm instructors employ strategies to relate to their students by drawing on personal experiences. Instructors often use their own language learning challenges to empathize with their students. Deborah draws on common experiences as a parent: "I'm a parent, and many of my students are, too. I tend to throw things out about kids." Such references to shared parent identities potentially open the door to conversations about supporting a child's education. In contrast, Gloria takes a no-nonsense instructional approach focused on passing the GED and communicates clear expectations for student behavior. As noted earlier, instructor and student focus was centered solely on GED content during class observations. Gloria requires students to master her strategies for completing GED preparation work before exposing them to the tutors who allow students to "get to see a different way," as she put it.

Instructor endeavors to understand and support parent involvement efforts are heavily informed by the instructors' backgrounds. Four of the Elm educators interviewed referenced experiences as mothers and grandmothers with children in the Stevens County school system to comment on the kinds of support school-age children need, communication practices between home and school, and specific challenges of helping children with homework. At Iris, Gloria's no-nonsense approach and clearly defined expectations for student work and behavior are also likely informed by her background as a middle school teacher. It is not a connection she made in interviews but one the researcher noted in observations. The Iris tutors were observed referencing their experiences as learners when they shared learning strategies and feelings about mastering particular content.

Social Capital Embedded in the Educators' Social Networks

The Elm Project runs on its connections in the community. Susan, the program coordinator, is at the nexus of this network. Many of the instructors are residents of the community and have prior personal relationships with her. Susan is a tireless advocate for the students and the program. She raised her children in the community and was an active parent in the public schools. As such, her knowledge of the area and its resources is extensive. The ESOL program relies on her to raise funds, craft additional programming, and connect the adult students to the resources they need.

Susan recognizes and activates the social capital embedded in her relationships to share information about and connect students to community resources. She provides the instructors with flyers and other informational materials to distribute in their classes on a regular basis, from notices about community events to information about the flu, free medical clinics, and the community college's programs in trade professions. The instructors turn to Susan with concerns about students and the need to connect students to other resources. Susan then identifies her contacts and those of other members of the organization with deep ties in the community.

The social networks and activation of social capital appear more formalized at the Iris Center. Iris operates as a part of an umbrella organization serving families with multiple social service needs. Caseworkers and nurses are the primary contact point for referrals to outside community resources rather than the ABE/GED instructional staff. Interactions focused on parent involvement for school-age children are infrequent between personnel at Iris and area schools.

Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this comparative case study was to begin to build a picture of the ways in which education programs for adults with limited English proficiency or formal education can support parent involvement. To guide this inquiry, three dimensions of these programs that showed promise in the literature were examined: knowledge and experiences associated with learning in a formal environment, social capital, and the transfer of learning self-efficacy to parent involvement self-efficacy. The Elm ESOL and Iris ABE/GED programs offered opportunities to connect the knowledge, experiences, and social capital acquired there to the ways in which parents interact with school staff, assist a child with homework and other out-of-school learning activities, and understand and navigate the school system to advocate on behalf of a child. There were also challenges to making connections such as heterogeneous student goals and language barriers between instructors and students.

Some opportunities were readily apparent to Elm and Iris educators, such as communicating information about parent participation in formal school events and the relevance of parents' math learning to children's math homework—a finding consistent with a few prior studies (Civil & Bernier, 2006; Shiffman, 2011). Elm leaders, in particular, recognized the possibilities for both using their own social capital and building that of their students to access community resources including the school. These findings are consistent with earlier research highlighting the important role of neighborhood organizations as resource brokers (Albertini, 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2008; Shiffman, 2013). The social capital among learners within adult education programs—found to be an important source of support and information for parenting in prior research (Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011; St. Clair, 2008; Shiffman, 2011)—was also recognized by Iris staff as potentially important for ABE/GED students but required staff encouragement and skill development to realize.

Other opportunities to connect adult learning to parent involvement were present but subtle. This may provide a line of inquiry to explain the nonstatistically significant yet positive effect of ESL programs on student achievement found by Jeynes (2012). In the current study, potential connections were associated with the learning process, including exposure to new ideas about learning, learning tasks and strategies, and reflections on one's own learning. If recognized, these experiences could facilitate parent reflection on their child's learning and familiarity with assumptions about learning embedded in contemporary American school practices (Lareau, 1989).

Classroom observations and interviews with Elm and Iris educators revealed limited information about the ways in which learning self-efficacy might transfer to parent involvement self-efficacy. Educators in both programs spoke about building their students' confidence as learners but offered little insight regarding how this might influence parent involvement self-efficacy. Parent learners who can speak directly to their feelings of efficacy are likely to be richer sources in this area; their perspectives will be explored in a future analysis.

This article offers a preliminary framework for identifying how—and to what extent—adult education programs and individual educators are disposed to draw connections between their work with students and supporting parent involvement roles. Not surprisingly, program emphasis and population served are important determinants of the relative attention program leaders and instructors can devote to parent involvement topics. Programs like Elm that serve adults with diverse goals are less likely to extensively embed parent involvement concepts into the curriculum and instruction. Language barriers between learners and instructors can also inhibit more complex conversations about parent involvement. When the program and population served

are aligned with the needs of parents to support a child's education and there is a shared language—as in the Iris ABE/GED course—the opportunities to make these linkages are pervasive. However, the extent to which connections are recognized and made also depends on how adult educators understand and enact their role as well as on their prior experiences with K–12 education. This study's findings are consistent with Belzer's (2006) and Sandlin and St. Clair's (2005) observations that instructors' prior experience plays an influential role in instructional decisions.

As illustrated in the two cases, adult educators are in a position to explore with parents ideas about learning, resources, people, and opportunities to support their child's education. Adult educators interact with their students on a regular basis, develop relationships, and can build trust. As such, adult education programs can be an important resource for schools seeking to reach this population of parents. Adult educators can offer K–12 educators insights regarding how their adult students learn and the nature of parental priorities and concerns. At the same time, schools can expand adult educators' frame of reference for understanding parent involvement needs through ongoing communication. Specifically, school staff can provide information about the K–12 curriculum, instruction, and resources to help parents and adult educators recognize and make connections between adult and child learning and to strengthen parent involvement practices.

Further research is needed to understand how and the extent to which parents actually make connections identified in the two cases. The second stage of data collection for this current study will examine parent perspectives. Additional research is needed to explore and test the effectiveness of these connections in a range of adult education programs with diverse emphases, populations served, and organizational arrangements.

With the adoption of college- and career-ready standards by states, parents will be called on to assist their children to master an increasingly sophisticated and complex curriculum, one that demands the use of higher order thinking skills. Parents historically less connected to the educational experience of their school-age children risk even further alienation at a time when teachers and schools will most need this parental support. This study suggests that adult education programs are in a unique position to work closely with parents grappling with their own learning challenges and, thus, can be powerful partners in strengthening parent involvement.

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Lessons Learned From a Neighborhood-Based Collaboration to Increase Parent Engagement

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Abstract

In general, youth whose parents are involved in their schooling experience better academic outcomes. Yet some parents, especially those with few resources in low-income urban communities, face barriers to becoming engaged in school and community. This report from the field describes the "Neighboring Project Parent Empowerment and Volunteer Readiness Program" (Neighboring Project), which was a collaborative effort between a Project GRAD site and the local public housing authority. The Neighboring Project took engagement efforts to the neighborhoods of lower-income, urban parents. The primary aim was to help parents increase their engagement in their children's schooling and neighborhoods by providing them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to do so. To date, the Neighboring Project has been conducted at three housing sites. This paper describes the development of the Neighboring Project, including recruitment efforts and its format and curriculum. Findings from focus groups and anecdotal information reveal the Neighboring Project had lasting impact on participants and led to increased involvement in school and neighborhood. Implications for future practice and research are discussed, including the need for active outreach to parents focused on increasing their skills, knowledge, and sense of self-efficacy, as well as tapping their innate strengths and resources.

Key Words: community programs, parents, parental engagement, involvement, schools, urban, low-income, outreach, collaboration, self-efficacy, public housing authority, Project GRAD, neighborhood

Introduction

A number of studies have documented that there is a positive relationship between parent involvement in their children's schooling and youth academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). Findings from a study by Barnard (2004) suggest that parent involvement in children's early schooling can have lasting effects by decreasing rates of dropping out in high school and increasing the rates of school completion. Furthermore, the evidence to date suggests that efforts by schools to increase parental involvement can be successful (Jeynes, 2005, 2007, 2013; Klimes-Dougan, Lopez, Nelson, & Adelman, 1992; McDonald et al., 2006; Seitsinger, Felner, Brand, & Burns, 2008). However, many parents experience barriers to becoming involved in their children's schooling (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Klimes-Dougan et al., 1992; Mannan & Blackwell, 1992). These barriers include the lack of material resources (e.g., childcare, transportation), the time crunch experienced by many today, and parents feeling intimidated or unprepared to talk with teachers and school administrators or to help their children with schoolwork at home. Such barriers may be especially pronounced among low-income parents who must daily cope with environmental stressors.

Although low-income parents may experience barriers to participation, they also have strengths and resources that may be left untapped, perhaps due to the unwitting and unintended adoption of a "deficit approach" by school and other professionals toward lower-income parents (Lawson, 2003; Lightfoot, 2004). Moreover, the communities and neighborhoods within which parents and schools exist can either reinforce or impede parental involvement in youth schooling, including parents' attitudes toward schools and school professionals' attitudes toward parents (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Lawson (2003) interviewed parents and teachers in a low-income and ethnically diverse urban neighborhood about their understanding of parent involvement. Parents reported a community-focused perception of parent involvement and wanted schools to offer more services to enhance the community, whereas teacher perceptions of parent involvement were more traditional. Parents thought "the school should become a hub for community programs and supports" that could increase parent and family skills and capabilities (Lawson, 2003, p. 102).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework would suggest that partnerships between families and schools occur in the larger context of the neighborhoods in which they are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, attention to neighborhood factors is important to consider in efforts to increase the engagement of lower-income parents in their children's schooling. The neighborhood in which parents live can affect the supports available to them. How long one

has lived in a neighborhood is correlated with one's sense of attachment and belongingness to that community, as well as social support ties in the neighborhood (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Sampson, 1988; Turney & Harknett, 2010). Residential stability can facilitate a sense of community and provide ties to others that parents and families can turn to for instrumental support. Increased mobility can lead to a reduction of family ties and increased social isolation among families (Boisjoly, Duncan, & Hofferth, 1995). Moreover, geographic mobility, especially at an early age, can be a risk factor for poor academic achievement (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1989).

