Culturally Responsive and Asset-Based Strategies for Family Engagement in Odds-Beating Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Several decades of research has generated a near-consensus on the link between positive student outcomes and effective engagement between educators and families. Despite the widespread acknowledgement of this connection, many educators continue to struggle to engage families in ways that are both culturally responsive and sensitive to power dynamics. Though barriers to family engagement have been explored in depth, little research exists about what family engagement looks like in schools with above-predicted student outcomes. This research offers insight into family engagement through two case studies of secondary schools in New York State—chosen for study for their odds-beating graduation outcomes. Educators in these schools share in common the strategies of drawing on local resources and engaging family members in culturally responsive and collaborative ways with particular sensitivities to power imbalances. These findings hold implications with regard to how barriers to family engagement may be overcome in demographically diverse contexts with histories of better graduation outcomes.

Key Words: cultural responsiveness, family engagement, secondary schools

Introduction

Emphasis on nurturing relationships between school employees (e.g., principals, teachers, support staff) and family members[1] has long been seen as an

important factor affecting student academic outcomes and has been associated with positive social/emotional effects as well (Epstein et al., 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Yet, especially at the secondary level and in more economically disadvantaged and culturally and linguistically diverse contexts, family members are often treated as clients rather than as collaborative participants in the education of their adolescent family members (Ishimaru, 2014). Such an approach to family engagement takes for granted cultural norms and the imperative for sensitivity to the inequities in power relations between educators and family members from diverse backgrounds (Cooper, 2009a; Fine, 1993; Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

To address this issue, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) took a more egalitarian approach to family–school relations than its predecessor: the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001). ESSA calls for the sharing of power between families and those who educate their children with the term parent "engagement" (ESSA, 2015, §1010) preferred over parent "involvement" (NCLB, 2001, §1116). This shift indicates an imperative for educators to move beyond a primarily one-way and disciplinary-focused communication outreach pattern with family members to a more reciprocal approach. This alternative emphasizes collaboration and includes the active pursuit of sharing decision making with family members who may be experiencing adversity and/or social exclusion. Likewise, this shift implicates the need to reconsider traditional school-sanctioned events as the primary vehicle for engagement and instead redouble efforts to forge relationships through and with other community organizations to meet families where they are.

Although this vision for family engagement as set forth in ESSA is a progressive step and rooted in growing evidence of its efficacy to improve outcomes for youth (Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2018), ESSA contains few details regarding how this goal is to be accomplished and by whom (Epstein, Jung, & Sheldon, 2019). Unsurprisingly, research has shown that many educators struggle in their efforts to engage with family members (Cooper, 2009b; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). While the barriers to family engagement have been studied extensively (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Fine, 1993; Lightfoot, 2004), less abundant are detailed accounts of how educators approach engaging families in schools beating the odds to obtain positive student achievement outcomes.

The larger study in which this one is embedded sought to identify the processes and practices associated with above-predicted student outcomes in terms of graduation rates among different populations of students (economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic/Latino, English language learners). This embedded study focused on two odds-beating schools that showed

evidence of having centered their attention on engaging families (Auerbach, 2010). Though dissimilar in their demographic characteristics and challenges faced, both schools demonstrated how educators engaged families in ways which are sensitive to context and family diversity.

Related Literature

Cultural Responsiveness and Parent and Family Engagement

Family engagement has been linked to numerous positive outcomes, including improved academic achievement, attendance, homework completion, and student motivation, as well as lower rates of dropout and truancy (Epstein et al., 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, involving family members in their children's schooling is more than a means to improve academic performance; it is also a prerequisite to democratizing schools and promoting community empowerment (Apple & Beane, 2007; Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Malczyk & Lawson, 2019). Though family engagement is widely acknowledged by school leaders and policymakers as having a positive influence on youth, many educators struggle to actively involve families in ways that are culturally responsive and community-sensitive (Cooper, 2009b).

Because it can take many forms, definitions of family engagement can vary widely. Epstein's (1995; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) six-part typology of involvement—which includes parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community—remains an influential model for understanding the ways families become involved in their children's education. Building on Epstein's typology, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) argue the two most significant factors in family members' involvement are role construction and sense of self-efficacy; the first factor refers to family members' conceptions about their place in their children's schooling, and the second refers to the belief among family members that their involvement will positively affect outcomes. Family members who both believe their role is to be involved in their children's education and that their involvement will produce positive effects are more likely to develop positive relationships with educators and become engaged with the school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Kim, Sheridan, Kwon, & Koziol, 2013; Minke, Sheridan, Kim, Ryoo, & Koziol, 2014), although Park and Holloway (2018) found that parents may also become involved to compensate for what they see as deficiencies at school.

Despite their influence, these frameworks have been criticized for their overly individualistic and school-centric approaches which can be problematic

when school values and standards coincide with those of dominant groups while dismissing others (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). Such approaches risk neglecting the power imbalances between school staff and families as well as perpetuating the historical exclusion of minority families and those from lower- and working-class backgrounds (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Thus, family members' decisions to become involved and the forms that involvement take are heavily influenced by "mediating" elements such as family and school demographics and broader social, historical, and cultural factors (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Additional individual factors can restrict and obstruct family involvement including family members' poor relationships with individual teachers and staff, family members' negative memories of their own experiences in school, and family members' responses to their children's behavioral and academic difficulties (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Mosle & Patel, 2012; Peña, 2010).

