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Requests for Manuscripts

The school can function as a thriving community. The *School Community Journal* includes articles related to the school as a community of teachers, students, parents, and staff. Family–school relations, site-based management, homework, sociology of education, systems theory, the classroom community, and other topics concerning early childhood and K–12 education are covered. SCJ publishes a mix of: (1) research (original, review, and interpretation), (2) essay and discussion, (3) reports from the field, including descriptions of programs, (4) book reviews, and (5) research and/or practice briefs. The journal seeks manuscripts from scholars, administrators, teachers, school board members, parents, and others interested in the school as a community.

Editorial Policy and Procedure

School Community Journal is committed to scholarly inquiry, discussion, and reportage of topics related to the community of the school. Manuscripts are considered in the four categories listed above. Note: The journal generally follows the format of the *APA Publication Manual*, 7th Edition; when online sources appear in the reference list, we prefer direct links. Please make sure electronic links cited are accurate and active. Use italics rather than underlining. Do not use tabs to format paragraphs or tables; please use the Insert Table function for tables and the First Line Indent function for paragraphs. Color for tables or figures is acceptable.

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1. The blinded manuscript, including an abstract of no more than 250 words in the same file, plus any tables or figures; and
2. A one paragraph description (each) of the author(s) and a mailing address, phone number, and email address where each author can be reached.

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Executive Editor's Comments

School Community Journal does not publish themed issues beyond our focus on creating a sense of community in schools because we only publish twice each year and doing so would put general submissions too far behind on the timeline. However, sometimes articles do cluster nicely.

In the current issue we have not one but two articles introducing what I believe will be very valuable survey tools in the field of family engagement in children's learning. Bachman and Beard introduce us to their Family Engagement Efficacy Beliefs of Educators (FEEB-E) survey, while Kumar presents the Questionnaire of Home Environment Literacy Practices (Q-HELP). Just the appendices on those two articles are well worth the price of this journal. But wait! This is an open access, peer-reviewed journal—you are getting all this for free! This thought filled me again with gratitude for the vision cast by the previous executive editor, Sam Redding, and reaffirmed by the current executive director of the Academic Development Institute (ADI), Pam Sheley. We all hope you will continue to utilize this publication to support the ongoing work in the trenches. We know from ADI's ongoing efforts that family and community engagement work can be messy but also know how much value it represents for families, teachers, administrators, community leaders, and most importantly, the children.

Another cluster that presented itself focuses on children with special educational needs. Graham-Clay offers another in her series on teachers communicating effectively with parents—this time focused on those with special needs. Aldersey and her colleagues describe barriers faced by students with disabilities in the developing country of Ethiopia and efforts to overcome those barriers. Next, Marino et al. lay out a creative approach to recruiting and training special education teachers to alleviate shortages through a unique collaboration.

We have lots of other great articles in this issue, as well. These important topics include learning from and with multilingual families (He et al.); a community collaboration via a lab design approach to innovating in education (Spencer-Mueller et al.); parent leaders' perceptions of how strong community ties alleviate some of the issues experienced by schools in an area of significant, ongoing poverty in the coal valleys of Wales (Meredith), and an examination of refugee parent and school staff relations in a country of first asylum (Sadiq & Anderson).

We conclude this issue with a practice brief from a successful urban community school principal and superintendent and now mentor, Carlos Azcoitia. We invite others to submit research and/or practice briefs, in addition to articles and book reviews—see our website for more details.

Lori G. Thomas
May 2025

Learning From Multilingual Families in Partnership With Schools

Ye He, Doris Kroiss, Jennifer Arcila, and Carine Kelleher

Abstract

Even though the importance of family engagement has been widely acknowledged, it remains challenging for schools to engage with families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Educators and administrators continue to report a lack of preparation and reveal deficit perspectives towards minoritized families. In this study, we describe efforts at two elementary schools and one middle school to seek input from multilingual families. Multilingual families were invited to share their engagement experiences, their engagement outcomes, and their aspirations for continued engagement in teaching and learning activities through both surveys and focus group discussions. The findings reveal an array of capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence already present in multilingual families. These insights demonstrate how multilingual family engagement practices can harness and further develop these characteristics to promote educator and family dual capacity-building.

Key Words: multilingual families, family engagement, partnerships, dual capacity-building, schools, capabilities, connections, cognition, confidence

Introduction

Even though the importance of family engagement in schools has been widely acknowledged (e.g., Calderon et al., 2019; Marsh et al., 2015;

Sheldon, 2009), educators continue to report a lack of preparation in engaging with families, especially those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Caspe & Hernadez, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Wassell et al., 2017; Zeichner, 2023). Deficit-based perceptions of minoritized families continue to influence the design and implementation of family engagement efforts (Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Kim, 2009; Wassell et al., 2017). Systemic barriers often reinforce a "disadvantaged" perception of families, leading to many immigrant families feeling "disappointed with school receptiveness" (Delouche et al., 2024, p. 245). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated disparities and underscored challenges facing minoritized households (Arias, 2020; Richmond et al., 2020). While some researchers have examined pandemic-related challenges for multilingual families, most studies focused on administrators', educators', or learners' experiences (Sari & Eutsler, 2023). It is important for educators to further their understanding of multilingual families' lived experiences so that educators may recognize families' assets and shift away from deficit-oriented pedagogies (Delouche et al., 2024).

Centering on families' perspectives and experiences, we describe in this study how a project team collaborated with three schools to seek input from multilingual families. We include the definition of family engagement and focus our literature review specifically on multilingual family engagement. Based on survey and focus group data collected in collaboration with schools, we explore multilingual families' capabilities (skills and knowledge), connections (networks), cognition (shifts in beliefs and values), and confidence (self-efficacy) using the dual-capacity building framework (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). The findings of the study reveal not only multilingual families' capacity to support teaching and learning, but also their perspectives and aspirations for further educator capacity enhancement at the school.