Although not all parent involvement efforts need to take place in the school setting, there remains a gap in the literature on community-based efforts to increase parent engagement. This paper addresses that gap by describing the development and implementation of a neighborhood-based collaboration designed to increase parent engagement in schools and communities. The "Neighboring Project Parent Empowerment and Volunteer Readiness Program" (Neighboring Project) is a coordinated effort between a Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams) site and the local public housing authority in one city of a southeastern state. The sites for the Neighboring Project meetings were the neighborhoods in which the parents lived. Project GRAD staff realized that some parents weren't engaged in the schools, so they decided to begin engagement efforts in parents' neighborhoods. The purpose of this neighborhood-based program was to increase parent preparedness to participate in the school and neighborhood and to become more involved in their children's schooling.

In this article, the Neighboring Project is described, and information obtained from focus groups with participants about its benefits is provided. The focus groups were conducted at the end of each series of Neighboring Project meetings. Their purpose was to learn participants' perceptions of the Neighboring Project, including the benefits, if any, they realized from participation, as well as what they liked about the Neighboring Project and their suggestions for what might make the Neighboring Project more beneficial or appealing. In the first section, the two collaborating agencies—Project GRAD and the local housing authority—are briefly described. The aims of the Neighboring Project and the demographics of the participants are provided, as well as a description of the planning and recruiting efforts. The curriculum is briefly described, and an example of an agenda for one meeting is provided. The second section provides findings from the focus groups about how the Neighboring Project was perceived by participants and whether and how it increased parents' knowledge and skills in relation to school and neighborhood involvement. Anecdotal

information also illustrates its impact on several of the participants. Next, a follow-up and transition program, the "Neighboring Project Moving Forward" is described. Finally, the implications of these efforts for future practice and research are discussed.

The Neighboring Project

The Neighboring Project is a coordinated effort between one Project GRAD site and the local housing authority. The primary purpose of Project GRAD is to improve academic success, increase graduation rates, and increase college access and a college-going culture among students in schools located in lower-income, urban communities. Project GRAD serves students in kindergarten through 12th grade and provides extended support services for postsecondary education for students that have received a scholarship through the program. Project GRAD reaches out to students, their families, and their teachers by providing academic support, social services, and classroom management. It also aims to increase parents' engagement in their children's education. Project GRAD in this city supports 14 schools, and all of the schools have students residing in housing authority developments. At the onset of Project GRAD 10 years ago, the 14 schools had the lowest graduation rates in the state.

The housing authority administers the city's public housing and rental assistance programs. The Community Service and Self-Sufficiency Requirement (CSSR) is a HUD requirement that adult residents of public housing contribute eight community service hours per month or engage in an economic self-sufficiency program for eight hours each month. Employed residents are exempt from this requirement, and other exemptions exist as well (e.g., 62 years of age or older, disability). Residents of public housing who do not adhere to the CSSR requirement are at risk of not having their lease renewed.

Both of the collaborating agencies work directly with families who are underresourced; their common client group and similarity of agency mission and values formed a base to come together and develop the Neighboring Project. The planning process began with the notion that strong neighborhoods are a primary driving force in supporting and encouraging strong families and productive schools.

The primary purposes of the Neighboring Project were to: (1) increase engagement between school and home to strengthen children's learning experiences; (2) build opportunities for school volunteering; and (3) increase knowledge about how to connect with school and neighborhood resources. The Family and Community Engagement Coordinator for Project GRAD initiated the Neighboring Project and the subsequent collaboration with the

housing authority. As noted, many of the families of students enrolled in Project GRAD schools live in public housing; hence, it was logical for the two entities to cooperate together in bringing this project to the neighborhoods where the families live. Parents were able to count their attendance at the Neighboring Project meetings as hours to meet the CSSR requirement. The Neighboring Project planners also wanted to help parents increase their awareness of volunteer opportunities in the schools and elsewhere in the neighborhood. The Neighboring Project was developed and conducted within the purview and roles of the Family and Community Engagement Coordinator and housing authority staff; additional staff or funding were not required. However, community support was sought for contributions of gift cards and materials for the Neighboring Store, which is discussed below under Curriculum.

To date, the Neighboring Project has been held at three housing sites. A different public housing site was chosen each year, and each Neighboring Project set of meetings was conducted once at each of the sites. The first set of Neighboring Project meetings was held during the 2008–2009 school year; the second Neighboring Project was held in the spring semester of 2010; and the third Neighboring Project was held in the spring semester of 2011. During the 2008–2009 school year, 30 meetings were held, and 18 and 16 meetings were held in the spring semester of 2010 and 2011, respectively. The reduction in the duration was in part due to the time intensity and the fact that staff at both agencies also had other job responsibilities. At the outset of the Neighboring Project at their site, most participants were behind in their CSSR an average of 40 to 60 hours. Across the three Neighboring Project sites, there were 71 participants who attended at least once. Of these 71, 93% (n = 66) were female and 83% (n = 59) were single. All of the participants were of low income. During the 2008–2009 year, 17 of the participants were African American and four were Caucasian. In 2010, 19 were Caucasian, and 16 were African American. During the spring of 2011, 12 were African American and three were Caucasian. Program completion ranged from 40% to 52% across the three sites, with an overall completion rate of 45%; completion was defined as attending over half of the sessions.

Planning and Recruiting

Input was sought from the residents of the neighborhoods in which the project was to be implemented. Residents were invited for a round table discussion held in their neighborhood (in a community room at the public housing site) to ascertain the challenges to living in as well as the opportunities available within their neighborhoods. Input was sought on topics to be covered, as well as the best days and times to conduct the meetings. We thought it crucial to

help residents take ownership of the program and to assist in the recruitment of other residents. After obtaining initial "buy-in" from those who attended the initial planning meetings, the project was introduced to the neighborhood. Efforts were made to target those who were at risk of losing their housing because they had not completed the CSSR; however, program participation was open to any resident with children enrolled in school. Several strategies were used to communicate with the residents. These included going door to door to talk with residents and leaving information about the project, mailing letters to the residents, sending notes from school home with children or grandchildren, phone contacts, and posters in the neighborhood. At the first site, a colorful tent with streamers and balloons was set up in the housing complex prior to the start of the school year. Information about the Neighboring Project was available, and residents who indicated an interest were asked to provide their names and contact information. Some school supplies were provided at no cost to those who stopped by, and refreshments were available.

After this initial planning and recruitment phase, the primary recruitment effort was knocking door to door by Project GRAD and housing authority staff to personally invite residents to the Neighboring Project meetings. On the day prior to the meetings, the staff and volunteer residents canvassed the neighborhood, knocking on the doors of residents who had participated or indicated an interest in doing so. Written reminders were left in the doors of residents who were not home. Another source of recruitment of new members was found in the residents who attended and found benefit; they would pass the word to neighbors, friends, or relatives about the project.

In addition to gaining input from residents, it was also important to inform the school principals and have them on board with the project. Principals were informed of the purpose and implementation of the Neighboring Project, and they, in turn, supported the effort in several ways. Principals allotted time for their Project GRAD campus manager to attend each Neighboring Project session, and they also agreed to send weekly reminders about the meetings home with students. Principals invited participants to the school for a day, providing a tour of the school and speaking with participants about volunteering, as well as providing information about current school activities and answering participant questions. Project GRAD staff also worked with teachers and principals in developing the Neighboring Project meetings.

Formal childcare was not provided due to lack of resources. The fact that meetings were held during school hours reduced to some extent the need for childcare; still, some participants had infants or toddlers. They were not discouraged from bringing their children with them—at any one meeting there were never more than two or three children in need of care. The sites had

children's books and toys available, and facilitators also would bring items appropriate for the children in attendance. There were always at least two staff in attendance at the meetings, so if need be, a staff member was available to assist as needed with childcare, such as holding an infant or redirecting a toddler.

Curriculum

The curriculum was developed by the Family and Community Engagement Coordinator and was designed to address the needs of the participants based on the prior round table discussions and input from school and agency staff. The curriculum is divided into three units: (1) building the community; (2) building self-esteem; and (3) building engagement and volunteerism. Examples of some topics covered include how to facilitate a learning environment at home, appropriate dress for a job interview, how to advocate for your child, connecting math between school and home, how to clean a cluttered house, what to do if your child is bullied, setting goals, and activities and discussion related to self-worth and values. Each unit has approximately six 2-hour sessions. Sessions were primarily facilitated by the Family and Community Engagement Coordinator, but guest speakers were also invited. In addition, participants were encouraged to attend various school and community activities, and transportation was provided to some of these. A Neighboring Pledge was developed, and each participant was asked to sign the pledge. The pledge focuses on the parents (or grandparent or other adult who is the child's caretaker) making a commitment to help their children achieve their goals.

Meetings were scheduled weekly throughout the school year at the first site and weekly for one semester at the other two sites. Meetings were held in a community room at the housing site within walking distance for all residents. The meetings were structured in a manner that encouraged participant involvement. To this end, the participants and facilitator sat in a circle, which more easily allows for open dialogue and relationship building. Hands-on activities were a part of each meeting. Each meeting concluded with a segment called "Fair Cup," during which each participant's name was placed on a popsicle stick, the stick was placed in a cup, and names were pulled randomly, with that person asked to provide feedback about the session. (Note: The "Fair Cup" is a Project GRAD School Climate Component practiced in the public school classroom at Project GRAD sites.) The aim of active involvement by the participants was to build ownership of the program and to build the skills to continue to be involved in school and neighborhood after the end of the program. In each session, it was emphasized to the participants that they are key stakeholders in making a difference in their neighborhood, school, and home. Figure 1 provides an example of one of the lessons from the unit on building

the community (more information on the curriculum can be obtained from the first author upon request).

Participants are awarded for participation throughout the sessions with points to be used in the Neighboring Store or with small giveaways. The Neighboring Store is stocked primarily with household cleaning supplies, paper products, and personal hygiene items. The items are set up at various times in the program (minimum twice a school semester). Participants use the points to cash in on the items. The focus of the Neighboring Store is to provide a resource for families and an incentive to participate in the program.

Agenda

Purpose: To provide practical strategies and steps to enhance community and build connections between school and family.

Unit: Building the Community
Lesson: Strengthening Community Connection

I. Welcome/Introductions/Making the Pledge

Outline of the session is covered. Members introduce themselves. First time participants of the Neighboring Project are recognized. At the end of the session, new participants review the Do You Believe segment and sign the Neighboring Pledge.

II. Putting the Pieces Together…Charting the Route to Community, School, & Family Relations

1st Group Exercise: How would you define a Neighborhood or Community?