Even when educators agree on the importance of family involvement and make attempts to mitigate barriers, they may have limited conceptualizations of what comprises involvement (Deplanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Lawson, 2003; Young, Austin, & Growe, 2013). Because educators may narrowly define involvement as formal participation in school-related activities, the efforts of family members who are active in their children's education outside of schools may go unrecognized (Cooper, 2009a; Peña, 2010; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005).

These challenges to involvement can be harder to overcome for working-class families, racial/ethnic minorities, and immigrant families (terms which often overlap) given the history of marginalization suffered by these groups (Cooper, 2009a; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lightfoot, 1978). Educators' perceptions of family involvement often rest on middle-class, White norms that neglect forms of caring evident among family members of different racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds (Cooper, 2009a). Because complying with schooling demands may be viewed as a proper form of involvement, African American families seeking to rectify the legacy of educational discrimination may be viewed as troublesome or unwilling to participate in their children's schooling (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lightfoot, 2004). Furthermore, those from the middle- and upper-middle classes may possess economic resources and a more flexible work schedule that allows them to comply with school expectations (Brantlinger, 2003; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999) as well as the social and cultural capital which provides them with the knowledge and power to navigate social institutions such as schools (Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999) while leveraging their cultural capital and economic privilege to influence schools through demands for academic tracking and the placement of

their children in accelerated programs (Brantlinger, 2003; McGrath & Kuril-off, 1999; Useem, 1992). Lareau (1989) argues that working-class parents may draw a separation between home and school, whereas those from middle- and upper-middle-class households see the home as an extension of school. These differing forms of socialization mean that middle-class parents prepare their children for schooling in ways which are conducive to the forms of learning expected of them by teachers, while those from lower classes struggle to participate in their children's education in ways sanctioned by the school (Gee, 2012; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 1989).

While immigrant and refugee students benefit from their families' involvement in school, their families' participation in schooling is often less visible than those of native-born parents (Turney & Kao, 2009). This disparity is in part due to immigrant and refugee families' developing English proficiency and unfamiliarity with American school norms as well as differences in culturally defined notions of the roles and responsibilities of family members in their children's education (García Coll et al., 2002; Guo, 2010; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Pérez Carreón et al., 2005). Valdés's (1996) ethnography, for instance, demonstrates how Mexican immigrant parents in the U.S. understand their roles as providing the basic necessities for their children to be successful in school, not as co-participants along with teachers and school staff in their children's education.

Such research demonstrates an unfortunate propagation of the idea that suboptimal family involvement lies in deficiencies within the family or, more broadly, within the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic group of which the family is part (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Lightfoot, 2004; Valencia & Black, 2002). This is despite the copious research demonstrating that these families highly value education and want to be involved in their children's education (Cooper, 2009a; Poza, Brooks, & Valdés, 2014; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Ramirez, 2003).

Family Partnership Versus Family Involvement

Various scholars have emphasized the need to move from a focus on family involvement to a partnership based on engagement. To this end, scholars have noted the importance of cultural responsiveness, raising awareness around the need to partner with parents and families and take into account different cultural norms (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Partnerships, as defined by Auerbach (2010), are "mutually respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups that value relationship building, dialogue, and power sharing as part of socially just, democratic schools" (p. 729). For partnerships to be authentic and impactful, some researchers have proposed that educators move

beyond a service model that sees family members as clients and instead forge genuine partnerships in which power is shared between educators and families with recognition that families participate in their children's educations in highly varied ways (Auerbach, 2010; Epstein et al., 2019). Using this approach, families play an active and participatory role in their children's education, and those roles are negotiated (i.e., not solely defined by school staff) and extend beyond the school walls (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Such family partnerships require building trust through the creation of an inviting, welcoming school climate as well as through effective communications regarding specific ways in which families can be involved in their child's experience inside and outside of school (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Chhuon et al., 2008). Communications are culturally responsive, grounded in community norms, and reinforce the notion that the involvement of all families is highly valued (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Lewis, Kim, & Bey, 2011). The intent of family involvement is expansive, going beyond simply improving student academic performance to include the fostering of social justice, democratic participation, and community empowerment (Apple & Beane, 2007; Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Warren et al., 2009). Educators who develop authentic partnerships with families also seek to understand the particular social, economic, and physical needs of families that can constrain involvement (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitvanichcha, 2001; Treviño, 2004).

In sum, numerous challenges face educators who seek to move beyond a model of parent participation or involvement which treats families as clients who must accommodate to the expectations of the school to a model of engagement in which families take an active role in their children's education (Cooper, 2009b; Fine, 1993; Ishimaru, 2014). As the research reviewed here illustrates, for impactful and inclusive family engagement to occur, educators must seek to engage family members in ways which are culturally responsive and sensitive to the inequality in power relations often experienced by lower income families, immigrants and refugees, and families of color (Cooper, 2009a; Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Taking into account both the challenges and potential pathways to effective parent and family engagement, we introduce the research questions guiding this study: How do odds-beating educators engage family members in their children's educational experience? What barriers obstruct parent and family engagement, and how are such barriers overcome?