Literature Review

From Parental Involvement to Family Engagement

The term *parental involvement* may be narrowly defined as parents' passive, "*accommodationist*" involvement in activities initiated and led by schools (Shirley, 1997, p. 73). For example, parents may be expected to attend school events or help with homework to support students' learning (Jeynes, 2011; Olmstead, 2013). This narrow definition has been problematized for its implication that being absent from school-centered activities may be interpreted as a lack of involvement (Hong, 2011; Poza et al., 2014),

and that parent involvement entails participation in ritualized practices that "subsumes parents into a dominant, mainstream model of involvement" (Doucet, 2011, p. 404). School-centered parental involvement frameworks have also received numerous criticisms (e.g., Bower & Griffin, 2011; Hong, 2011; Warren et al., 2009). Baquedano-López et al. (2013) pointed out that school-centered involvement is especially problematic when schools' visions and practices are established based on the values of the dominant culture, arguing:

> Although conceptually useful, these typologies still reflect a restricted vision of partnership centered on the school's agenda. We note that these typologies do not engage the intersections of race, class, and immigration, which are relevant to the experiences of many parents from nondominant backgrounds. (p. 150)

Family engagement, on the other hand, recognizes families' roles in the teaching and learning process beyond the school and values families' perspectives, experiences, and aspirations (Ferlazzo, 2011; Redding et al., 2004). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) presented the shift from parental involvement with schools and parental involvement with schooling to parental engagement with children's learning as a continuum. They focused on the equitable distribution of agency along the continuum and argued that:

> As schools and parents move along the continuum, there is a move from information giving (on the part of schools) to a sharing of information between parents and schools. This is a move from the prioritization of the school's needs and desires to joint decisions between parents and schools. (p. 402)

Using this continuum as a framework, Protacio et al. (2020) described family engagement activities for English learners (ELs; i.e., learners from multilingual backgrounds receiving English language development support) such as bilingual game nights, cultural celebrations, and home visits to illustrate the shift of agency distribution between schools and families. When schools incorporate family values into family engagement activities, they are enacting a two-way learning partnership (Trumbull et al., 2020).

Consistent with Protacio et al. (2020), in this study, we use the term "family engagement" recognizing the role of family members other than parents in the development of multilingual learners. We define family engagement as shared responsibilities among schools, families, and communities that may be enacted in various learning environments, including schools, homes, and community settings (National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group, 2010). Our collaboration with the partner

schools centers on valuing and integrating multilingual families' inputs in the co-design of family engagement efforts to support learners' multilingual development.

Multilingual Family Engagement

Minoritized families encounter various challenges and barriers to meaningfully engaging in their children's learning. These challenges include language differences, educators' deficit perspectives, and the lack of family input in the design and implementation of family engagement programs. Among these challenges, language differences are often perceived as one of the major barriers impeding school–home connections (Baker et al., 2016; Melzi et al., 2018). Schools' limited capacity to offer translation and interpretation support for families from a wide range of diverse linguistic backgrounds and families' perceived lack of capacity to support their children's English language development were major barriers identified by educational agencies (Kochanek et al., 2011; Sugarman & Lazrín, 2020). However, when schools adapt their communication strategies to meet multilingual families' needs, it increases trust between families and schools, encourages family engagement, and "activates family assets" (Delouche et al., 2024, p. 243).

Unfortunately, educators' deficit perceptions of minoritized families' engagement in their children's learning continue to persist, frequently resulting in the underrepresentation of multilingual families in school engagement initiatives which reinforces educators' negative assumptions regarding families' interest in their children's education (Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Baker et al., 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; Wassell et al., 2017). When educational agencies design programs and activities to engage multilingual families, input from families may not be sought or considered (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). Privileging features of the dominant culture in schools may lead to reduced trust between families and educators (Delouche et al., 2024; Isaac, 2022). For example, family literacy programs may use a structured curriculum with no feedback from families (e.g., Wessels, 2014). Researchers have cautioned against the one-size-fits-all approach to family engagement, especially when programs are designed to focus only on accountability measures used in schools (Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Crozier & Davies 2007; Goodall, 2013).

COVID-19: Unprecedented Challenges and Solutions

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated preexisting challenges and created new obstacles for multilingual family engagement. Research has

documented the disproportionately low access multilingual families had to technological resources required for virtual instruction (Kim & Padilla, 2020). Moreover, challenges accessing online communication platforms were exacerbated by language barriers faced by multilingual families (Sari & Eutsler, 2023). Even with reliable access to technology, families found communication barriers to exist when home language translation was not provided (Cioè-Peña, 2022). Finally, the pandemic created a variety of personal challenges for multilingual families. Front-line workers were unable to support their children with virtual instruction during the school day (Jenkins, 2021; Nowicki, 2020), and many families faced unprecedented rates of financial detriments leading to food and housing insecurity (Holtzman et al., 2022).

School districts and educators responded to these challenges by providing access to technology, initiating multimodal communication measures, and centering the family–school partnership to improve student outcomes (Delouche et al., 2024; Kaura & Melnicoe, 2020; Nowicki, 2020; Peterson et al., 2020). This unprecedented collective challenge helped to encourage schools to engage multilingual families in meaningful ways beyond prescriptive school-based activities.

As the literature suggests, intentionally seeking input from families is one of the first steps in building trust to promoting family engagement (Delouche et al., 2024). Using methods such as survey alone, however, may not be sufficient in inviting the perspectives of families from diverse backgrounds (Vera et al., 2016). Based on their studies of educators' initiatives to engage EL families, Protacio et al. (2020) suggested that educators consider inviting families to share their perspectives using multilingual surveys with open-ended questions. Researchers also suggested using multilingual survey instruments and focus group discussions to invite families to share their perspectives (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Vera et al., 2016). In this study, therefore, we collaborated with partner schools to seek input from multilingual families using both multilingual surveys and focus group discussions. In addition to inviting families to share their experiences and perspectives regarding family engagement, we also asked families for their suggestions for future engagement opportunities.

Theoretical Framework

This study builds upon family engagement frameworks that center on equity and capacity building (Ishimaru, 2014; Mapp & Bergman, 2019). Instead of restricting the partnership with multilingual families based on

existing ritualized practices at the schools (Doucet, 2011), equity-centered family engagement frameworks invite families as partners to critically reflect on their engagement experiences, attend to building educators' and families' engagement capacities, and envision future engagement potentials.

Challenging school-based parental involvement efforts that position minoritized families as passive recipients of information or training to maintain the existing school culture, researchers emphasized the importance of engagement wherein families contribute to decision-making and actions that lead to changes and transformations in education (Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Hong, 2011; Ishimaru, 2019; Shirley, 1997). The dual capacity-building framework adopted by the U.S. Department of Education underscores collaborations among families and educators as they negotiate challenges and seek capacity-building opportunity conditions at both the process and organizational levels (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). Policy and program goals were specified in terms of educators' and families' development of their capabilities (skills and knowledge), connections (networks), cognition (shifts in beliefs and values), and confidence (self-efficacy) to reach the ultimate partnership outcomes (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

To enact equitable family engagement, Ishimaru (2014, 2019) contrasts traditional partnerships and equitable collaborations in terms of the goals, context, strategies, and parent roles. Traditional partnerships frequently overlook the potential assets offered by multilingual families' perspectives (Isaac et al., 2022). In contrast, equitable collaborations emphasize the importance of reciprocal knowledge and resource exchange between schools and families (Delouche et al., 2024). While systemic change in existing school cultures can be difficult to enact, Ishimaru points out that nurturing and cultivating families' relational power can disrupt the unilateral power differential between schools and families (Ishimaru, 2019).