- The participants are divided into small groups (various methods are used to divide participants (i.e., count off by numbers, chairs have various pictures and they have to find similar and/or differences, etc.)
- Each group is provided a large flip chart sheet, tape, and markers.
- On one table in the room are various cut outs of buildings (churches, schools, houses, apartments, stores, libraries, etc.)
- Each group defines a neighborhood by selecting the cut outs and arranging them on the large flip chart sheet.
- At the end of the time, each group reports on their community design; the flip charts are posted around the wall and remain up to the end of the 6-week Unit. The formal and social definition of neighborhood is reviewed, but the focus is to compare and identify the core areas that everyone placed in their design of the community. The objective is that every neighborhood may not look the same, but there are some essentials that support families; these are divided between school, home, community, relationships.

2nd Group Exercise: Welcome to the Dream Factory (The ProjectGRAD Vision Statement leads into the next activity.)

Figure 1 continued next page

Vision Statement
We see a world of hope,
where there are no limits on potential,
the greatness in every child is inspired and celebrated,
and dreams are realized through opportunities and education.

Open Discussion (1st Part): Charting Your Route…Dream Factory in Process

- Open Discussion – What is in your neighborhood or community?

Group Exercise or Open Discussion (Based on session time): What are the Road Blocks?

- 3 questions are discussed (The feedback from the questions below are listed on chart paper and posted on the walls.)
  1. Why are parents often hesitant to establish partnerships with members of the community/school?
  2. What are the weaknesses you see in your community?
  3. What are the strengths that you see in your community?

  The key principle in this exercise is to begin to focus on the strengths within their own community, how they make positive impacts in their community, and get beyond the barriers in connecting school, community, and family.

III. Fair Cup…Making the Connection (see text for an explanation of the Fair Cup)

IV. Remarks/Closing/Announcements

Figure 1. An Example of a Lesson From the Unit "Building the Community"

Focus Groups

Focus groups were held at each of the three sites to gather participants' perceptions of and satisfaction with the Neighboring Project and to ascertain whether and how it had impacted their involvement in their children's education and in their neighborhoods. The focus groups were facilitated by a faculty member from the local university who had not attended the meetings but was aware of the project and had attended the early information meetings. At two of the focus groups, a second facilitator was available. The second facilitator was a doctoral candidate in Educational Psychology and Research who had been involved with Project GRAD. The focus group questions and probes focused on how the participants became involved with and the benefits they received from the Neighboring Project, as well as their suggestions for what could be done differently. The focus groups were open to all participants of the Neighboring Project. Focus group participants were recruited by extending an invitation at several of the Neighboring Project meetings held prior to the scheduled date for the focus group. Focus groups were held at the same locations where the Neighboring Project meetings had been conducted. Twenty-two participated in the focus groups; nine at the first site (2008–2009 school year), seven at the second site (Spring 2010), and six at the third site (Spring 2011). Of the nine focus group participants at the first site, eight were female, and seven were African American. At the second site, all seven were female, and two were African

American. Of the six at the third site, all six were African American, and five were female.

Ideally, the focus groups would have been taped and transcribed, but resources did not permit this. There were two facilitators at two of the focus groups. The primary facilitator took the lead in asking the prepared questions, whereas the second facilitator was primarily responsible for taking notes. These roles were not rigid in that the primary facilitator also took notes, and the second facilitator asked follow-up questions. Immediately after the focus groups each facilitator looked at her notes and indicated the primary themes that emerged in the answers and discussion of each question. They then met to compare and discuss these. There was agreement between the facilitators on the primary themes that emerged in the answers to each question. This was likely due to the fact that the facilitators met right after the focus groups, as well as the straightforward nature of the questions and the high uniformity among the participants in their perceptions of the Neighboring Project. For the focus group with only one facilitator, the facilitator took notes during the group and also wrote key phrases that would jog her memory when she reviewed her notes after the group. Immediately after the focus group, the facilitator expanded upon the notes in more detail; this was done prior to leaving the site so what the participants said was still fresh. Prior to ending each focus group, the facilitator(s) summarized back to participants the main points that had been discussed and asked for clarification, as well as providing a final opportunity to bring up other issues or concerns. These validity checks were important to ensure the facilitator(s) accurately understood and interpreted the participants' responses and discussion and were especially important given that the sessions were not audiorecorded.

Findings

The findings from the focus groups are presented by the primary questions asked during the focus groups: (1) how participants initially became involved and how they sustained involvement; (2) benefits from participating; and (3) suggestions for improvement or what they did not like about the Neighboring Project.

Involvement

Two paths to involvement emerged across all three groups. One was the door-to-door canvassing noted above. This was especially important in the early stages. One participant noted that early on in the recruitment, a small gift was left with a note "you're awesome," and how meaningful that was to her

and how it motivated her to attend. The second way that participants initially became involved was being invited by a neighbor, friend, or family member.

Some participants noted ambivalence about first attending. For example, one stated she was "dragged" by a friend, and several others stated they initially began only as a way to earn CSSR hours. (Interestingly, none of the participants noted as a benefit earning CSSR hours.) However, their participation evolved into enjoying it and wanting to attend. Participants continued their involvement because the meetings were helpful, they developed friendships, and they learned new skills and information. Although questions were not specifically asked about the Neighboring Project facilitators, it became clear that the attitude of the staff was pivotal to the success of the Neighboring Project. Participants noted the staff were "personable and professional," "friendly," "genuinely cared" about them, and were not there "just because it was their job."

Benefits

Participants were queried about the benefits from participating, with probes built in to learn about their involvement in Project GRAD and school activities, helping children at home with school work and school-related issues, and involvement with and awareness of neighborhood resources. School-related benefits included meeting the Project GRAD staff and teachers at their children's school. Several participants indicated they had not known about Project GRAD prior to the Neighboring Project. They learned the names of staff at their children's school and "in what order" to contact them (e.g., start with the teacher prior to going to the principal). Participants said they gained the self-esteem and skills to initiate conversations with their children's teachers. As an example of this, a participant told of her child complaining that her teacher didn't like her and that her child was upset because the teacher showed one of her papers to the class. The parent was encouraged by the project facilitators to talk with the child's teacher. She did so and was able to resolve the situation. Initiating discussion with the teacher was a new behavior for her.

Participants provided examples of some of the school-related activities they had participated in as a result of the Neighboring Project. These included attendance at the Project GRAD Conference and Celebration dinner, helping to judge classroom doors at the school (teachers decorated their doors with information about the college they attended/college relevant material), volunteering in the classroom, and helping at the school carnival. One participant stated she had not known there were so many ways to become involved at school. Another reported she helped with her child's field day and had not previously volunteered for this type of activity. Participants noted the Neighboring Project gave them the confidence to become more involved and made them feel like they had something to contribute.

The Neighboring Project also provided information that helped parents help their children at home. A participant stated she now set a specific time for homework in the evening, and others chimed in that they now realized the importance of a daily routine for their children. Participants also indicated they began to encourage their children to stay in school and emphasized the importance of school. An immigrant parent noted she had not realized college was competitive and that it had to be paid for. She learned her children needed to start early preparing for college.

Participants also increased their involvement in neighborhood activities. At two of the three sites the participants told of starting and maintaining a residents' association. (At each site 5 of the participants from the Neighboring Project are standing officers for the residents' association, which focuses on building connection and communication between residents and housing management. It is recognized as an avenue to assist in coordinating resources and identifying needs for the housing neighborhood.) At one of these sites the participants also began a Neighborhood Watch, noting how they now look out for each other and communicate with one another more. This same group talked about how coming together as a group enabled them to learn about one another, join forces, and "get things done."

Participants learned about a number of neighborhood resources as they took field trips to some of them, as well as appropriate behavior in seeking jobs and volunteer opportunities. Specifically, a participant talked about the Literacy Imperative, which provides free books to children and offers free drawing lessons. She was not aware of this resource prior to the Neighboring Project. Another participant stated she learned how to apply for a job and gave the example that she stopped taking her children with her to job interviews. In addition to learning about volunteer opportunities, they learned what they needed to do to volunteer (e.g., how to make the contact, how to dress and present themselves).

An unanticipated but very real benefit was the sense of community built and the development of new friendships. Across groups, participants stated they met neighbors they had not known previously. One described the Neighboring Project group as first being friends, and now they are a "family." One participant summed up her assessment by saying, "it's the best thing that ever happened to me."

Suggestions

Participants had a difficult time stating their least favorite thing or offering suggestions for improvement. Uniformly, participants wanted the Neighboring Project to continue or to offer periodic follow-up sessions. One group suggested that information for what parents of seniors should expect in terms of

graduation fees could be provided. Another group suggested workshops to help parents "parent" and talked of increased behavioral problems among youth. Topics suggested included domestic violence, teen dating violence, drug/alcohol use among youth, and gangs. They said it was sometimes hard to talk to a professional and that information/workshops provided in their own neighborhood would be one way to help parents.

Anecdotal Evidence

In addition to the focus groups, staff became aware of how participants were impacted by the Neighboring Project. One example is especially poignant. A participant called the Family and Community Engagement Coordinator two years after she completed the Neighboring Project to report that her granddaughter was graduating from high school. This was her first grandchild to graduate from high school. She called to say thank you, stating that if it wasn't for the program, she would not have known how to get the help her granddaughter needed or had the confidence to seek out resources. She was still practicing what she had learned and believed her participation in the Neighboring Project was the reason her granddaughter was graduating. Another illustration of how the project exposed some of the participants to new experiences is when, at a celebration lunch, a mother stated, "I've always wondered what it's like to eat out with other women." This statement points out how the experiences of some low-resource parents and families may differ significantly from those of the professionals with whom they interact.

Several who participated in the Neighboring Project attended Project GRAD's annual parent conference without transportation assistance; this was a new behavior for these participants. A number of the participants teamed with Project GRAD and the housing authority staff to conduct a presentation to the housing authority's Board of Commissioners. This presentation was also recorded and aired on the local community cable channel. As a result of feedback from participants, the Neighboring Project Moving Forward was established, and, as of this writing, has been implemented once. The next section briefly describes the Neighboring Project Moving Forward and includes additional anecdotes related to its impact.

Neighboring Project Moving Forward

The Neighboring Project Moving Forward is a transitional and follow-up program to the Neighboring Project. Participants were selected from those who successfully completed the Neighboring Project at any of the three sites and expressed an interest in learning more about leadership skills. The objective of

the follow-up program was to build skills and provide tools to better equip participants to become more involved in their neighborhoods and schools. The Neighboring Project Moving Forward sessions were held in a separate location away from the housing sites, such as the housing authority board room and Project GRAD's training room. This allowed participants to be exposed to different meeting settings. Participants were responsible for securing their own transportation to the meeting site. This was to strengthen their sense of independence and self-efficacy and learn to problem-solve and begin to function as a leader. Information was provided on how to secure bus passes as well as the names of others in the area who were participating and might be available to car pool or come together. Participants were required to keep a journal of their experiences participating in the follow-up program and working with outside groups (e.g., attending residents' association meetings, PTA/PTO meetings, etc.). They were required to attend PTA and residents' association meetings.