Methods

This study is part of a larger, mixed method multiple case study conducted in the 2017–18 school year as part of a public–private research practice

partnership (called NYKids) housed in the University at Albany's School of Education. The larger study examined secondary schools that are considered odds-beating because a number of student subgroups graduate at above predicted rates and this trend is consistent over time. In New York State, students' mastery of the state's learning standards is assessed using the New York State Regents Examinations. In order to earn a high school diploma, a student must earn a minimum of 22 credits allocated across specified sets of courses and pass at least five Regents Examinations. Students meeting these minimum requirements receive a Regents diploma. A subset of high school graduates who pass three additional Regents Examinations, often requiring completion of more advanced coursework, receive an Advanced Regents diploma.

The graduation rates used to identify odds-beating schools in this study were the percentages of a ninth grade cohort that earned a Regents diploma or an Advanced Regents diploma either four or five years later. The rates at which graduates earn Regents or Advanced Regents diplomas were obtained from the New York State Department of Education's Graduation Rate Database for 2014–15 and 2015–16. Regents' diploma rates were obtained for three successive cohorts of ninth graders—2010, 2011, and 2012. The overall performance gap for each school was calculated by averaging standardized Regents or Advanced Regents diploma gaps (or z-scores) across the regression analyses. Schools with average scores between +/-0.30 were classified as "typically performing," with 280 schools identified outside of New York City (NYC). The 116 schools with average scores over 0.8 were classified as "odds beating," of which 40 were located outside of NYC.

Next, considering both size of school and geographic location, seven "odds-beating" secondary schools were identified for recruitment for consistently achieving statistically significant better rates of graduation (> .5 z score as seen on Table 1), and three "typically performing" high schools were identified for recruitment for consistently achieving predicted to slightly below predicted rates of graduation (-0.35 – 0.10). Odds-beaters were oversampled to yield more depth of understanding of potential promising practices. From prior studies, the typically performing sample (rather than lower performing schools that undergo state interventions) as well as the sample size of three schools was judged to provide opportunities for triangulation and likely provide an adequate data set for comparison purposes.

For the current embedded study, two odds-beating schools where efforts for parent and family engagement were of particular interest were selected for deeper analysis. As seen in Table 1, Freeport (identified with consent[2]) is a relatively large, suburban school with a percentage of students identified as economically disadvantaged and/or culturally or linguistically diverse greater

than the state average. Sherburne-Earlville (identified with consent[3]) serves a largely White population of students at close to the state average rates of economic disadvantage, similar to many of their rural[4] school peers.

Table 1. Sample Schools

School	z-Score	Grade Span	Urbanicity	% Econ. Disadvantage[5]	% ELL	% Hispanic/ Latino	% Black/ African American	Per Pupil Expenditures[6]
Freeport	0.82	9–12	Suburban	66	16	64	29	$22,314
Sherburne-Earlville	0.85	9–12	Rural	51	0	1	1	$22,507
State Averages	N/A	N/A	N/A	55	9	26	17	$23,361

Data Collection

Once schools were identified based upon student graduation outcomes, a recruitment protocol was followed and school site visits arranged. A team of up to three people (led by a university faculty member/researcher and assisted by doctoral students, all certified by the Institutional Review Board for human subjects research) mined data available on school websites and then visited the schools to conduct interviews and focus groups with the principal, teachers, support staff, and district leaders to explore policies, processes, and practices at the classroom, school, and district levels. Interviews and focus groups were usually one hour in length, were audiotaped, and a record was kept of responses using a laptop computer so that the record would be accurate and responses could be analyzed later. Audio files were transcribed by doctoral students and checked for accuracy by a research staff employee. Participant names were stripped from the files, and these files were then stored on the university's password-protected server. For this embedded study, we examined two school observation tour memos, 26 interviews and focus groups, and 22 hard copy documents, as well as a large number of electronic files from the web and two interpretive memos—one for each school. The total number of participants from whom data were collected was 63.

Data Analysis

In the larger study, researchers engaged in both inductive and deductive cross-case analysis and used methods of triangulation (source and researcher)

and member checking (i.e., confirmation with participants) to verify their findings and interpretations (Maxwell, 2013). This embedded analysis was guided by the research questions as articulated above and also included the use of both deductive and inductive methods of analysis.

Using a qualitative software program, data were initially coded into a priori categories (relationships with parents being one set of code categories) generated from the larger study's literature review. Using typical case study procedures (Yin, 2014), researchers crafted case studies after all data were coded, code reports generated, and patterns identified using such tools as matrices (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). These case studies were shared with principals and superintendents in a process of member checking, at which time any inaccuracies identified were resolved.

Family engagement emerged as a salient theme in the performance of the odds-beating schools in this study as participants repeatedly noted the importance of developing positive relationships with families. As demonstrated below, odds-beating staff and educators at both schools endeavored to include family members in the education of their children and sought to not only increase family presence in their school, but also to empower families to take part in the education of their children in a variety of ways (Auerbach, 2010; Cooper, 2009a). In both contexts, the need to utilize culturally responsive and community-sensitive approaches to engagement were readily apparent. The following sections present evidence collected at two odds-beating secondary schools with a focus on the strategies which educators and staff used to overcome barriers to effective family engagement.

Culturally Responsive Forms of Family Engagement in Two Contexts

Sherburne-Earlville High School

Approximately 4,000 people live in the village of Sherburne. Although some students live in the village, just down the hill from the district's multiacre perch, many students live too far to walk or bike to school; they must endure hour-long or longer bus rides to arrive at the schools' doors. The property that now serves as home for the complex of school buildings once was a family farm, and dairy farming has provided traditional employment options in the area. However, this agricultural sector has shrunk over the past several decades, and in response, residents have actively pursued new opportunities. In recent years, for example, businesses such as a nationally distributed yogurt manufacturer (located only a dozen miles away), as well as small niche companies like

organic beef and alpaca farms, have presented viable new employment options for Sherburne-Earlville's graduates.