Integrating both the dual capacity-building framework and the equitable collaboration strategies, we prioritize multilingual families' experiences, perspectives, and suggestions to critically reflect on existing engagement efforts at the partner schools. We focus specifically on multilingual families' capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence to explore equitable partnership potentials and educator capacity-building opportunities.

Project Context

This study was part of a larger project designed to support educators working with multilingual students and families. In collaboration with local partner schools, the project team accomplished this through professional

development and family engagement activities in the local school contexts. Through the professional development modules, various family engagement strategies and resources were introduced, including the dual capacity-building framework. Educators were invited to share their application of the family engagement strategies in their schools and engage in online learning exchanges (He & Bagwell, 2022). In addition, the project team also worked with administrators and educators at the partner schools to support school-based family engagement activities.

We invited input from families at three partner schools, two elementary schools and one middle school, all located in the same school district. Educators in all three schools expressed interest in learning from multilingual families regarding their experiences and perspectives. All three schools receive Title I funds. Both elementary schools have over 400 students each. School A has around 27% of their total student population identified as ELs, while School C has over 39% identified as ELs. The middle school (School B) has over 600 students, with over 8% identified as ELs. Both elementary schools started dual language programs in 2018 to use English and a partner language in content instruction. School A has two dual language programs, Spanish–English and Urdu–English. School C has a Spanish–English dual language program. These programs are open to all students in the schools, including those identified as ELs. The middle school houses an adult English language program designed for multilingual families and students. This Saturday program employs a two-generation approach that offers both English classes to parents and science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics (STEAM) activities to children. This program was founded in 2015 as a partnership among the university, the school, and the local community (He et al., 2019). The program team includes family representatives, K–12 educators, university teacher educators, and preservice teachers. Family participants offer ongoing feedback and suggestions to co-design the program (He & Bagwell, 2022).

In addition to the dual language programs in the elementary schools and the Saturday program at the middle school, all schools organize activities and host events for all families, including families with multilingual backgrounds. Through these activities, families learn more about the curriculum activities at the school and practice strategies to work with their children on multilingual learning at home. Schools have also hosted multicultural events to invite families to share their home cultures and celebrate the diverse cultures represented in the community.

Methods

This study explored the experiences and perspectives shared by multilingual families from the three partner schools. Specifically, we focused on three research questions:

1. How do multilingual families describe their engagement in these schools?
2. In what ways do multilingual families leverage and build their capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence to partner with schools?
3. What do multilingual families suggest as future engagement opportunities?

Researcher Positionality

All authors are bilingual speakers working closely with multilingual learners and their families through a larger project designed for educator professional development and family engagement. The first author is Chinese–English bilingual and serves as the lead principal investigator of the project. She has led various partnership projects with local schools and engaged in both educator professional development and multilingual family engagement activities across the state. The second author is German–English bilingual and experienced U.S. K–12 schooling as an English learner. She has worked as a teacher in the same county where the partner schools are located and serves as a postdoctoral fellow on the project. The third and fourth authors are Spanish–English bilingual. The third author supports the project as a research assistant, and the fourth author serves as the project manager. Both authors participate in data collection and database management for the project. Three of the four authors are also parents with bilingual children attending local schools. The authors engaged in regular reflections and discussions of the data analysis and interpretation to examine potential biases. The shared code book, research memos, and audit trails further enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis and interpretation.

All authors share the asset-based perspective that undergirds the larger project focusing on educator professional development and family engagement centering on the promotion of multilingualism. Rather than viewing language differences as a barrier to overcome, the authors appreciate the community cultural wealth multilingual families bring and aim to surface and leverage multilingual families' funds of knowledge to enhance multilingual educational efforts at the schools (González et al., 2005; Yosso, 2005). In addition, the authors employ the dual capacity-building framework in their engagement with both educators and multilingual families (Mapp & Bergman, 2013, 2019).

Data Collection

Data were collected using both survey and focus group discussions during 2018–22 to maximize feedback and input from multilingual families (see Appendices A and B). Both survey items and focus group discussions were offered in multilingual formats. Families could provide their input using the survey or by participating in focus group discussions. Families included any adult caretakers and guardians present in the students' lives.

The survey includes three demographic items regarding families' language background and their children's schools, two items regarding their perspectives of family engagement activities they have participated in, and one open-ended question regarding ideal family engagement activities. When reporting their perceptions of the family engagement experiences, respondents are invited to use a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree) to share their perspectives of prior family engagement experiences and their intention to engage in future activities. Specifically, families rated previous family engagement experiences based on how well organized the events were, the extent to which activities supported their own English language development (ELD), events' usefulness for supporting students' academic learning, and the impact of activities on families' sense of involvement with their child's school. In addition, families indicated how interested they were in joining similar events in the future. This multilingual instrument is made available in Arabic, English, Spanish, and Urdu for families with different language backgrounds and preferences. It was distributed as an anonymous link. While families' names and contact information were collected as part of the survey, they were documented separately only for administrative purposes. Participants' names were not associated with their responses.

In addition to the online survey, families were also invited to participate in focus group discussions facilitated by the school and the project team. These focus group discussions took place during school-based or community-based events designed for families. Each focus group included 5–10 families, and the discussion was conducted in the families' preferred language. During the focus group discussions, families were invited to share their engagement experiences, perspectives, and ideal engagement opportunities. All focus group discussions were recorded, and anonymized notes from the focus group discussions were included as data in this study.

Participants

Participants included multilingual families that have children identified as ELs receiving English language development support or dual language

learners (DLLs) who participate in dual language programs. These families include both those who speak a language other than English at home and those who are native English speakers and have enrolled their children in a dual language program. Regardless of the language spoken most at home, all families support their children's multilingual development as ELs or DLLs. A total of 176 family members provided feedback regarding family engagement at their schools via survey responses. In addition, 147 participants provided feedback through family focus group discussions.

As indicated in Table 1, 77 family members from School A provided survey responses, accounting for 44% of the total survey responses. In addition, School A engaged 39 families in focus groups, equaling 27% of the total focus group participants. Focus group discussions were conducted in English, Spanish, and Urdu, respectively. In School B, the middle school, 50 family members, totaling 28% of all survey respondents, completed the survey, and 93 participants engaged in focus group discussions, making up 63% of all focus group respondents. In School C, 49 family members, or 28% of all survey takers, responded to the surveys, and 15 Spanish-speaking families (10% of all focus group participants) engaged in focus group discussions. Both the survey responses and the focus group discussions reflected the linguistic diversity among family participants.