Sessions were held monthly for two hours. During the sessions, the participants discussed and processed their experiences. Information was provided on what it means to be a parent leader, how to establish meeting agendas, identifying community resources to help support their meetings and how to establish collaboration with these, group dynamics and functioning, and how to develop a newsletter. Twelve residents participated in the Neighboring Project Moving Forward.

One of the participants who completed both programs is president of her residents' association and has completed and will be graduating from the yearlong community action leadership program. Another participant asked to be on Project GRAD's parent board and introduced the guest speaker at the annual parent conference, attended by approximately 600 people. Another has become a regular volunteer in her child's school, was recognized by the school for her volunteer work, and was asked to speak at a community volunteer luncheon at her school.

Discussion

In general, the participants were very positive about the Neighboring Project, voiced benefits from participating, and expressed disappointment that it had come to an end. Although the Neighboring Project was beneficial to those who completed the program, little is known about why those who attended some sessions did not attend consistently enough to complete the program. Resources did not exist to allow a follow-up with those who started but did not continue with the project. More information about the differences in characteristics and needs between those who attended and completed and those who

attended some sessions but did not complete would provide information that could lead to improvements and adaptations in the program. Attention will need to be paid to the balance between reaching out and wanting to learn more from parents and their right to not attend and not participate in the program. However, it should be noted that the attrition rate for the Neighboring Project is similar to other social service programs (Littell, Alexander, & Reynolds, 2001).

The lack of pre and post data on parents' involvement in their children's schooling (at home or school) and their neighborhood volunteer activities limits what is known about the program outcomes. A challenge to collecting more data from parents early on in the process is the ambivalence that some initially had about participating in the project; collection of data from parents or asking for an informed consent to contact the schools may only increase this ambivalence. One idea for the future is to enlist parents who have successfully completed the Neighboring Project as interviewers to help in data collection. Data were collected on the number of participants who maintained housing. This was an important outcome since many of the participants were behind in their CSSR and at risk of eviction, especially since research suggests that housing stability is important for building community and social support (Turney & Harknett, 2010). Of the 32 residents who successfully completed the Neighboring Project, all except three were able to maintain stable housing. Of the three who did not maintain their housing, one was evicted because she failed to meet the CSSR, one voluntarily admitted herself to drug and alcohol treatment, and one secured employment and no longer qualified for public housing. The participant who obtained employment informed staff that the Neighboring Project helped him to learn about resources for job hunting. Whereas 91% of those who completed the Neighboring Project were able to retain their housing, only 44% of those who attended at least once but did not complete the Neighboring Project retained their housing x^2 (1, n = 71) = 17.15, p = .001. Although this is encouraging, no causal links can be made between the Neighboring Project and maintaining housing.

Several lessons were learned from this project. First, efforts to increase school engagement and neighborhood involvement among lower income parents who experience personal and environmental stressors may increase their potential for success if the efforts also address the self-esteem and self-efficacy of the parents. The relationship building that occurred between the staff and participants helped participants realize they are capable of meeting goals and worthy to express their needs to teachers and other professionals. The Neighboring Project and Neighboring Project Moving Forward set reasonable expectations that participants could meet but did not set expectations so high as to set up

participants for failure. The "stepped" approach described here is one way to target increased participation among underresourced parents. It would have been unlikely that parents who participated in the Neighboring Project Moving Forward would have been motivated or had the self-confidence to do so without first participating and succeeding in the Neighboring Project.

Second, it is important to examine assumptions about why some parents may not "come to school" or become as engaged as professionals might like in their children's schooling. Research has shown that parental self-efficacy is important to parent's involvement in their children's schooling, especially involvement in home activities related to school (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Over 15 years ago, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) stressed that interventions to increase parent involvement must address parental self-efficacy as well as how parents perceive their role in relation to their children's education. Our experiences also suggest that parents' lack of confidence and knowledge may result in a lack of participation in the school and neighborhood. Moreover, although the lack of resources among the parents included material goods, it was the lack of know-how and self-efficacy in how to assert themselves with school personnel or initiate problem-solving conversations, as well as not knowing of various volunteer opportunities in the schools, that seemed to contribute more to their lack of engagement in the schools. In short, it is not that parents do not care, but that they may not possess the knowledge and skills of how to become involved in their children's schooling.

Third, it may not be enough to invite parents to school events or encourage their participation through letters and newsletters; rather, active and ongoing outreach efforts to parents in lower-income neighborhoods may be needed to increase their involvement. Going to the parents demonstrated to them that their skills and time as parent volunteers were needed and valued, thus reinforcing the importance and relevance of their participation in their child's schooling. This may have impacted how parents viewed their role in relation to school involvement; how parents define their role in relation to their children's schooling is related to their engagement (Green et al., 2007). Some parents may lack the skills and confidence to initiate engagement with teachers and schools or to respond to written invitations; imparting skills and confidence is a first step to increased engagement. Outreach and programs such as the Neighboring Project must involve the parents as collaborators, and engagement efforts must be tailored to the needs of each neighborhood and parent group. To this end, staff persistence and consistency is needed. There were times, especially initially, when only one or two or three residents showed up for sessions. Persistence of the staff resulted from their belief in the relevance and value of the project.

Fourth, the Neighboring Project was much more than a curriculum to be implemented. It became clear in the focus groups that what was important to the participants was the relationship with the facilitators and the perception that the staff genuinely cared about them. This is no different from other helping encounters across different service sectors, such as mental health, child welfare, and substance abuse treatment, where the importance of the relationship has been demonstrated over and over (Castonguay & Beutler, 2006; Marsh, Angell, Andrews, & Curry, 2012; Norcross, 2002). Assigning a staff member not really committed to the concept of taking engagement efforts to the neighborhood to implement the Neighboring Project or another curriculum is not likely to yield positive results.

Fifth, the Neighboring Project would not have been as effective or sustainable without a collaborative partnership with the schools and all agencies involved. This may be especially so since the Neighboring Project was labor intensive, yet it was implemented with no new major funds or staff (as noted earlier, there were some donations by individuals to help support the Neighboring store, etc.). Agency and school staff who want to implement such efforts need administrative support, as well as support from other agencies who can serve as guest speakers and facilitators.

Future efforts might include learning more from those who initiate participation but do not sustain it, as well as incorporating more quantitative measures in the evaluation. At the same time, the effects of the Neighboring Project on participants could not have been told by quantitative measures alone—their stories, as told to staff and in the focus groups, added a more in-depth understanding of their experiences and how the project affected them. The Neighboring Project experience reinforces the importance of reaching out to families in their neighborhoods to increase the skills, knowledge, and confidence of underresourced parents and to highlight their innate strengths and abilities as parents and community members.

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Effects of a School-Based Mentoring Program on School Behavior and Measures of Adolescent Connectedness

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Abstract

In an effort to increase students' success, schools and communities have begun to develop school-based mentoring programs (SBMP) to foster positive outcomes for children and adolescents. However, experts have called for more research into the effectiveness of these efforts for students across grade levels. Therefore, this study was designed to examine the impact of participation in a SBMP on behavioral and social outcomes for sixth through tenth grade students. Analyses revealed that compared to control students, SBMP participants had significantly fewer unexcused absences (with moderate effect size) and discipline referrals (with large effect size) and reported significantly higher scores on four measures of connectedness (with moderate to negligible effect sizes). First year participants also reported significantly higher scores on one measure of connectedness (with a large effect size). Implications for practice and suggestions for further research are provided.

Key Words: school-based mentoring, behavior, connectedness, social outcomes, adolescents, community mentors, middle, high schools, discipline referrals

Introduction

Our nation is currently in the midst of an unparalleled effort to increase academic achievement for all students. In this context, parents, teachers,

school leaders, and communities are looking for effective approaches to support learning, achievement, and success for both children and adolescents. The development of mentoring programs has been one approach adopted to provide assistance and support for a variety of students (Karcher & Herrera, 2007). Typically, the process of mentoring is viewed as "strengthening an individual at risk through a personal relationship with an experienced and caring person. Through shared activities, guidance, information, and encouragement, the individual gains in character and competence and begins setting positive life goals" (Barron-McKeagney, Woody, & D'Souza, 2000, p. 40). These programs seek to match nonparent adult mentors with students to serve as role models through sharing knowledge, skills, expertise, and offering personal support (Delgado, 2002).

Previous studies have classified mentoring programs according to a number of different dimensions such as whether the mentoring occurs in a group or one-on-one basis or whether it is community-based or site-based (Sipe & Roder, 1999). Each of these structures can have a differential effect on the mentoring experience due to variations in the screening, training, and support provided for mentors as well as the length of time and types of activities that mentors and mentees are asked to complete.

Mentoring programs that are located in school settings are referred to as school-based mentoring programs (SBMPs). These programs typically have four prominent characteristics: school personnel refer students for mentoring; an adult mentor meets with a student for one hour per week during the school year; mentors meet with their mentees on school grounds during the school day; mentors and mentees engage in both academic and social activities during their time together (Jucovy, 2000).

In a review of the research, Randolph and Johnson (2008) found that the primary benefits for students who participate in SBMPs are increased connectedness at school (e.g., King, Vidourck, Davis, & McClellan, 2002; Lee & Cramond,1999; Martinek, Schilling, & Johnson, 2001; Portwood, Ayers, Kinmson, Waris, & Wise, 2005), as well as increased connectedness in the family (King et al., 2002) and in the community (Portwood et al., 2005). However, this finding appeared to be dependent on the quality and length of the mentoring relationship, with few improvements found in the first year of participation (e.g., Herrera, 2004; Lee & Cramond, 1999). To date, evidence regarding the effect of participation in a SBMP on students' academic performance and prosocial peer relationships has been mixed (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006; Herrera, 1999, 2004; Martinek et al., 2001; Portwood et al., 2005).

Research indicates that additional advantages of SBMPs include: reduced program costs, increased supervision available for mentors and mentees,

increased safety for mentees, increased advocacy for students, increased academic focus, and increased opportunities to reach higher-risk children and families (Rhodes, 2002). However, research also indicates that SBMPs tend to be limited in their ability to provide youth with a mentor for an extended period of time (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002). This may be a drawback of a SBMP, as research indicates that mentoring relationships lasting less than a year (typical in SBMPs) tend to demonstrate little significant improvement in mentees' academic, social, and substance use outcomes (Jekielek et al., 2002).

Given that SBMPs are gaining popularity across our nation (Karcher & Herrera, 2007), there is an urgent need for measures of accountability and evidence of effectiveness (Kyler, Bumbarger, & Greenberg, 2005). Thus, this study was designed to investigate the effectiveness of a SBMP administered by a nonprofit organization, Thrive, in a small city in the Rocky Mountain West. (Note: Organization name used with permission.)