Despite its high rates of achievement, Sherburne-Earlville is beset with numerous challenges which make it difficult to effectively engage family members. Although just over half of Sherburne-Earlville's students are considered "economically disadvantaged," this number—as in many other rural communities across the state—is likely underreported and has been growing along with increased rates of mental health needs and substance abuse issues among families. Providing adequate services to students and their families is a logistical and geographical challenge for educators at Sherburne-Earlville. As the superintendent explained:

> Mental health and poverty are big issues for the district. Attendance is one of the important indicators. So we're working on attendance, including retention, and doing home visits, working with parents, connecting with community agencies to get help with chronically absent kids.

In addition, the rural environment of Sherburne-Earlville presents challenges to families as a lack of steady employment has caused increasing levels of transience. Visible needs in students often signal family stress including recurrent transitions, in particular changing residences in concert with parents' employment searches. School leaders described what they called "The Route 12 shuffle," named for the main thoroughfare between Binghamton and Utica, along which students are "moving constantly," said the principal. The challenges associated with transience and poverty have required district and school leaders to adjust resources to ensure that students are receiving the social, emotional, and academic supports necessary to succeed. Furthermore, educators at Sherburne-Earlville have to balance the needs of youth and families who seek opportunities beyond the community and those with concerns that their children will abandon them and their community post-graduation. As the principal explained, "[It's] trying to change that mindset that this [high school] is a ticket out; this [high school] is an investment to help you and give you more options going forward."

Amidst these challenges, educators at Sherburne-Earlville seek to engage families in ways which are both culturally responsive to their local community and sensitive to local norms and priorities. For example, educators first attended to the high-priority economic and social needs which could be obstructing the capacity of family members to fully participate in their children's school experience. As the superintendent commented:

> [T]here are a number of things in place to support our families in poverty so that basic needs are met because, as you know, if their basic needs

aren't met, then they're not going to come to school, and that's not going to be their fault. But if they come to school, and they have clothes, and they ate the night before, then it's half the battle right there.

These educators seek not only to understand the social and economic obstacles faced by adolescents and their families, but often described feeling that it was their responsibility to ameliorate these issues as well. As the principal of Sherburne-Earlville put it, "You're trying to meet the needs of the whole family and not just the student." Numerous initiatives were aimed at collectively responding to the economic deprivation experienced by families they served. Underlying these efforts was the recognition that parents could not actively engage with their child's education when beset by more pressing needs (Lopez et al., 2001). The principal described the effort made by educators to address poverty in their district:

> Well an email goes out, "What can we do for these students?" You know, everyone rises to the occasion, and there was a fundraiser. Personally, I'll put money into a student's account to meet their needs. For another family, we found out that they don't have any food, so we have a backpack program that people donate food and personal hygiene items to. We put another email out, "Hey things are running low, and we have a family in need." And I'll go out and buy a few bags of groceries, and other people will do the same. Local businesses help out immensely.

Thus, in recognizing the deleterious effect that such deprivation could have on engagement and success in school, educators and staff at Sherburne-Earlville worked to address the economic needs of students and their families as a prerequisite to engaging them in educational activities.

Despite the strained relationship between some families and the school, educators and school leaders frequently commented on the central role that the school played for community members. "I know that the school tends to be really a hub of our community," explained the superintendent, "If you come up here, it's well-kept, it's beautiful, it's really a source of pride for our community." Indeed, an intimate and positive relationship with the surrounding community was frequently described by participants as an important factor in engaging family members (Warren et al., 2009). "We rely on the old adage: it takes a village to raise a family," said the principal. He continued, "Well it takes a community for a school and the students to be successful." The stable and consistent presence of veteran educators and leaders provided parents with an added level of comfort and familiarity which helped promote positive relationships with families. For the superintendent of Sherburne-Earlville, the development of "long-lasting relationships" between community members and

school staff was one of the primary reasons for the high level of support the district has received from the community.

Many staff members and educators at Sherburne-Earlville had close ties with the surrounding community and either grew up or currently resided there. As a teacher and parent in the community stated, "Everybody in the district, everybody in the community has ties to the school." These close ties, as several respondents explained, provided community members with a deep sense of interdependence and shared purpose, which gave them a collective sense of strength to overcome the economic and social adversity they faced. As another teacher and parent put it:

> Yes, there're going to be issues because of the economic depression and things that people will turn to. But I think what we're seeing is that there are people trying to fight that as well in different ways. I think what gives us an advantage in a rural area is the community sense of looking out for each other and trying to deal with it and keep those elements at bay as best as possible.

Such closeness also helped educators to forge positive relationships with families and provided informal opportunities to interact with families. As a teacher from Sherburne-Earlville explained, "When I talk to parents as a teacher, I know most of the parents that I'm talking to already." Described by many as the center of the community, the school provided a common space for everyone to come together. The superintendent commented, "When those lights go on at the stadium, people just show up…everybody comes to the school." Interactions outside of the school added a layer of comfort for family members with regard to in-school matters and provided educators with an insider's view to the needs and expectations of their students' families (Lawson, 2003; Peña, 2010). As a teacher from Sherburne-Earlville explained:

> When you have a lot of our teachers that live in the district, you get to know families. We're part of the community, we know each other, and so we feel comfortable.…If I don't know someone, it might be more difficult to try to and be able to communicate, but I know that, because I know that person, and we know each other well and know we have their best interest in mind, they listen to what we are saying.