Table 1. Participants

Survey	**School A**		**School B**		**School C**		**Total**	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
English	20	26%	10	20%	11	22%	41	23%
Spanish	31	40%	33	66%	38	78%	102	58%
Urdu	23	30%	1	2%	n/a	n/a	24	14%
Other	3	4%	6	12%	n/a	n/a	9	5%
Total	**77**	**44%**	**50**	**28%**	**49**	**28%**	**176**	**100%**
Focus Group	**School A**		**School B**		**School C**		**Total**	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
	39	27%	93	63%	15	10%	147	100%

Data Analysis

To address the research questions, quantitative data collected from the Likert-scale survey items and qualitative data from open-ended survey items and focus group discussions were analyzed and integrated in a convergent manner (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Qualitative data were first segmented and organized based on the survey and focus group questions

to address the research questions regarding families' perception of their engagement experiences, their engagement processes, and their aspirations for future engagement potentials.

For the first research question regarding multilingual families' perception of their engagement experiences, descriptive analyses were conducted based on the quantitative data from the survey. For this analysis, 5-point Likert scale items were collapsed into four categories (Disagree, Neutral, Agree, No Response) and a Kruskal-Wallis test was employed to explore significant relationships between families' home language, school, and school year with their evaluation of engagement activities. A post-hoc procedure using Dunn's test was then conducted to determine the directionality of significant relationships between the variables. In addition, descriptive coding was conducted based on open-ended survey questions and relevant focus group discussions to substantiate the quantitative findings (Miles et al., 2020). The dual-capacity building framework was employed to guide the analysis to address the second research question regarding families' capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). The coding definitions were first established based on the framework and then refined through iterative data analysis based on data from the study to guide first cycle coding (Miles et al., 2020). Relationships across the codes were then established through the code co-occurrence matrix analysis using ATLAS.ti (2023). To address the third research questions regarding multilingual families' aspirations for future engagement, holistic coding was employed to capture both common themes across all participants from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and unique perspectives reflecting participants' identities (Miles et al., 2020).

Two researchers analyzed data separately and compared coding results through ongoing research meetings to refine the coding process and data interpretation. The findings and interpretations were also shared with other research team members and stakeholder representatives from the three schools to seek their input and feedback.

Findings

Family Engagement Experiences

Overall, 176 families provided their input regarding the organization of family engagement activities (Organization), activities' relevance for supporting families' English language development, activities' effectiveness for assisting families to support their child's learning (Learning), the impact of activities on feeling involved in the school (Involvement), and families'

intentions to engage in future activities (Future Engagement). It is important to note that respondents may not have attended all activities and were not required to answer all questions. About 30–40% of all respondents provided no answer on each of the items (see Table 2).

Most respondents agreed with the effectiveness of these engagement efforts (> 40%). Comparing across the three schools, even though a larger percentage of families from School A or B agreed with the effectiveness of the engagement efforts, no statistically significant relationship was observed between school membership and participants' responses.

Table 2. Participant Experiences

	School	Disagree		Neutral		Agree		No Response	
		n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Organization	A	8	10%	7	9%	36	47%	26	34%
	B	7	14%	3	6%	28	56%	12	24%
	C	6	12%	4	8%	21	43%	18	37%
	Total	**21**	**12%**	**14**	**8%**	**85**	**48%**	**56**	**32%**
English Language Development	A	9	12%	7	9%	34	44%	27	35%
	B	5	10%	5	10%	24	48%	16	32%
	C	4	8%	3	6%	16	33%	26	53%
	Total	**18**	**10%**	**15**	**9%**	**74**	**42%**	**69**	**39%**
Learning	A	12	15%	3	4%	43	56%	19	25%
	B	8	16%	2	4%	28	56%	12	24%
	C	3	6%	3	6%	19	39%	24	49%
	Total	**23**	**13%**	**8**	**5%**	**90**	**51%**	**55**	**31%**
Involvement	A	8	10%	5	6%	42	55%	22	29%
	B	8	16%	6	12%	22	44%	14	28%
	C	1	2%	5	10%	17	35%	26	53%
	Total	**17**	**10%**	**16**	**9%**	**81**	**46%**	**62**	**35%**
Future Engagement	A	8	10%	3	4%	45	58%	21	27%
	B	9	18%	3	6%	25	50%	13	26%
	C	2	4%	3	6%	22	45%	22	45%
	Total	**19**	**11%**	**9**	**5%**	**92**	**52%**	**56**	**32%**

Families' home language was found to be significantly correlated with four of the five engagement efforts (i.e., organization, English language development, learning, future engagement). It was not surprising that

Spanish-speaking respondents rated the effectiveness of English language development activities higher than English-speaking respondents ($p < 0.001$), considering the targeted audience of the program. It was interesting to note that Spanish-speaking respondents rated organization, learning, and future engagement significantly higher compared to their English-speaking counterparts ($p < 0.001$). Moreover, speakers of other languages rated the effectiveness of family engagement efforts on student learning higher than English-speaking families ($p = 0.025$).

Multilingual Family Engagement Capacity

Multilingual families' capacity in terms of their capabilities (skills and knowledge), connections (networks), cognition (shifts in beliefs and values), and confidence (self-efficacy) do not operate in isolation. The beliefs and values of multilingual families (i.e., cognition) influenced how they perceived their capabilities and confidence for school engagement. Further, families' cultivation and expansion of connections strengthened their skills and knowledge for school engagement (i.e., capabilities). In this section, we first highlight how families' beliefs and values relate to their perceived capabilities and confidence. Then, we discuss how connections support the development of capabilities for multilingual families.

Cognition for Multilingual Families' Capabilities and Confidence

Two beliefs and values were shared among all family participants in this study. Participants commented on the importance of: (a) education for themselves and their children; and (b) elevating families' language and cultural backgrounds in various educational settings.

Multilingual families' beliefs and values regarding the importance of education for themselves and their children were reported as the driving force for their further development of capabilities and confidence to become partners in education at the schools. The adult English program offered at School B (the middle school) was initiated based on multilingual families' requests. As one parent shared, "I want to be able to understand my son when he speaks in English" (School B Focus Group, 2020). Others also shared their desires to feel more empowered to communicate with teachers and support their children at home and in other settings. One parent expressed her appreciation of having the opportunity to do so because of her participation in the program. She stated, "Classes give me confidence to go to the store without the kids as interpreters" (School B Survey, 2019). Instead of offering a prestructured curriculum, this program seeks input from families every year to adjust its engagement. During the COVID-19

pandemic, the program transitioned to meeting online and communicating with families through social media platforms. STEAM activity boxes were offered for pick up so that children could continue to engage at home as well. Participating families expressed enhanced confidence to speak with teachers and to participate in their children's educational experiences. As one parent shared, "I feel confident about talking without being afraid of making mistakes. I don't feel ashamed; I am giving the best of myself. I am really learning" (School B Focus Group, 2018).