Designing a Unique SBMP

Thrive is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to encourage healthy family development through community awareness, parent education, and support to children and families. The organization is deeply rooted in the local community and is currently supported by 15 organization sponsors, over 50 program sponsors, 34 event sponsors, and hundreds of individual sponsors. The organization's goals are to:

- ensure success for all children;
- promote optimal child growth and development;
- increase attachment and bonding between parent and child;
- provide support for children's achievement by providing strong role models;
- increase students' academic, social, and emotional intelligence;
- promote positive parenting practices that ensure healthy cognitive, social, and emotional development;
- increase families' ability to access community resources including health care, housing, jobs, child care, and transportation;
- improve quality of family life by teaching and modeling problem solving and communication skills; and
- assist other groups to provide family-centered programs that promote these goals.

In 1989, Thrive designed and implemented a SBMP to offer school-age children and adolescents a sense of connectedness with a caring adult and to provide academic, social, and emotional support and encouragement. The SBMP has developed a superior reputation in the city due to its high standards for recruitment, screening, training, and supervision of mentors and the

strength of the partnership between the organization and the school district. This innovative collaboration, the first of its kind in the state, has brought the community together with the schools for the single purpose of increasing the success of all children. The SBMP has been recognized as a successful model by the Governor's Task Force and by a federal regional educational laboratory.

The strength of the SBMP's reputation has been built upon a unique aspect of its design: This SBMP does not function as a stand-alone offering. Rather, this SBMP is part of a wraparound suite of strategies and services designed to work together to foster students' healthy development and success. This SBMP is one of five closely connected strategies and services creating a partnership that integrates critical school, community, and family resources to promote academic success and the social and behavioral health of students (see Table 1).

Table 1. Thrive's Integrated Strategies and Services Model

Strategies & Services	Objectives
Collaboration	Thrive developed and maintains a strong community partnership with the schools and the school district, as well as community organizations, professionals, and families.
Mentoring	Thrive designed the SBMP to pair referred students with mentors in order to improve students' behavioral, social, and academic skills.
Parent Engagement	Thrive created a Parent Liaison program to provide trained professionals who offer support for parents throughout the community, building their ability to engage, communicate, and effectively solve problems with schools.
Professional Development	For K–12 teachers and school staff, Thrive provides professional development opportunities focused on developing a school climate that encourages family engagement.
Parent Education	Thrive offers classes and workshops for parents of children (birth through high school) designed to promote the view that school is a resource to the family and to build a foundation for effective communication.

Thrive's integrated strategies and services model forms a community-wide partnership of organizations, professionals, and services to help meet the

unique needs of children, parents, and families. The integrated program model wraps around the SBMP, combining mentoring with communication, professional development, interdisciplinary teams, counseling, parent education, and family engagement to help students be both academically and socially successful. A list of the integrated strategies and services used to deliver the Thrive SBMP are listed in Table 1.

Collaboration: Developing the Partnership

Thrive has made it a priority to form a strong set of partnerships around resources critical to children's and families' success. This collaborative partnership involves multiple stakeholders including community organizations and professionals who all work together to support the growth and development of children and families. Each stakeholder has a valued role and makes a contribution in the planning, assessment, problem-solving, and funding of the integrated strategies and services model.

Thrive holds regular meetings at the school district level with the superintendent and the district principals. These meetings include the SBMP coordinators, the Parent Liaisons, Thrive's director, and school counselors. The purpose of these meetings is to maintain open communication with district personnel and evaluate, assess, plan, and address challenges faced by partners.

Mentoring: Building a School-Based Mentoring Program

The SBMP was launched over 20 years ago in order to meet the needs of children and adolescents who were "falling through cracks," often falling behind in school yet failing to qualify for available services. The founders of the SBMP had a holistic vision for the program; as they launched one of the first SBMPs in the country, they wanted to provide support for children but also for parents and teachers. Their vision included mentor recruiting, careful screening, thorough training, individualized matching, and adequate supervision and support to retain high-quality mentors. The SBMP currently has 560 K–12 students matched with a caring adult. The hallmarks of this SBMP include: referrals made by school personnel; participation open to any child (which helps to prevent labeling and stigmatization of participants); a highly individualized match; a one hour per week meeting in the controlled environment of a school setting; trained on-site supervision and resources; and direct interaction with teachers and counselors to identify students' areas of need. (Note: For further details about this SBMP's design, leadership, and curriculum, please contact the first author.)

The primary goal of the SBMP is to provide one-on-one mentoring for students to improve their academic, behavioral, and social skills. Students are referred to the program when their teacher believes that the student would gain

academic and/or social benefit from a mentor. The referring teacher, school principal, SBMP staff, counselors, and parents set goals for each referred student and determine how to best achieve those goals. Then, using a personalized matching protocol, students are matched with a mentor that can best help them to achieve their academic and personal goals.

At the start of the school year, mentors are matched with a student based on students' needs and mentors' strengths. For example, a student who needs encouragement and support in mathematics will be matched with a mentor who has indicated an aptitude in mathematics and a willingness to help a student with academics. On the other hand, a student with a strong interest in art will be matched with a mentor who also has a strong interest in art or is an artist. All matches in the middle and high school are gender specific. Ethnicity is not a factor in matching.

SBMP Coordinators from Thrive work to recruit, screen, train, and support volunteer mentors throughout the year. The Program Coordinators all have college degrees in either social services or education. Some have Master's degrees in the fields of social work, counseling, or education. In order to maintain program fidelity, all Program Coordinators participate in regular training including weekly team meetings, national and state conferences, and online webinars. In turn, Program Coordinators work closely with mentors to provide the information, training, resources, and support needed for the mentors to be able to deliver high-quality mentoring and fidelity to the program design.

First-year mentors attend two three-hour training sessions. The first session is held early in the school year and provides an overview of the program's procedures, policies, and types of situations that mentors might encounter. Program Coordinators meet the new mentors at the school site and provide an orientation on school procedures and introduce mentors to their students and teachers. The Program Coordinators provide weekly supervision throughout the school year for the mentors. They provide resources for mentors, tips on working with children, and—through discussion of successes and challenges—identify avenues to increase the effectiveness of the mentoring interactions. The second training session is held in the spring and is focused on problem-solving skills. Discussion revolves around opportunities to dialogue through situations that they may have encountered throughout the year.

Parent Engagement: Developing the Role of the Parent Liaison

In 1995, Thrive developed an additional set of services designed to increase parent engagement with the schools. The creation of the Parent Liaison role was substantiated by the belief that the child's ability to succeed is directly influenced by the ability of parents to communicate effectively with schools and

the ability of schools to engage parents as partners. Thus, the goal of the Parent Liaison is to support constructive dialogue between the parent, the teacher, and the school in a holistic effort to contribute to the success of the child.

Currently, Thrive has a one-half time Parent Liaison in each school for a total of 9 Parent Liaisons in the city's elementary and middle schools. The Parent Liaisons work in the schools every day; they talk with school personnel about students' needs and connect with parents to provide support and resources regarding parenting strategies and child development issues. They also connect families with sources of ongoing support, information, and resources aimed at meeting the families' needs. In addition, each Parent Liaison meets regularly with the school principal and counselor to address students' ongoing needs.

Professional Development: Supporting K–12 Teachers and School Staff

Thrive provides professional development workshops for teachers, counselors, and school staff designed to create a school climate that promotes family engagement. The curriculum is entitled *Beyond Involvement: Engaging Parents as Partners*. The school staff members attend two two-hour workshops each year focused on developing strategies to increase their ability to encourage parents as partners in their child's education. The workshops explore ways in which school staff can respect cultural differences and respond productively to different points of view. The workshops are scheduled on the school calendar in advance so that all staff can participate. Attendance is recorded and each workshop is evaluated by the participants to provide formative feedback for program improvement.

Parent Education: Building Parents' Knowledge and Skills

Thrive has developed a series of four two-hour classes for parents designed to increase adults' parenting knowledge and skills. There are three themes that are woven throughout the classes: schools are a resource for families; children are more successful when schools and families work together; and early learning is the foundation for all other learning.

The classes lay the foundation for effective communication between parents and teachers. Parents learn to set high expectations and clear boundaries to build a strong, supportive learning environment for their child as they progress through the stages of child development. Thrive builds ongoing relationships with families and provides support, information, and resources to each family based on their needs.

The Current Study

The purpose of this investigation was to determine the effect of the SBMP on students' behavioral and social outcomes. The SBMP specifically seeks to

reduce the number of students' discipline infractions as well as improve students' attendance, self-confidence, engagement in academics, and sense of connectedness. Experts have broadly defined connectedness as "acts of giving back to, being involved with, and investing oneself in an affective manner in places and activities as well as in relationships with other people" (Karcher, Holcomb, & Zambrano, 2008, p. 653). This connectedness to the world occurs within three related ecological systems that adolescents experience daily: (1) microsystems (e.g., parents, siblings, teachers, peers, friends), (2) macrosystems (e.g., family, school, neighborhood, religion, cultural group), and (3) mesosystems (e.g., processes of connection between macro and micro systems such as reading, media, technology). Thus, successful SBMPs should help to foster children's and teens' understanding of their connectedness to the world across time (Karcher et al., 2008). In order to investigate the effect of the SBMP on students' behavioral and social outcomes, this study was guided by three research questions:

1. Is there a difference in absenteeism and discipline referrals for 7th–10th grade students in the SBMP compared to students who are not in the SBMP? (Note: 6th is not included here because absence and discipline referral data were not tracked at the K–6 level at the schools.)
2. Do 6th–10th grade students in the SBMP report a greater sense of connectedness than students who are not in the SBMP?
3. Are perceptions of connectedness greater for 6th–10th grade students during their first year in the SBMP compared to students who are not in the SBMP?

Method

Given that the purpose of this investigation was to examine the effect of the SBMP on participants' behavioral and social outcomes, this study employed a quasi-experimental design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). The treatment group consisted of participants in a SBMP, and the control group consisted of matched students from a different school district who met the SBMP referral criteria. The referral criteria was defined as a student who, in the referring teacher's opinion, would benefit academically or behaviorally from involvement with a mentor.

Setting and Participants

The school district where the school-based mentoring program was implemented was situated in a city of over 37,000 individuals located in the northern Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The middle school where the

school-based mentoring program was used had an enrollment of 578 students. A total of 121 6th–10th grade students participated in the SBMP treatment group (*N* = 62 female, *N* = 59 male). Of those 121, 82% (99) were Caucasian, 7% (8) were Native American, 8% (10) were Hispanic, 2% (3) were African American, and 1(1%) student was of Asian ethnicity. Twenty-two percent of the treatment group students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. These students were selected for the comparison treatment group because of the mentoring services offered by community members and students from a nearby university. Mentors for these students ranged in age from 18 to 80 years. Thrive records indicated that mentors met with their mentees from mid-October through June on the school campus approximately once a week. Mentees were excused from class during the best time identified by their teachers. During the one-hour visit, mentors and mentees engaged in a variety of activities such as playing board games, reading, working on homework or school projects, or talking together.