School leaders and educators utilized these forms of community-based knowledge to respond to the particular needs and interests of family members and to communicate with them in ways which were responsive to local norms and priorities. Several educators, for example, described the need to engage students and families in ways which were meaningful to them. In Sherburne-Earlville, knowledge of the outdoors, hunting, and agriculture are

highly valued. Educators embraced this value and sought to develop it as a way to deepen their connections to students and to connect students to the community. As a teacher said, "When you show that genuine interest, and you're willing to be a part of their lives…we're involved in their lives, and you can't fake that." One teacher, for example, described how he put up photos of students' hunts and trophies they received. The most notable of these efforts, however, is the rebuilding of the agricultural science program, which had been eliminated in the 1990s. Reinstating this program had long been a priority for many families, students, and teachers, since Sherburne-Earlville has historically been an agricultural community. As the superintendent recounted, "We have [community] members saying, 'Here we are, an ag-related school. Where's the ag?'" Responding to such questions, school and district leaders have been adding agricultural courses and planned to hire a full-time instructor to teach those courses at the time of this study. Commenting on the recent addition of a hunting and wilderness course to the school's curriculum, the principal added, "We're constantly adjusting our course offerings to what they [students] are interested in." Taking notice of these student and family interests clearly communicated the message to families that local knowledge was valued by educators, and they took it seriously enough to adjust the curriculum and their staffing to prioritize it. Highlighting these commonalities created a more egalitarian relationship with families and avoided condescension and deficit perspectives that commonly hamper family engagement efforts (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). As one school leader noted, "You can't make [parents] feel less than;…you have to make them feel valued, that they're important, too—that what they're saying is meaningful."

Lastly, at Sherburne-Earlville, family engagement was viewed as a responsibility shared by all staff members. As a school leader from Sherburne-Earlville concisely put it, "Everybody communicates with families." Respondents frequently described a "team" approach to engaging families with the shared goal of looking out for students' well-being. This notion of collaboration was extended to the approach taken by educators towards relationships with families (Auerbach, 2010). As the principal commented, "We're referred to as the 'S-E family' and it is like family. There's ups and downs, but when things happen everyone pulls together, and we try to do the best for kids." Although educators at Sherburne-Earlville maintained that everyone was responsible for engaging family members, additional staff members were hired to spearhead efforts in engaging families and provide links between support staff and educators. Many at Sherburne-Earlville worked closely with local law enforcement, child protective services, and the department of social services to tackle the increasing prevalence of drug abuse in the community. Several respondents also

discussed the importance of the Attendance Advocate who worked closely with school leaders to conduct home visits for students with poor attendance. As one school leader described, the experience helped open her eyes to the conditions in which many of her students lived:

> I did, I think, over 20 home visits this summer, and I went out and said, "Hey, we have a new attendance policy," and so I chose my kids that had 50 absences or more last year. "Can I come out to your house, would it be okay if I brought you the policy—you could give me feedback on it, you could talk about it, make a plan?" So that was really, really import-ant, because I grew up in this community, but I didn't realize how some of my kids were living.

As evidenced by the numerous responses of educators, many of whom were also parents in the community, educators and Sherburne-Earlville had a close connection to the local community that they often leveraged to connect with families in frequent and informal contexts. Such connections were further strengthened by the willingness of educators to incorporate the meaningful elements of the local community in school curricula (Auerbach, 2010). Lastly, educators recognized the ways in which the mental health concerns and pover-ty faced by many students and their families could hamper school engagement and sought to ameliorate these conditions (Lopez et al., 2001; Treviño, 2004).

Freeport High School

While multiple generations of families have lived in the community and at-tended Freeport, the school and community is increasingly welcoming youth and families arriving in the United States from countries predominately in the Caribbean and Central America. In 2016–17, 16% of students were English Language Learners, and 64% were Hispanic. The superintendent reports that 20–25% of incoming ninth graders are immigrants. Some of the students ar-riving in Freeport are not only immigrants in a new country but are reuniting with family members they have not seen for many years or may be meeting for the first time. Other immigrant students may live in Freeport with extended family or friends rather than their immediate families. Some of these students and their families also regularly travel between the U.S. and their home coun-tries. These circumstances and others contribute to increased mobility and transience among Freeport students, some of whom may experience extended interruptions in their formal education. Providing an environment that allows these students to flourish is a major focus for educators at Freeport.

Many employees from the district and school described Freeport as a "gem." Situated among many affluent communities in western Long Island's Nassau

County, Freeport Union Free School District (UFSD) has a median household income of $60,043 compared to $102,044 across the county. Similarly, the poverty rate in the district is 13.5% compared to 6.1% across the county. In 2016–17, 66% of students at Freeport were considered economically disadvantaged. The disparities between Freeport and the surrounding school districts led many participants to comment on the ways in which their school was perceived by outsiders. One teacher explained, "When I say I work in Freeport, you get the stigma of 'it's poor' or 'it's violent.'" He continued, "I don't have that experience at all." In fact, many participants commented with pride about their successes amidst the challenges of educating a large number of immigrant students and the higher level of poverty. As one teacher put it, "Some of the other surrounding districts—the [gestures air quotes] 'better districts'—don't even have half of what we're giving our kids."