Further, families' beliefs and values for leveraging their language and culture as assets enhanced their capabilities for engaging in school engagement activities. One family member shared about opportunities to teach and learn about various cultures, expressing, "We also have done presentations about international food from our countries" (School B Focus Group, 2018). Likewise, in School C, one of the elementary schools with dual language programs, multilingual families not only volunteered at the school, but took on more leadership roles to contribute to dual language curriculum discussions and to serve on the school leadership team. Through their engagement, several multilingual parents developed capabilities to serve as advocates for the dual language program, and some became dual language teachers or teaching assistants at the school. Families also volunteered specific ideas of supporting their school's dual language program, including the development of parent networks through online platforms.

In this study, multilingual families expressed both their desire to develop their English language capabilities to engage with school-centered activities and their interest in integrating their language and cultural backgrounds in the educational process for their children. While these beliefs may appear paradoxical, the enactment of both sets of values reflected multilingual families' negotiation of their funds of knowledge within the current educational context (Moll et al., 1992).

Cultivation and Expansion of Connections

Connections entail both relationships cultivated among families and interactions between multilingual families and educators. A reciprocal relationship was observed based on data in this study where multilingual families' connections with other families and educators enhanced their capabilities and their capabilities in turn supported the further expansion of their connections.

Through the adult English language program at the middle school, families reported how they developed connections among themselves. One mother shared, "We are in a learning process. When one of us makes a

mistake, the classmate helps her. If one doesn't know, the other one helps. There is a lot of respect among us" (School B Focus Group, 2018). In addition, connections with educators enhanced families' capabilities for engaging as partners in their children's education. At one of the elementary schools, families appreciated getting connected with teachers through school-based activities such as "around the world" cultural night, stating that these events provided an opportunity to develop knowledge about the school's dual language program. Families also reported seeing the benefits of these events for their children's development. Other connections that supported the development of families' capabilities included opportunities for families to collaborate with their children in academic settings. As one parent expressed:

> I cannot speak much English, and it also helps because they put us to work together. We do assignments where I must do something, and she must do something else. So, we always work together. And she likes to participate and socialize a lot. (School C Focus Group, 2019)

As families grew their capabilities, they were better able to cultivate and expand their connections with educators and with one another. Families' efforts to understand and engage in teaching and learning practices, their skills to navigate channels of communication with support from the schools, and their capabilities to leverage knowledge about their own language and culture supported these connections. Through the dual language programs at the elementary schools, parents from different language backgrounds were encouraged to volunteer at the school, participate in teaching and learning activities, and share their language and cultural experiences. In addition to connections with educators at the school, families also shared their connections with teachers and other families through social media platforms to expand their networks of support. In addition, families' enhanced capabilities to communicate in English also supported connections in school settings. For example, one parent shared how her ability to learn English through the adult English program helped to connect her to her daughter's teacher by giving her the confidence to practice new words in English. Families also expressed that the capabilities developed in their English classes connected them with each other. One parent emphasized:

> The best classes I have received is the one from this school. This class is three hours where we don't stop participating, talking, learning. During the week they assign work. This is also about personal development. It's an enrichment experience. (School B Focus Group, 2018)

Communication plays a key role in sustaining connections. During the pandemic, multilingual and multimodal communications became essential to sustain connections between families and school staff. Families reported feeling comfortable using the online platform to communicate with the school and appreciated having phone calls with teachers on occasion to better communicate about their children's learning. In the focus group discussion during 2021, families shared that they felt comfortable sharing their concerns and asking questions, knowing that teachers would respond to their questions and concerns in a timely manner. Multilingual parents also commented on the importance of communication in their languages and the options to use both online and phone communications with teachers. One parent from the elementary school shared how much she appreciated that the school translates communication and reminders for families into their native languages, so that all parents can understand what is going on in school. As an Urdu speaker, this mother shared that she feels that Urdu-speaking parents can be empowered when materials are available in their language.

Families' capabilities to leverage knowledge about their own language and culture, their skills to navigate channels of communication with support from the schools, and their efforts to understand and engage in teaching and learning practices supported their connections with school staff and one another. At both the elementary schools and the middle school, activities such as cultural nights were held before the COVID-19 pandemic and after schools transitioned back to in-person sessions. Many families expressed their appreciation to have the opportunity to connect with schools, share their cultural backgrounds, and to encourage their children to learn more about their heritage cultures. One family member expressed, "In my kids' school, they have a Latino festival that we like to participate in because we learn about many countries and their customs" (School B Focus Group, 2019).

Future Engagement Opportunities

While multilingual families at the three schools generally expressed satisfaction and gratitude towards the engagement efforts at the schools, challenges were discussed, and families offered suggestions for future engagement considerations. These engagement opportunities centered on (a) effective multilingual, multimodal communications; (b) activities promoting parent–child relationship building; and (c) parents as educational partners.

In all schools, regardless of the schools' efforts to provide materials in multiple languages and to support parents to navigate the technology platforms, families recommended communicating information in a more accessible and comprehensible manner. For example, one parent suggested the use of text messages in addition to voice messages when communicating with families,

> The messages do arrive well, and the messages are in English and then in Spanish, but sometimes we cannot hear well the messages because they are voicemails…sometimes we can't understand what they say in Spanish—maybe they need another form to contact. It would be better if we could get text messages. (School C Focus Group, 2019)

Another parent suggested teachers explain information in small chunks to make it more comprehensible: "Sometimes it's hard to understand information (e.g., how to use Nearpod). Be helpful to have things explained in chunks" (School B Focus Group, 2020).

In addition, families at the elementary schools also expressed a desire for school engagement activities to offer opportunities to bond with their children, provide an outlet for students' interests, and involve the whole family. One parent mentioned, "I would like to participate in something that will involve the family so we could get more communication as a family and more fun" (School A Survey, 2021). Parents also advocated for opportunities to educate the "whole child," mentioning that it would be ideal to have additional activities for engagement such as soccer and basketball, cheerleading, crafts, or music lessons for students. In the focus group, families also suggested engaging older siblings more in school activities and as volunteers at the school.

With strong desires to participate in their children's learning, families advocated for their role as co-educators. Families at the elementary schools suggested that the schools offer a resource list with appropriate materials to support children's home bilingual/biliteracy activities as well as to have access to more online resources for language learning so that parents can participate in lessons. Middle school families shared that they would like to learn more about ways they can offer support for their children's learning at home as well. They would also like to engage in conversations with their children about their school experiences. Parents suggested that the school could consider offering parents: "some tutoring in specific subjects (e.g., math) and help with phonetics and how words sound" (School B Focus Group, 2020).