The control group consisted of 235 6th–10th grade students (*N* = 104 female, *N* = 125 male, *N* = 6 not reported) from two different school districts who met the same SBMP referral criteria as used for the treatment group. The first control group school (*N* = 99) was located in a town of 750 residents located in north central Washington State. The grade 7 through 12 enrollment for this school was approximately 300 students. Seventy-four percent of those students qualified for free or reduced lunch. The second control group school (*N* = 154) was located in a city with approximately 3,000 residents located in north central Washington State. The grade 7 through 12 school enrollment for the second control group school was approximately 280 students.

The ethnicities of the two control schools were different with respect to the numbers of White and Hispanic students. The ethnic composition for the first control group school was: 60% White, 37% Hispanic, 3% Native American, and 1% Asian. Twenty-seven percent of these students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The ethnicity for the second control group school was 29% White, 69% Hispanic, 1% Native American, and 1% Asian. Sixty percent of these students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Students in the control group were matched as much as possible to students in the SBMP treatment group by gender and grade level. Participating schools obtained parental consent for all students involved in the study.

Instrument

The instrument used to collect data regarding students' perceptions of connectedness was The Hemingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness Survey (MAC Adolescent Version 5.5: Grades 6–12; Karcher, 2005). This instrument

was used to measure the effects of the school-based mentoring on students after participating in the SBMP during the 2010–2011 school year. The MAC was designed to measure a student's perceptions of his or her connectedness to four important adolescent worlds: self, family, school, and friends (Karcher, 2001).

The MAC is a self-report survey consisting of 40 items designed to measure adolescents' degree of caring for and involvement in specific relationships, contexts, and activities (Karcher, 2005). The survey is comprised of 10 subscales; all items use a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = not at all true, 2 = not really true, 3 = sort of true, 4 = true, 5 = very true.) Eight of the 10 subscales include a reverse-coded item. The 10 subscales assessed by the MAC include: Connectedness to Neighborhood, Connectedness to Friends, Connectedness to Parents, Connectedness to Siblings, Connectedness to School, Connectedness to Peers, Connectedness to Teachers, Connectedness to Reading, Self-in-the-Present, and Self-in-the-Future.

Results from prior studies conducted by Karcher (2001) using both exploratory and confirmatory analysis support the 10 construct factor structure and provide evidence of convergent and discriminant validity and one-month test–retest reliability of .68-.91. The 10-factor structure was found across gender, age (teens vs. preteens), and risk status (delinquent vs. nondelinquent youth) using confirmatory factor analysis. Karcher (2001) reported the strongest evidence of convergent validity with measures of family connectedness, school connectedness, self-esteem, and future orientation. Cronbach's alpha ranged from weak (r =.60 and .68 for Connectedness to Peers and Self-in-the-Future, respectively) to strong (r = .91 and .94 for Connectedness to Reading and Connectedness to Siblings, respectively; Karcher, 2001).

Procedure

In order to best answer the research questions, two data sets were collected for this study during the 2010–2011 school year. Data regarding unexcused absences and discipline referrals for 7th–10th grade students in the treatment and control groups were gathered from the respective school districts. Data for 6th graders were not available (unexcused absences for 6th grade students in the control group were recorded in days rather than unexcused periods and therefore were not comparable to the absences reported for 6th grade students in the SBMP). Both school districts were able to provide two years of data regarding students' absenteeism and discipline referrals. Thus, to enhance the rigor of the analysis, both years of data were analyzed and reported in this study.

The MAC survey was administered in November 2010 and again in June 2011 to 6th–10th grade students in the SBMP and control group. To assess the effects of program participation, June 2011 MAC survey scores for all 6th–10th

grade students in the treatment and control group were compared for each of the ten subscales. Finally, a subset of the data from students who were new participants in the SBMP during the 2010–2011 was compared to matched controls in each of the ten subscales.

Results

Unexcused Absences

Using independent sample *t*-tests, attendance data for 7th–10th grade students participating in the SBMP (N = 114) were compared to control group students (N = 154) on the average number of unexcused absences. The mean number of unexcused absences for SBMP students (M = 5.95, SD = 27.98) was significantly lower than for control students (M = 18.00, SD = 32.66), $t_{(222)}$ = -2.69, p < .000, d = .79 (see Table 2). The outcome was similar for the 2010–2011 school year, with the mean number of absences for SBMP students (M = 4.11, SD = 9.87) being significantly lower than for control students (M = 17.71, SD = 64.13), $t_{(183)}$ = -1.99, p < .002, d = 0.60.

Discipline Referrals

Using independent sample *t*-tests, discipline referral data for 7th–10th grade students participating in the SBMP (N = 114) were compared to control group students (N = 154) on the average number of discipline referrals. These results are reported in Table 2. In the 2009–2010 school year, the mean number of discipline referrals for SBMP students (M = 0.97, SD = 2.20) was significantly lower than for control students (M = 2.71, SD =2.93), $t_{(258)}$= -5.38, p < .004, d= 1.43. In 2010–2011, the mean number of discipline referrals for SBMP students (M = 1.52, SD = 2.34) was again significantly lower than for control students (M = 3.49, SD = 3.11), $t_{(212)}$ = -5.06, p < .041, d = 1.84.

Table 2. Average Unexcused Absences and Discipline Referrals for SBMP and Control Students Grades 7–10

	2009–2010				2010–2011			
	SBMP		Control		SBMP		Control	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Unexcused Absences	5.95*	27.98	18.00	32.66	4.11*	9.87	17.71	64.13
Discipline Referrals	.97*	2.20	2.71	2.93	1.52*	2.34	3.49	3.11

*significant at $p \leq .05$

Measures of Connectedness

Independent samples *t*-tests were used to compare all 6th–10th grade students in the SBMP (N = 121) to control group students (N = 234) across the 10 subscales of the Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (MAC). An alpha level of .05 was set as the maximum Type I error rate for results to be judged significant. The first round of analysis examined the difference between treatment and control students' mean total score on the MAC. No significant differences were found in participants' total mean scores. This finding was not surprising given the vast developmental differences that exist across students in grades six and ten. Thus, a second round of analysis was conducted to examine the data from the 10 subscales of the MAC by grade level. Results for MAC subscale comparisons by grade level are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Average MAC Scores for SBMP and Control Students Grades 6–10

	Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8		Grade 9		Grade 10	
	Trtmt	Cont	Trtmt	Cont	Trtmt	Cont	Trtmt	Cont	Trtmt	Cont
Neighborhood	3.46+	2.97	3.21	2.71	2.93+	2.86	2.79	3.12	2.73	3.22
Friends	3.92+	3.55	3.87+	3.83	4.25+	3.86	3.94+	3.86	4.00	4.10
Self-in-Present	3.88+	3.19	3.70*	3.32	3.94+	3.76	3.65	3.66	3.79+	3.76
Parent	4.16*	3.91	3.99+	3.70	3.73	3.95	3.77	3.84	3.59	3.86
Siblings	3.46	3.67	3.49+	3.17	3.28	3.70	3.48	3.72	3.50	3.76
School	3.63+	3.40	3.58+	3.39	3.60+	3.49	3.22	3.55	3.03	3.66
Peers	3.35+	3.32	3.49+	3.15	3.63+	3.41	3.17	3.57	3.26	3.72
Teacher	4.20+	3.65	3.84+	3.60	3.76	3.82	3.56	3.87	3.66	3.92
Self-in-Future	3.96*	3.84	3.98+	3.70	3.93	3.96	3.71	4.07	3.80	4.07
Reading	3.46+	3.23	2.97+	2.60	3.31+	3.11	3.57+	3.33	3.00*	2.94

*significant at $p \leq .05$
+treatment mean score higher than control mean score but not statistically significant

In comparison to students in the control group, sixth grade students in the SBMP reported higher mean scores on nine subscales but only achieved statistical significance on two subscales. Sixth graders in the SBMP had significantly higher mean scores on the Parent subscale (M = 4.16, SD = .46) compared to their nonmentored peers (M = 3.91, SD = .72), $t_{(58)}$ = -1.62, p = .051, d = 0.42. Sixth grade mentored students also demonstrated significantly higher mean perceptions (M = 3.97, SD = .70) on the Self-in-Future subscale when

compared to the sixth grade control group scores (M = 3.84, SD = .52) of students who did not receive mentoring, $t_{(58)}$ = -0.79, p = .019, d = 0.21.

The pattern of results was slightly different for seventh grade students. Seventh graders in the SBMP reported higher mean scores on eight subscales but only achieved statistical significance on one subscale. Comparisons for the Self-in-Present subscale found that seventh grade students who were in the SBMP had higher mean perceptions (M = 3.70, SD = .89) of their Self-in-Present when compared to seventh grade students who were not in the SBMP (M = 3.32, SD = .68), $t_{(48)}$ = -1.70, p = .052, d = 0.48.

Eighth graders in the SBMP reported higher mean scores on six subscales but did not achieve statistical significance on any subscale. Ninth graders in the SBMP reported higher mean scores on only two subscales but failed to reach statistical significance on any subscales.

Finally, 10th grade students in the SBMP reported higher mean scores on two subscales with one achieving the level of significance. Comparisons for tenth grade students found significant group differences on the Connectedness to Reading subscale. Students in the SBMP had significantly higher mean perceptions (M = 3.00, SD = 1.60) of Connectedness to Reading than did tenth grade students who were not in the SBMP (M = 2.94, SD = .70), $t_{(48)}$ = -.158, p = .001, d = 0.05.

Effect Sizes

In order to quantify the size of the differences between the mean scores for the treatment and control groups, effect sizes were calculated for each grade-level subscale where a significant difference was found (see Figure 1). For students participating in the SBMP, the effect sizes for the reductions in unexcused absences in 2009–2010 (d = .79) and 2010–2011 (d = .60) were large to moderate. The reduction in the number of discipline referrals in 2009–2010 (d = 1.43) and 2010–2011 (d = 1.84) were very large for students participating in the SBMP.

For 7th graders, the size of the effect for Self-in-Present was moderate (d = .48) and for 6th graders, the effect size for the Parent subscale was moderate (d = .42) and Self-in-Future was small (d = .21). For 10th graders, the effect size of the differences on the Reading subscale was negligible (d = .05).