Establishing positive relationships with families was seen as a high priority at Freeport, and educators and staff made efforts to ensure that all families—regardless of cultural, linguistic, and class background—were provided opportunities to engage in the schooling process. Like Sherburne-Earlville, educators at Freeport sought to understand how the social and economic challenges faced by students and their families may create barriers to authentic engagement. Educators at Freeport worked not only to provide families with material resources to alleviate deprivation, but also to empower them through workshops and educational programs (Fine, 1993; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). For example, a program entitled Parent University provided formal education for parents who were seeking a GED as well as educational workshops developed using grant money from My Brother's Keeper. Such efforts were aimed at not only ameliorating the economic constraints many poor families experience, but also creating conditions which fostered empowerment among parents and family members (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

In many instances, a deeper understanding of family circumstances facilitated changes in school practices, contrasting with the assumption that it is family members who must accommodate school requirements (Auerbach, 2010). Staff and educators at Freeport, for example, ensured that family members would not be obstructed to participating in school events due to their work schedules. A support staff member at Freeport explained how they created a "Spanish-Speaking Parent Night" after they realized that family members of their English as a New Language (ENL) students struggled to attend meetings during the day due to their daunting work schedules. "We started off years ago, I want to say maybe 16 or 17 years ago, with like five parents that would show up [to the Spanish-speaking parent event held during the day]; now we have grown, and many, many of our parents have heard, and they do

see the benefits of coming," she said. Such accommodations reinforced the message that educators are willing to adjust to meet the needs of families rather than expecting them to conform to school norms (Cooper, 2009b; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

For educators at Freeport, communicating in Spanish was crucial to engage with their sizable Latin American population. To this end, staff ensured that bilingual staff members and translators were present during parent–teacher interactions, and all documents including report cards and the course catalog were translated. A transition meeting was held at Freeport in both English and Spanish to introduce new parents to the expectations, routines, and opportunities for students entering high school. With numerous Spanish-speaking staff members, family members at these schools felt more at ease and willing to participate on equal terms. "We don't force anybody to learn English," explained a support staff member. A Freeport social worker explained the importance of speaking Spanish to students' families: "In my case, because I speak the language, as soon as I start talking to them in Spanish, they just open up." By engaging family members using their native language rather than burdening students with translation duties, educators at Freeport avoided upsetting family dynamics and undermining parental authority (Orellana, 2006). Importantly, Spanish was not simply used as a lingua franca to communicate with family members; it was also utilized widely in academic settings through Freeport's robust bilingual program as well as Heritage Spanish and Spanish Language Arts classes taught to native speakers. This conveyed the message that English, while important, was not the only language appropriate for school settings and that students' native language was a valuable asset, not an obstacle to their academic success (Bartlett & García, 2011).

Similar to Sherburne-Earlville, Freeport educators worked collaboratively to engage with parents and family members and added additional staff to help lead the way in this endeavor. A Transition Coordinator, for instance, was hired to aid in helping students moving into the secondary level. Respondents credited her with establishing links between families, community service providers, and support staff at schools. Furthermore, by prioritizing the hiring of bilingual staff, Freeport ensured that Spanish-speaking families would never be excluded from school activities or denied the same level of comfort as those who spoke English. A support staff member elaborated on the importance of their Spanish-speaking staff members:

> And when they learn that they're able to call someone in the building who speaks their language, you can see, you can feel the relief in them, like, "Oh you're going to meet with my child?" In prior years they would have had to find a translator, a third person, and a lot gets lost in the

translation. So having us readily available on the phone or if they come in, a lot of pop-ins where they really need to talk to someone, and they come straight to Guidance.…Those parents, in particular, know they have a Spanish-speaking guidance counselor that they can speak with.

The collaborative and inclusive climate at Freeport was extended to their strategies of family engagement. Educators sought to engage family members on their own terms and work together with them to improve the academic performance and well-being of their children. Numerous participants used the word "team" when describing their approach to developing relationships with families. As a support staff member at Freeport concisely put it, "You've got to meet them where they are at." For example, educators and staff at Freeport worked closely with the surrounding community to collectively support their students, and many school and district leaders discussed the importance of maintaining relationships with community organizations, local businesses, political leaders, and religious institutions (Fine, 1993; Warren et al., 2009). The superintendent of Freeport schools maintained community support through active involvement and direct connections with local churches, the Chamber of Commerce, the surrounding colleges and universities, as well as other organizations such as the NAACP and a group called "Latino Leaders." These close ties with the surrounding community provided odds-beating educators with access to local resources as well as the insight necessary to interact with families in ways which were culturally responsive and community-based (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Educators at Freeport also worked to abandon narrow definitions of involvement in order to engage families in as many different ways as possible. Recognizing that not all families participate in their children's education in the same ways, staff members maintained the belief that families care about their children's education and want to be involved in it regardless of their presence in formal school settings (Peña, 2010; Pérez Carreón et al., 2005). They furthermore acknowledged that ways in which past negative experiences with schools could present obstacles to full engagement for families (DePlanty et al., 2007). These understandings provided an alternative to deficit language when describing engaging families and promoted the idea that educators must work to actively engage families in varied ways rather than presuming families should meet the expectations of the school (Auerbach, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2007). A district leader commented:

Our parents are very supportive. I've been here for, as I said, over 20 years, and I've seen differences in parents that come and go, but by and large, they are all very supportive of what we do. They care for their children. They want the best for their children. There are some parents who

are more vocal than others or some parents are more involved than the others. That doesn't mean that the parents that we don't see every day don't care for their kids. They do care very much for their kids. They may not be here every day, but whenever you ask them to do anything, they are there. They are involved.