Families' suggestions for improvement reflected their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds situated within the specific school context as

well. Families from School B, the middle school, emphasized the importance of sustaining learning opportunities such as the adult English class to support their negotiation in the U.S. society in general. Families would appreciate more resources to support their English language development and would benefit from receiving educational certifications. One mother said, "I also want the GED, but we need to know English. Maybe the teacher can tell us when we are ready, when we are in the advance level" (School B Focus Group, 2018). Other parents suggested more books in English or childcare so they could attend English classes. On the other hand, at School C, parents of children attending the dual language program urged the school to make specific accommodations to celebrate their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Focus group data documented families' efforts to advocate for themselves, noting that there were more than 40 Pakistani families who wanted future family engagement opportunities to be more related to their backgrounds. One mother suggested integrating Pakistani celebrations into the school's calendar. Other recommendations from families included the initiation of an international festival to better share and celebrate families' cultural backgrounds within the school community. Families also advocated for linguistic resources. One parent stated, "They have teachers who speak Spanish but not Urdu. They should have a social worker for Pakistani population" (School A Focus Group, 2018).

Discussion and Implications

Different from studies focusing on school-based curriculum or family engagement activities, in this study, we partnered with three schools to engage families to seek their input and feedback using multilingual survey responses and focus group discussions. In order to disrupt patterns of deficit-oriented dynamics which place families at the receiving end of school-based initiatives, we centered on multilingual families' perspectives and experiences. Specifically, we asked families to reflect on and evaluate their experiences with school engagement events, described how families found opportunities to expand their capacities through engagement activities, and shared families' suggestions for future engagement potentials. Both the process of engagement and the findings based on multilingual families' feedback provide insights for researchers and practitioners advocating for equity-centered multilingual family engagement.

While all three partner schools had family engagement plans and engaged routinely in family engagement activities, none of the schools invited multilingual families to share their input and feedback in a systematic and

ongoing manner prior to the engagement with this project. Through the partnership project, the research team worked closely with educators at the schools to integrate the multilingual survey and focus group discussions within the school events and calendars. At the end of each event or focus group, a memo was shared with the school based on anonymous input and feedback from multilingual families. At the beginning of the project, the project team set the data collection and reporting timeline. During the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020–21 academic year, the process further supported family–school connections. Toward the end of the project in 2021, educators at the schools initiated the timeline and led the planning to integrate the multilingual families' input and feedback in school decision-making. Multilingual families also became more familiar with the process to routinely share their input and feedback to support educators. Considering the prevalent deficit-based perceptions that position families as recipients of school-based initiatives (Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Delouche et al., 2024; Ishimaru, 2019), the integration of a systematic process to seek multilingual families' feedback may invite more multilingual families to participate in educational decision making. State, district, and school leaders may want to consider integrating routines and processes to engage multilingual families as part of the ongoing family engagement efforts to cultivate collaborative partnerships for student learning (Caspe & Hernandez, 2023).

Further, the relationship between families' capabilities (skills and knowledge), connections (networks), cognition (shifts in beliefs and values), and confidence (self-efficacy) not only substantiated the dual capacity-building framework focusing on multilingual families, but also offered additional insights regarding the relationship across these four considerations. The tensions of the sociolinguistic values associated with the English language versus one's home languages and cultures propelled both English language learning and development and the advocacy for home language integration in school curriculum and communication for multilingual families. The reciprocal relationship between connections and capabilities further highlighted the importance of school–home connections and networks among families, especially as schools negotiated challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Carruba-Rogel et al., 2019; Ochoa & Quiroa, 2020; Peterson et al., 2020). Families and communities may benefit from joint reflection space with educators and teacher educators to share their language experiences as multilingual families and students to maximize the use of their full linguistic repertoire in educational settings.

Finally, findings from the study revealed promising multilingual family engagement practices based on both families' perception of their engagement experiences and their aspirations of future engagement opportunities. The research process, in addition to the findings, demonstrated the importance of multilingual and multimodal engagement with families (Cohan, et al., 2019; Gomez et al., 2021). The importance of leveraging multilingual families' home language as a mode of communication was evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic and utilized by educators as a more effective means of family engagement (Nowicki, 2020). Based on input from the families, schools not only sustained effective practices of communication, but also expanded support for families through the dual language programs and the Saturday program at the middle school. The elementary school with the Urdu dual language program engaged in additional projects to explore the design and implementation of Urdu curriculum materials. The middle school offered online access to the Saturday program and expanded the program to reach multilingual families beyond local settings. Continuing the university–school partnership, the university teacher educators plan to integrate multilingual families' experiences, perspectives, and aspirations within teacher education and professional development programs that involve preservice teachers and in-service teachers beyond the partner schools to highlight families' capacities and suggestions.

In summary, stakeholders including educators, families, and teacher educators can attend to both the process conditions and organizational conditions to further enhance the dual capacity-building of educators and families through meaningful family engagement efforts (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). The process conditions entail ways administrators and educators can respect, value, and seek families' input in decision making, and families can, in turn, shift from being recipients to collaborators to contribute to student learning and school improvement. Further, the organizational conditions can be enhanced through the cultivation of reflective spaces and systematic two-way communications. University-based educator preparation programs and teacher professional development can also contribute to and benefit from these engagement interactions to support the development of current and future teacher family engagement competencies.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations in this study. First, even though both survey and focus group discussions were offered in multilingual formats, additional languages need to be added to the survey and multilingual interpreters and cultural brokers need to be invited to facilitate the focus group discussions

to maximize the input from families. Further, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were restrictions to in-person engagement in 2020 and 2021. Access to technology and internet may have restricted the engagement of some multilingual families. As schools and communities have resumed in-person activities, more discussions may be conducted in person in collaboration with community partners and schools. Finally, in addition to seeking families' input using surveys and focus group discussions, efforts need to be made to engage multilingual families in partnerships and curriculum decision-making to continue to promote multilingualism within and beyond the school boundaries.

Future research on leveraging the strengths of multilingual families should also be expanded to encompass often overlooked assets (e.g., valuing secure attachments and encouraging unstructured playtime) that positively correlate with improved student outcomes (Fourment et al., 2022). The depth of cultural wealth and the possibility for dual-capacity building is vast, and even the smallest moves toward dual capacity can enact a tremendous amount of trust and engagement.