First Year of Participation in the SBMP

Mean MAC scores of students new to the SBMP were compared to scores of students in the control group. Full grade level comparisons were limited due to the low number of eighth (N = 1) grade students new to the program; however, grade level comparisons were possible for sixth (N = 10), seventh (N = 3), ninth (N = 6), and tenth grades (N = 6).

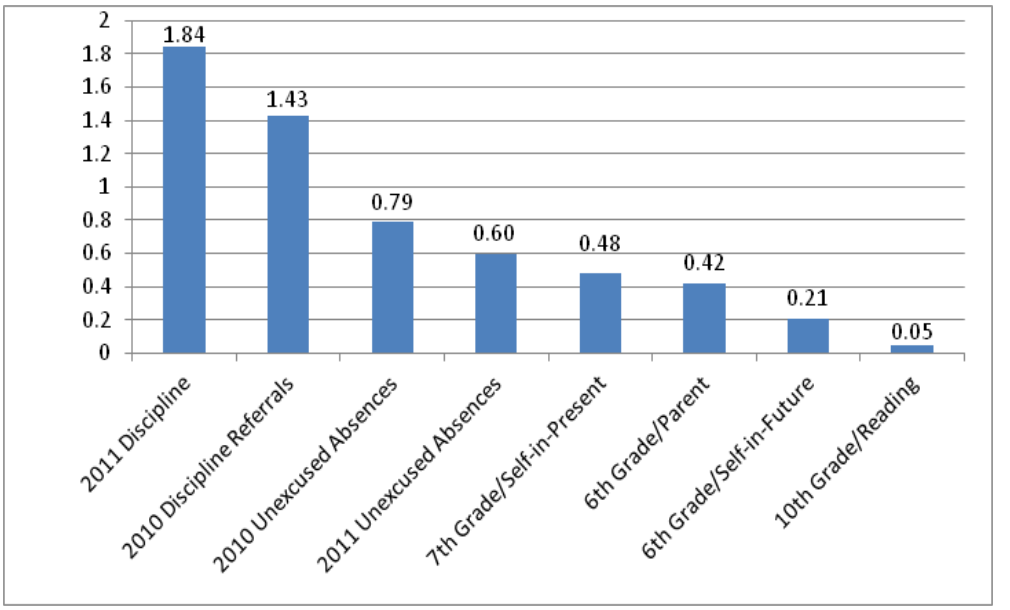

Figure 1. Effect Sizes of Significantly Different Scores for Students in the SBMP

Results from comparisons for the Self-in-Present subscale reported in Table 4 found that sixth grade students who were in the SBMP reported higher mean scores (M = 3.86, SD = .562) of their Self-in-Present when compared to sixth grade students who were not in the SBMP (M = 3.02, SD = .902), $t_{(22)}$ = -2.49, p = .047, d = 1.15. The magnitude of the effect size on this subscale suggests that the first year in the SBMP has the potential to have a major positive impact on how sixth graders view themselves.

Comparisons for tenth grade students found significant group differences on the Connectedness to Reading subscale. Results from comparisons for the Reading subscale found that first year students in the SBMP reported significantly higher mean perceptions (M = 3.10, SD = 1.82) of Connectedness to Reading than their tenth grade peers not in the SBMP (M = 2.94, SD = 1.02), $t_{(38)}$ = -.296, p = .021, d = 0.11. The magnitude of this effect size suggests that for tenth graders in their first year of the SBMP, their participation had positive but small effects on their sense of connection to reading.

Table 4. Significantly Different Mean Scores of Students New in SBMP and Control Group

	Students New to SBMP			Control Students	
	Subscale Mean	SD	*d*	Subscale Mean	SD
6th/Self-in-Present	3.82*	.56	1.15	3.02	.90
10th/Reading	3.10*	1.82	.11	2.94	1.02

*significant at $p \leq .05$

Discussion

The study was designed to investigate how participation in a SBMP impacts children's behavioral and social outcomes. Specifically, the study examined outcomes for 6th–10th grade students who participated in a SBMP to determine if they had fewer absences, fewer discipline referrals, and greater sense of connectedness than students who did not participate in a SBMP. The study also sought to examine the effects for students who were in their first year of participation in the SBMP.

Previous research suggests that students involved in SBMPs may receive some benefits from their participation, but these benefits may be limited (Herrera, 2004). However, findings from this study revealed students' participation in a SBMP was related to better school attendance and fewer behavioral problems across all grade levels. Furthermore, sixth graders in the SBMP reported a stronger sense of connectedness on nine of the 10 MAC subscales (Neighborhood, Friends, Parents, School, Peers, Teachers, Reading, Present Self, and Future Self). Sixth graders who were new to the SBMP reported a stronger sense of connectedness to Present Self. Seventh graders in the SBMP reported a stronger sense of connectedness on nine of the 10 MAC subscales (Friends, Parents, Siblings, School, Peers, Teachers, Reading, Present Self, and Future Self). Eighth graders in the SBMP reported a stronger sense of connectedness on six of the MAC subscales (Neighborhood, Friends, School, Peers, Reading, and Present Self). Ninth graders reported a stronger sense of Connectedness to Friends and Reading while 10th graders in the SBMP reported a stronger sense of Connectedness to Present Self and Reading. Tenth graders who were new to the SBMP also reported a stronger sense of Connectedness to Reading than students not in a SBMP.

Improved Behavioral Outcomes

Reduced School Absences

The results from this study indicate that students who participate in a SBMP have significantly fewer unexcused absences from school than students who do not participate in a SBMP. The moderate to large effect sizes associated with this finding are important and suggest that participation in the SBMP can help to reduce the number of students' absences from school. This is particularly noteworthy in light of the devastating consequences that have been linked to school absenteeism. For example, in a review of the research, Kearney (2008) found that unexcused absences from school are "a key risk factor for violence, injury, substance use, psychiatric disorders, and economic deprivation" (p. 451). Furthermore, "youths with chronic school absenteeism and school

refusal behavior are at risk for delinquency and school dropout in adolescence and various economic, psychiatric, social, and marital problems in adulthood" (Kearney, 2008, p. 464). Given the gravity of the negative outcomes linked to excessive school absence, it is encouraging that the data from this study indicate that participation in a SBMP can have a major positive impact on the reduction of students' absences from school.

Fewer Discipline Referrals

The results from this study indicate that students who participate in a SBMP have significantly fewer discipline referrals than students who do not participate in a SBMP. Furthermore, the very large effect size of this finding suggests that participation in a SBMP is likely to make a significant difference in reducing the number of students' discipline referrals.

This finding is a critical outcome on two fronts. First, from the schools' perspective, students' disruptive behavior is one of the highest ranked problems identified by teachers across the country (Skiba & Sprague, 2008; Utley, Kozleski, Smith, & Draper, 2002). When disruptive behavior occurs, a teacher must take time away from instruction and/or preparation to make an Office Discipline Referral (ODR), defined as "an event in which (a) a student engaged in a behavior that violated a rule/social norm in the school, (b) a problem behavior was observed by a member of the school staff, and (c) the event resulted in a consequence delivered by administrative staff who produced a permanent (written) product defining the whole event" (Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000, p. 96). Thus, when students engage in disruptive behavior, they interrupt the teacher's ability to teach as well as their own and other students' opportunities to learn. Lassen, Steele, and Sailor (2006) found that higher rates of ODRs and suspensions are correlated with lower scores on academic assessments across grade levels. Thus, the findings from this study indicate that schools can use a SBMP as an effective, robust approach to reducing the number of ODRs which, in turn, may provide teachers with more instructional time and improve learning for all students.

Second, reducing the disruptive behavior that leads to ODRs may impact the lives of youth both in and out of school. For example, research suggests that a student with 10 or more ODRs within a given school year is seriously at risk for school attendance problems, school failure, delinquency, and drug and alcohol use (Sprague et al., 2001; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey 1995). Furthermore, the literature clearly demonstrates repeated positive correlations between disruptive school behavior and crime, delinquency, alcohol and other drug use, and other forms of serious misconduct in the larger community (Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004). Thus, it is possible that the development of

a SBMP may support a decrease in disruptive behaviors in schools, decrease the number of ODRs, and impact youths' behaviors out of school as well.

Improved Social Outcomes

For the past 15 years, researchers have explored various aspects of adolescents' social connectedness and attempted to identify the factors that support healthy personal development. One of the key findings in this area is that connectedness to school was found to be one of the strongest predictors of adolescent health and reduced risk-taking behaviors (Resnick & Bearman, 1997).

This study examined the differences in self-reported connectedness between students who participated in a SBMP and those who did not. The data suggest that the participants in the SBMP had significantly stronger perceptions of Connectedness to Parents (6th graders), the Future (6th graders), the Present (7th graders), and Reading (10th graders). For participants in their first year of the SBMP, students had significantly stronger perceptions of Connectedness to the Present (6th graders) and Reading (10th graders).

Increased Connectedness for SBMP Participants

Connectedness is defined as the "outward expression of positive feelings and the seeking of support from people and places" (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2). It involves active demonstrations of positive feelings and proximity-seeking behaviors reflecting links to people (e.g., parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and peers) and to places (e.g., school and neighborhood; Karcher, 2012). This sense of connectedness "is not dependent on an internal personal trait, but is something that can be changed, improved, nurtured" (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 3), and in a very real way, this critical aspect of the development of all young people is exactly what mentors in the SBMP do with students every day (Karcher, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

In this study, almost all grade levels of students in the SBMP reported higher scores on the Connectedness to Self-in-Present subscale. This subscale is based on Kohut's self-development model and Erikson's model of identity development (Karcher, 2005). Kohut's self-development model advocated that self-esteem and connectedness are facilitated through relationships with others and that children need caregivers who celebrate and admire them (Kohut, 1979). The Self-in-Present subscale includes a self-esteem component as it is fostered by experiences in current relationships. Increases in scores on this scale suggest that almost all participants in the SBMP are benefiting emotionally from the close relationships that they have developed with their mentors. Seventh grade students reported significantly more positive perceptions of their

current selves than students in the control group. The theory of connectedness suggests that these students may have higher self-awareness of their skills and talents and perceive themselves as being a likeable person.

The Connectedness to Self-in-Future subscale measures how students see themselves in the future. Student in Grades 6 and 7 who participated in the SBMP had higher scores on this subscale, suggesting a stronger sense of purpose and development of ambitions than students in the control group. This was especially the case for 6th graders, for whom the result was significantly different with an effect size of .21. It is plausible that students' relationship with Thrive's program mentors contributed to students' optimism about the future.