School leaders at Freeport often spearheaded initiatives to generate trusting relationships between schools and families, and the stable and consistent presence of veteran educators and leaders at Freeport provided family members with an added level of comfort and familiarity. As the principal from Freeport put it, "I'm a familiar face." The principal also described the importance of mutual respect and trust in his approach to conversations with students' families. Recently implementing a policy where he would return all parents' phone calls the same day, he explained:

> You call me, you're going to get a phone call by the end of the day. I have a design where my secretaries know: "He will call you after 3:00." After 3:00 I can really think about what I want to say, how I want to go about it, and make sure that you get that proper respect.

This open channel of communication sent the message to families that their opinions were important and would be heard. "They have a voice," the principal explained before concluding, "I take every phone call with the same sense of urgency that they feel."

Implicit in the approaches taken by staff and educators at Freeport was the idea that a wide range of communication methods were needed to engage the families of their diverse student population (Auerbach, 2010). To ensure that Spanish-speaking family members would not be marginalized, Freeport staffed numerous bilingual educators and support staff members. These practices ultimately eschewed deficit language by affirming the belief all families value their children's education and wish to be engaged in it regardless of their relationship with the school (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Lastly, through collaborative efforts between their school and local agencies and institutions, educators at Freeport ensured that efforts to engage families would be grounded in the local context and supported through community resources.

Discussion

The two case studies described in this research provide important details as to how educators in odds-beating secondary schools approach parent and family engagement. Though quite different in their contexts and demographic

makeup, these examples show that family engagement can be responsive to local community contexts, foster egalitarian partnerships, and honor the value of a deep understanding of the conditions in which families live (see Figure 1). Such knowledge gives educators insight into the assets families offer as well as the obstacles they face in becoming engaged in their children's schooling, appropriate strategies to overcome these challenges, and a framework which avoids the pitfall of deficit explanations for any perceived lack of involvement on the part of families (Auerbach, 2010; Baquedano-López et al., 2013).
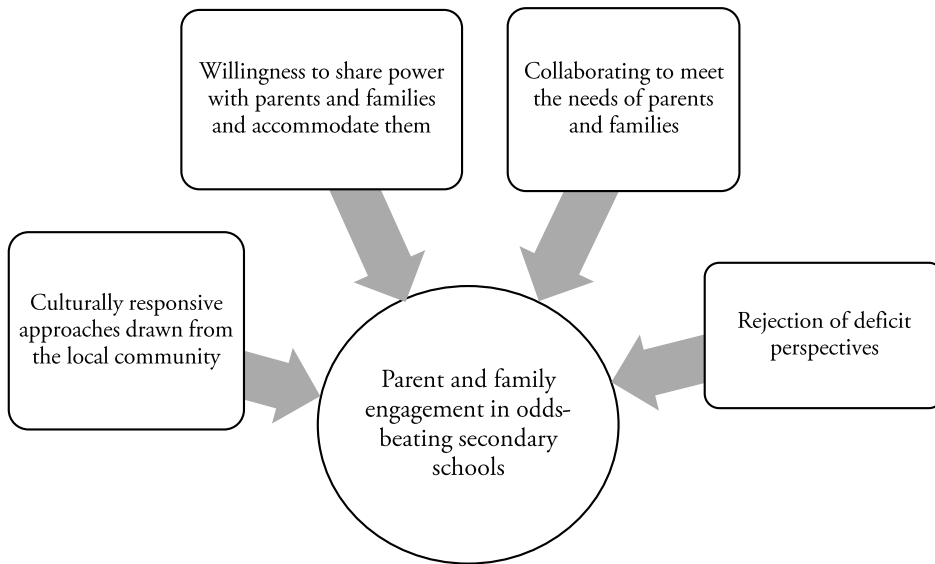
Figure 1. Shared strategies for parent and family engagement in odds-beating schools.

In rural Sherburne-Earlville, such approaches involved capitalizing on the local interests in hunting, agriculture, and sports in order to connect with students and their families. Educators interviewed described a relationship between these connections and the quality of relationships between educators and families that they see as providing a basis for authentic engagement. Moreover, the close community ties held by many educators and staff at this rural school provided them with an insider's view into the havoc endured by many families due to poverty, drug abuse, and increasing incidences of mental illness. The more educators sought to understand families' social, economic, and emotional struggles that presented barriers to engagement, the more impetus they had to develop strategies in hopes of ameliorating those hardships (Lopez et al., 2001; Treviño, 2004).

While Freeport contrasted with Sherburne-Earlville in that Freeport has a suburban–urban locale and a more ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student population, educators there also highlighted the need to approach family engagement through community-based and culturally responsive strategies. For example, educators' and staff members' common use of Spanish with family members and youth in classrooms signaled a clear willingness to accommodate to the needs of youth, parents, and families and communicated the message that their cultures and languages were valued assets, not obstacles to overcome (Bartlett & García, 2011; Guo, 2010). Furthermore, by collaborating among themselves as well as with families and community-based organizations and local institutions, educators at Freeport created a network of support for family engagement that was both culturally appropriate and drew on the resources of the community (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Poza et al., 2014; Warren et al., 2009).