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Appendix A. Family Engagement Survey

1. Do you have a family member (e.g., children, grandchildren, niece, nephew, etc.) attending preschool programs or K–12 schools?
   a. Yes [continue to next question]
   b. No [end of survey]
2. What is your native language?
3. How many school age child(ren) do you have?
4. Which school(s) do(es) your child(ren) attend?
5. Which family engagement activities have your participated in this semester?
   a. Adult English as a Second Language classes
   b. Technology workshops
   c. Parents and Children Together activities

   d. Afterschool programs for families
   e. Weekend programs for families
   f. Other (please specify)
   g. I have not participated in any family engagement activities before.
6. Please rate the following statements about the activities you have participated in. (1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree; 6=not applicable)
   a. The activities were well-organized.
   b. The information I received was useful for improving my own English proficiency.
   c. The information I received helped me to support my child's learning.
   d. After participating in the school activity, I feel more involved with my child's school.
   e. I am interested in coming back for future school activities.
7. What types of family engagement activities would you be willing to participate in in the future?
8. Please feel free to provide any other feedback or comments.

Appendix B. Family Engagement Focus Group Protocol

1. Let's start with some introduction. Can you tell me a little bit about yourselves and your child(ren)?
2. What do you think of the school activity you participated in today?
   a. What did you enjoy?
   b. What suggestions do you have? Why?
3. What other activities have you participated in the past at your child's school?
   a. How often do you participate in these sorts of activities?
   b. Why do you choose to participate?
   c. What activities have you enjoyed the most, and why?
   d. How effective have you found these activities?
4. How do you find out about programs and activities for family members at the school?
5. Ideally, what type of programs and activities do you wish the school could offer for you and parents or family members like you?
6. If these programs and activities are offered at the school, what other support might you need to be able to participate?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Communicating With Parents of Children With Special Needs: Strategies for Teachers

Susan Graham-Clay

Abstract

Communicating with parents is a key role for teachers to foster relationships that will support student learning. This essay and discussion article focuses on a range of strategies teachers can use to promote effective communication with parents of children with special needs. The increasing prevalence of students with disabilities in our schools is highlighted as well as training needs relevant to both regular and special education teachers. The importance of understanding the parent experience is discussed, as well as viewing parents of children with disabilities as experts on their child, which complements the professional knowledge and practice of teachers. Specific strategies discussed include building trust with parents and the use of effective communication skills, including a thoughtful approach to the content, mode, and frequency of communication. Strategies to support key interactions with parents during IEP meetings are outlined based on the literature. Finally, opportunities to support communication with parents who are culturally and linguistically diverse and who also have a child with a disability are highlighted, with the goal to reduce barriers and promote parent engagement.

Key Words: communication, communicate, communicating, exceptionalities, parents, teachers, children, students, special needs, special education, disability, disabilities, strategies, parent engagement, parent involvement, school–home partnership, culturally and linguistically diverse, CLD

Introduction

Effective communication between teachers and parents is critical to build strong relationships that support student learning. Communicating is one of six key parent involvement strategies outlined by Epstein over time (Epstein, 1995, 2010; Epstein et al., 2018) and has been described as the strongest predictor of parent involvement (Gisewhite et al., 2021; Park & Holloway, 2018). Teacher–parent communication is important for all students but becomes even more critical for the parents of children with disabilities, whose special education goals and programs may vary widely from the regular curriculum. Communication and collaboration between teachers and parents of children with disabilities occur at multiple levels, including discussing the child's educational needs, participating in the evaluation process, identifying goals, reviewing progress, and planning for successful transitions (Mereoiu et al., 2016). Indeed, there are legal mandates in the United States and in many other countries to ensure parent participation in both evaluation and placement decisions and in the development of an individualized learning plan for the child.

It is important that teachers understand the unique needs and experiences of parents who have children with special needs to support effective communication. Beyond their control and because of their experiences, many parents have faced significant personal and family stress, wait lists, health concerns, and financial hardships. Parents often become experts on their child in ways that go well beyond expectations for a typical parent, such as in-depth knowledge of medical conditions, developmental milestones, and treatment history. Parents are often asked to repeat their child's story to multiple professionals. Many parents are forced to take on unexpected roles to address their child's educational needs, requiring considerable personal time and energy (such as advocacy). Parents have also reported stress due to feeling criticized and blamed for their child's challenges (Broomhead, 2013; Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015), as well as stress navigating the special education system (Datoo, 2021; Heiman, 2021).

This essay and discussion article is the third in a series for teachers on communicating with parents. The first article outlined the wide range of one-way and two-way communication strategies available to teachers such as websites, email, various apps, report cards, phone calls, as well as in-person and virtual meetings (Graham-Clay, 2024a). The second article outlined specific communication skills that teachers can use to support difficult conversations with parents (Graham-Clay, 2024b). These skills are particularly important when communicating with parents of children with

special needs, given the increased potential for heightened emotions (Solvason & Proctor, 2021), disagreements regarding educational decisions (Lasater, 2016), and lack of trust (Madsen & Madsen, 2022).

Educators carry the primary responsibility to develop and maintain relationships with the parents of children with special needs (Broomhead, 2019). This current article focuses specifically on strategies teachers can use to support effective communication with this unique parent group. The increasing prevalence of children with disabilities in the education system is described amid the lack of focused training available to both general and special education teachers to communicate with parents. Specific considerations and strategies to support effective communication with parents of children with special needs are then discussed. First, it is important that teachers understand the parenting experience and recognize the expertise that these parents bring regarding their child. Teachers are then encouraged to build trust with parents and to use effective communication skills to ensure that parent voices are both heard and understood. This requires a thoughtful approach related to the content, mode, and frequency of communication. Based on the literature, strategies to maximize effective communication during Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings are outlined to support collaborative planning. Finally, culturally responsive practices are discussed that will support communication with parents who are culturally and linguistically diverse and who also have a child with a disability.

The term "parent" in this article refers to those adults in a child's life who may communicate with the child's teacher regarding the child's special education needs, program, and services (including parents, guardians, grandparents, foster parents, etc.). The terms special needs and disability are used interchangeably within the text. That said, it is recognized that while these descriptive terms are widely used in the educational literature, sensitivity is needed as language terms and labels have the potential to negatively impact perceptions about a child (Clark, 2023). It is imperative that each child's unique gifts, talents, and abilities are recognized and supported.

Prevalence of Disabilities

The number of children with disabilities in our schools is increasing. National Health Information Survey (NHIS) data reported a 9.5% increased prevalence of developmental disabilities among children between 2009 and 2017 (Durkin, 2019). Similar trends were also reported in other countries. Based on this data, particular increases were noted in the prevalence of

attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and intellectual disabilities (Zablotsky et al., 2019). U.S. Census data in 2019 indicated an estimated 2.6 million households had at least one child at home with a disability, representing 7.2% of the households in the U.S. with children under the age of 18 (Young, 2021).