Tenth graders reported significantly higher scores on the Connectedness to Reading subscale. Karcher (2005) developed this subscale based on Winnicot's (1974) importance of the "capacity to be alone." Winnicot stated that attachment disruptions can affect the development of one's ability to play alone, leaving one feeling anxious and lonely. In this study, 10th grade participants in the SBMP reported significantly higher scores than control students. These perceptions of security in being alone indicate the ability "to rest contented without external stimuli" (Winnicot, 1974, p. 32). It is possible that relationships built with mentors over the school year led to students' feeling more secure in being alone and able to derive more enjoyment from the world of reading. Students' connectedness to reading may also increase students' ability to access academic content and experience academic success. While this finding was statistically significant, the effect size was negligible, suggesting the treatment had positive but small effects.

Increased Connectedness for First-Year SBMP Participants

Previous research has suggested that most of the benefits of SBMP are not seen until after one year of meeting (e.g., Grossman & Johnson, 1999; Lee & Cramond, 1999). In fact, these studies indicate that programs are likely to see next to no change in students who participate in SBMP for matches starting and ending during a single school year.

However, the current study found that for students new to the SBMP, there was a significant difference for 6th graders who were mentored versus 6th grade control students on the Connected to Self-in-Present subscale. This subscale measures self-esteem as fostered by current relationships and showed a striking difference in terms of how new 6th graders in the SBMP saw their present selves. Increases in scores on this scale suggest that first-year students in the SBMP are benefiting emotionally from the close relationships that they have developed with their mentors.

The effect size was very large for this finding, indicating that participation in the SBMP has the potential to have a major positive impact on how 6th graders

view themselves. This is a critical finding in light of the vast developmental, academic, and social challenges faced by middle school students today. The data from this study indicate that not only can measurable effects of SBMP be found in the first year of participation, but these effects may be very large for students navigating the challenges of 6th grade.

Limitations of Research Findings

Results from this study should be interpreted in consideration of the quasi-experimental approach used to investigate the treatment effects of the school-based mentoring program. Although students were not randomly assigned to treatment and control group conditions, every effort was made to match control and treatment group students on factors (i.e., grade level, gender) that might have influenced student behavior, absences, social interactions, and connectedness to their school other than the school-based mentoring program. However, despite efforts to match control and treatment group students, there were still distinct differences between comparison groups with respect to ethnic composition and socioeconomic status which may limit generalizability.

Recommendations for Practice and Further Research

As our nation works to increase academic achievement for all students, the findings from this study can provide a ray of hope for parents, teachers, school leaders, and community members looking for effective approaches to support student success. The results of this study provide practical insights as to the impacts made by a SBMP. The evidence indicates that the careful development of SBMP as part of an integrated suite of strategies and services has the potential to increase student attendance, reduce discipline referrals, increase students' sense of connectedness, and particularly support the growth and development of students in 6th and 7th grades.

Previous research (Kearney, 2008) has suggested that assigning adult mentors to youths at risk for prematurely leaving school and employing school-based responses to attendance problems can be particularly effective in increasing student attendance (Kearney & Hugelshofer, 2000; Reid, 2007; Scott & Friedli, 2002). The current study provides further evidence for this recommendation as students in the SBMP had significantly better attendance than did students in the control group. This study also provides additional strong evidence for the effect of mentoring to significantly reduce students' discipline referrals (ODRs). Given the elevated levels of risk associated with high rates of absenteeism and disruptive behavior, this study indicates that SMBPs can make a difference in the lives of at-risk students. The findings of this study also support previous research that has suggested that mentors should receive specific

training regarding ways to support students' attendance and positive classroom behaviors (Reid, 2007) with particular emphasis placed on ways to help students build a strong sense of connectedness to self in the present and the future.

Given that connectedness predicts or correlates to so many other positive behaviors and outcomes, experts suggest that this construct can serve as a reliable indicator of how students are developing during their participation in the SBMP and how well positioned they will be for future successes and struggles (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The data from this study suggest that school-based mentoring support may be most important for students in 6th and 7th grades, as these two groups showed the most increases across the 10 domains of connectedness when compared with students in the control group. Further research is recommended to determine *how* participation in a SBMP impacts students' sense of connectedness.

Finally, the evidence in from this study suggests that well-designed and managed SBMPs can make a difference in the lives of students, even in the first year of participation. These findings bring hope and provide helpful guidance to those who are dedicated to providing high-quality, one-on-one mentoring for students and fostering their academic and lifelong personal success.

In conclusion, it is critical that SBMPs continue to increase the quality of their programs by basing their development on evidence-based practice. This effort will require concurrent attention to both existing research findings as well as "legislative and policy priorities, organizational resources and mission, and the relative cost-effectiveness of other available services and supports" (Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010, p. 16). Future research also needs to include longitudinal studies to identify the processes at work in SBMPs, such as the role of youth and mentor characteristics, match longevity, relationship quality, and long-term outcomes for children (Wheeler et al., 2010).

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Book Review: Promising Practices for Fathers' Involvement in Children's Education

Gilda Martinez-Alba

Key Words: book review, fathers, involvement, engagement, schools, home, education, dads, promising practices, global perspectives

Parental involvement at home and at school is very important in helping children succeed in school. This can look different from home to home, city to city, state to state, and certainly from country to country. In particular, fathers' roles in raising children can be vastly different depending on the cultural norms where they live, their work status, their need to help based on the mother's (or extended family's, caregiver's, etc.) availability, the mother's willingness to be open to the father's help, and time permitting.

Research already exists on fathers' involvement in their children's lives, yet not as much exists related to their involvement in schools, though it is growing (Abel, 2012; McBride, Dyer, & Laxman, 2013; Terriquez, 2013). The book *Promising Practices for Fathers' Involvement in Children's Education*, edited by Hsiu-Zu Ho and Diana Hiatt-Michael (2013), provides an overview of studies about fathers' involvement in children's education from numerous places around the globe. The various chapters are written by authors from different countries, making this a captivating volume and adding to our knowledge a wide range of perspectives in one book.

The first chapter, written about fathers from the United States, discusses how fathers might be hesitant in school settings based on their own past negative experiences, or the high number of females working in schools, or the fact that they may have dropped out of school. The authors also discuss how gay fathers face obstacles of acceptance by school administrators or teachers. On a

more positive note, the chapter covers how Head Start programs, virtual visit programs with fathers in prison, and reading programs targeted to immigrant fathers motivate fathers to be more involved with their children.

Father involvement in Canada was examined in Chapter 2. Overall, father involvement has increased there. In a study of 1,000 families, fathers were engrossed in playing, bedtime routines, and going to sporting events; whereas, mothers were more involved in cooking, caring for sick children, and homework. The authors then summarized five other studies about father and mother involvement, which described specific ways fathers have become more proactive in their children's education.

Chapter 3 covered father involvement in students' education in Taiwan. Customarily, caring for children is done by mothers there. However, with the increasing number of women working, sharing tasks is becoming more accepted. A review of studies in this field was offered. Promising practices are forthcoming, such as government policies that allow fathers to have unpaid leave from work (up to two years when a child is born) and corporations or schools that provide daycare centers. Overall, parent involvement used to be seen as an intrusion; thus, this is a novel practice in Taiwanese culture.

Latino fathers in the United States and their involvement in their children's schooling were discussed in Chapter 4. Based on previous research, these fathers many times were thought of as not participating in their children's lives or as abusive and/or chauvinistic. More recent research has provided a more optimistic light, including Latino fathers being thought of as providing financial support, as loving, and as caregivers. In addition, they have been shown to value their role as a teacher and believe they are accountable for their children's education.

In Chapter 5, fathers' and teachers' perceptions about their partnership in secondary schools in Spain was reviewed. It was a good chapter to follow and compare to Chapter 4, since these were Latino fathers in Europe. Fathers in Spain are expected to help in raising children, including with school-related matters. Yet, work schedules that conflict with school schedules can make it difficult for fathers to participate in school activities, a barrier which was noted in previous chapters as well.

A cross-cultural perspective on father involvement in early childhood education in Turkey and the United States was provided in Chapter 6. More specifically, it provided an overview about what kindergarten teachers perceive father involvement as, the forms and rates of communication between fathers and teachers, and the roles of fathers in their young children's education. Overall, it appeared that low father involvement was an issue that needs to be addressed through professional development in both countries.

Chapter 7 moves to father and parent involvement across Africa. While acknowledging the diversity of Africa, the authors reported that, in general, African fathers value education, knowing it can help make for a better life. However, many children across Africa do not have fathers as a result of HIV, AIDS, famine, or war, or if they do have fathers, being able to feed the children comes as a first priority: "You don't eat school" (p. 122). Fortunately, the chapter ends with a section called "Hope for the Future" in which the authors discuss the African Fathers' Initiative: Room to Read, as well as other programs to help engage fathers in their children's education.

Chapter 8 goes over education and fatherhood in Argentina. It begins by sharing how fathers used to have the dominant role in the family, but as time has passed, there has been more of a balance between men's and women's roles, not just in their involvement in children's education, but overall. As a result, some of the programs or initiatives discussed involved fathers and mothers.

Father involvement in South Korea varies, as discussed in Chapter 9, from fathers who see their roles solely as financial supporters to fathers that want to be an important part of their children's lives. In addition, more women are working and going to school. As a result, it is believed that couples are having fewer children. To counteract this situation, grassroots movements are in place to aid with father involvement, such as father schools where fathers get to participate in a course that teaches them how to become involved.

The last chapter of the book was dedicated to predicting delinquency and academic outcomes for ethnic minority adolescents in the United States. It described how, when fathers are not present in their children's lives, the chances of the children living in poverty increase. Yet, if fathers spend quality time with their children, they can help prevent future criminal conduct in teenagers. Furthermore, positive relationships between fathers and their children had a positive influence on their scholastic results.

Interestingly, themes emerged showing similarities across the chapters and locales. For example, fathers believed they needed to support their children financially. Fathers also set expectations for their children, such as the importance of school attendance, getting good grades, and preparing for future professions. Fathers were beginning to help more with homework. Plus, they were collaborating with teachers to share challenges they faced. Conversely, some teachers commented that fathers did not regularly attend school functions, including parent–teacher conferences. As a result, even if the fathers were involved with their children's education, it was perceived by the teachers that they were not.

Programs for fathers are still developing, and the authors of these chapters urge them to continue expanding. The authors also noted that more research in this area is needed, such as more mixed method studies with immigrant

fathers, fathers in prison, or fathers in the military. Something to consider when planning research projects involving immigrant fathers is that, for example, Latino or African families come from various countries; when the groups are discussed as a whole it is impossible to differentiate their countries of origin and corresponding cultures. More specificity would be beneficial when conducting studies and reporting them.

Overall, this book was written in a very clear manner, with each chapter bringing in a different perspective from a different country or continent from a variety of authors, making it a thought-provoking read. This book would be a great fit for a workshop or book club to help teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and other educators learn various ways that are in place to help promote father involvement and why fathers might respond (or not respond) to certain methods.

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