By paying close attention to both the needs and challenges faced by families, educators at both schools understood their responsibility to adapt to families rather than expecting families to conform to school-based norms (Auerbach, 2010). Both of these case studies further demonstrate the need for educators and school leaders to genuinely share power with families and view their knowledge and perspective as valuable contributions (Ishimaru, 2014). Educators in these schools expressed the belief that all families cared about their children's schooling by both acknowledging the social and economic challenges which often obstructed full engagement as well as by seeking to engage with family members on their own terms, rather than simply in school-sanctioned events that for a variety of reasons may not be perceived as welcoming or inclusive (Auerbach, 2010; Baquedano-López et al., 2013).

Although these case studies provide powerful examples of positive family engagement, not all participants held the same asset-based and positive beliefs regarding their relationships with families. Several participants at Freeport, for example, admitted that they could be doing more to engage parents and worried that the obstacles to engaging hard-to-reach parents could be, at times, too much to overcome. Likewise, a few participants at Sherburne-Earlville were concerned that family members seemed less engaged in their children's education than they would like them to be. These exceptions illustrate that educators in these two schools, while exemplary in their approaches to engaging parents, still had room to improve. Indeed, as Goodall and Montgomery (2014) remind us, family engagement is best conceived as an ongoing process rather than a project which could at some point be fully completed.

The findings presented here offer useful insights for leaders, educators, researchers, and policymakers into how family engagement may be approached

successfully in different contexts serving different populations of youth and families. Such lessons are valuable in an era when educators are under increasing pressure to engage with families yet often fall short of this goal (Auerbach, 2010; Ishimaru, 2014). Furthermore, these findings help add to the relative paucity of studies conducted in rural areas and at the secondary level (Jensen & Minke, 2017; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Yet, as illustrated in both cases, a one-size-fits-all model to family engagement will likely not work well. Without thoughtful accommodations, educators risk alienating families who face mental illness or substance abuse issues or encounter social exclusion for any number of other reasons, including poverty or ethnic or linguistic background (Cooper, 2009a; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Furthermore, the evidence presented in this analysis shows that while strong leaders are needed to promote effective family engagement strategies, a collaborative effort where all educators and staff both feel responsible and take responsibility for engaging with families is the more effective way to develop authentic relationships and partnerships with community members (Epstein et al., 2019). As illustrated in both Freeport and Sherburne-Earlville, approaches to family engagement are most effective when they are grounded in the culture and norms of the local community while recognizing that these communities change and evolve over time (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Warren et al., 2009).

Limitations

The data set was generated from a larger study that did not focus specifically on family engagement. If we had generated findings from a different data set focused specifically on family engagement we may have derived different findings. Further, no assumption of causality between family engagement strategies and graduation outcomes is assumed in this study. Rather, the intent in this analysis is to draw out from these odds-beaters what patterns they share in their approaches to family engagement. We also acknowledge that the schools studied were identified based upon graduation-rate outcomes for particular populations of students. If the sampling criteria were based on different measures and different populations, we may have derived different findings.

Conclusion

There is a general consensus that family engagement has a positive impact on student performance (Epstein et al., 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002), yet many educators continue to struggle with ways to develop authentic partnerships with families. Based on case studies of two schools with unusually high student graduation outcomes, this study has identified

shared patterns of family engagement. Though dissimilar in their contexts and demographic characteristics, these odds-beating school educators hold in common the strategies of drawing on local resources and engaging family members in culturally responsive and collaborative ways with particular sensitivities to power imbalances.

Although the benefits of family engagement are often seen as means to promote better academic performance among youth, it is crucial to acknowledge that collaborating with families provides benefits which extend beyond academic achievement, such as increasing student engagement and fostering community empowerment (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Malczyk & Lawson, 2019). Ensuring that all family members are provided the opportunity to be engaged in their children's education means not only more democratic schools, but a more democratic society as well (Apple & Beane, 2007; Auerbach & Collier, 2012).

As illustrated through the attention given to family engagement in recent legislation such as ESSA, the need for educators to use better family engagement strategies is one which will undoubtedly continue to call for empirical research. This analysis of family engagement strategies in two odds-beating schools provides insight into what is prioritized with regard to family engagement, who takes on this important work, and how it is done. While the barriers to family engagement remain formidable even in these schools, they demonstrate that many of these barriers are not insurmountable and are best addressed through thoughtful adaptation based upon local assets and needs.

Endnotes

[1] We purposefully use the term "family" to denote all individuals in caretaking roles regardless of their biological relationship to the child.
[2] Case study of Freeport available at https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Freeport.case-study.FINAL_.pdf
[3] Case study of Sherburne-Earlville available at https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SherburneEarlville.case_.study_.FINAL_.pdf
[4] The Census Bureau defines "rural" as any population, housing, or territory not in an urban area. Urban areas are defined as having a population of 50,000 or more: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html
[5] See definition of economic disadvantage at https://data.nysed.gov/glossary.php?report=report-cards
[6] Total per pupil expenditures as reported in the 2016–17 fiscal supplement.

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