The reasons for this increasing prevalence over time are multifaceted. These include improved child survival (Durkin, 2019; Olusanya et al., 2022) as well as improved knowledge of neurodevelopment by health providers, educators, and parents; enhanced developmental screening; broadened diagnostic criteria; and increased inclusion of children with disabilities (Durkin, 2019). Diagnostic capacity has also improved resulting in more "timely and accurate diagnoses for children" (Dan et al., 2024, p. 2).

From a special education perspective, the Report on the Condition of Education 2023 indicated the number of American students (aged 3–21) receiving special education or related services increased from 6.4 million in 2010–11 to 7.3 million in the 2021–22 school year (Irwin et al., 2023). This translated to 15% of the total public-school enrollment of students in the U.S. The disability types listed in order of prevalence included: specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, health impairments (e.g., heart condition, epilepsy), autism, developmental delay, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, multiple disabilities, and hearing impairment. Although countries differ in their definition, Brussino (2020) reported that all education systems have faced an increasing population of students with special education needs.

Depending on the school district, students with special needs may attend a regular class, a combination of regular and special education classroom placements, or a self-contained special education class. Thus, both general education and special education teachers often engage with the parents of children who present a range of special education needs. Given a growing focus on inclusive education in past years, the increasing numbers of students receiving special education services, and the limited number of special education teachers in some locales (Koch, 2020), it is important that all teachers are trained and prepared to interact effectively with the parents of children with special needs (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Koch, 2020; Solvason & Proctor, 2021).

Teacher Training

The importance of effective communication skills with parents has long been highlighted as a key competency for teachers. Unfortunately, teachers

are often not adequately trained to work with parents generally, nor with the parents of children with special education needs specifically (Accardo et al., 2020; Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Collier et al., 2015; Gisewhite et al., 2021). The high rate of teacher attrition in the U.S. further underlines the need for focused training of both regular and special education teachers to work with parents of children with special needs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Indeed, few training programs have required courses on collaboration and the "interpersonal aspects" of teaching (Luke & Vaughn, 2022).

The need for focused training for teachers was highlighted by Kyzar et al. (2019) who conducted a national survey of special education faculty members across 52 institutions in the U.S. Just over 95% of faculty agreed that family–professional partnerships were a key responsibility for preservice teachers after graduation; however, only half (49.6%) were satisfied with the depth of the content covered in their program. The lack of formal training for teachers on family–school partnerships was also highlighted in two cross-cultural reviews, noting that the level of training was dependent on individual instructors (Epstein, 2018; Thompson et al., 2018). A survey of Canadian teacher educators showed consistent results. Parent engagement was a valued skill; however, the presence of relevant content in university courses depended on the specific instructor (Antony-Newman, 2024). It was proposed that long-term sustainability of parent engagement content will require policy changes at the teacher certification and program accreditation levels.

Several studies have focused specifically on training preservice teachers to work with parents of children with special education needs. Preservice training has sometimes incorporated opportunities for student teachers to interact with and to learn from parents, such as designing and implementing an intervention in collaboration with a parent (Accardo et al., 2020), making a home visit and then writing a reflection paper about the experience (Collier et al., 2015), meeting with parents several times through a course (Greenbank, 2023), having a course for teacher candidates co-taught by a professor and parent (Murray et al., 2018), as well as field experiences that provided structured interactions with a child and family (Sutton et al., 2020). Strassfeld (2019) strongly advocated for preservice teachers to have fieldwork opportunities to engage with parents, to learn about disabilities, and to engage in "service-learning" activities within a specific cultural community. Participation in IEP meetings has been highlighted as a particular need for preservice teachers, as many have never actually attended an IEP meeting prior to entering the profession (Toledo, 2023). A gap in the knowledge of teachers with respect to neurodiversity was also

identified (Dan et al., 2024) to better prepare educators to understand the complex range of disabilities they may encounter in their teaching practice. Additional training for special education teachers was also recommended regarding supervision of and collaboration with paraprofessionals who work directly with students (Dudek et al., 2024).

Training for teachers has been shown to be effective to promote partnerships with parents. A meta-analysis of 39 studies on a range of training programs for preservice and practicing teachers reported a significant positive effect on all teacher–family engagement outcomes, including communication strategies, collaborative planning, and problem solving (Smith & Sheridan, 2019). However, Mancenido and Pello (2020) cautioned that the reliance on self-report surveys in the field makes it difficult to determine if teacher training interventions of self-reported beliefs and knowledge translate into actual skills and practices for teachers.

The Parent Experience

Parenthood is a demanding and major milestone in life for all parents (Jambekar et al., 2018). That said, parenting a child with special needs can be a "complicated and demanding task" (Cheng & Lai, 2023, p. 9) and often brings a "number of well-documented, out-of-the-ordinary challenges and hardships" (McConnell et al., 2015, p. 30). It is important that teachers understand and appreciate the lived experiences of parents of children with special needs, including both the challenges as well as the joys.

The use of "narrative inquiry" as a form of qualitative research has frequently been used in the form of interviews with parents to understand their parenting experience (Lalvani & Polvere, 2013). Studies have focused on the range of parental reactions that may occur over time as well as the impacts on many facets of family life. Some studies have focused on the perspectives of parents of children with specific diagnoses (such as ADHD and ASD), whereas other research has included parents of children with a broad range of disabilities.

Following their child's diagnosis, the initial emotional reactions of parents often include feelings of shock and denial (Rositas et al., 2023) as well as a "dark period" characterized by depressive features (Wai Chau & Furness, 2023). Sheehan and Guerin (2018) reported that the early years were often marked by parental feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, and stress. During the child's later years, parents reported a shift towards feelings of joy and pride in their child. Many challenges have been reported by parents that impact their parenting experience, including the demands of physical

care of their child, fatigue, as well as higher rates of family breakdown and parent burnout (Ott, 2015; Roskam & Mikolajczak, 2023). This is especially true for parents with combined vulnerabilities (e.g., single parent of a child with a disability; Tekola et al., 2023). Higher rates of depression and other mental health challenges were reported in parents of children with developmental disabilities (Marquis et al., 2020). Parents of children with ADHD described stress associated with responding to their child's challenging behaviors (Leitch et al., 2019) resulting in a "near constant state of hypervigilance" (p. 4). Indeed, many parents described their experience as a "constant fight" for support and respect (McConnell et al., 2015, p. 14) that required "continuous coping" (Shenaar-Golan, 2017, p. 306).

Research has shown that the experience of having a child with a disability may also result in social costs for many parents in the form of lost relationships (Shenaar-Golan, 2017), social isolation (Andreyko, 2016), increased dependency on family members (Jambekar et al., 2018), and feelings of stigma (Cheng & Lai, 2023; Tekola et al., 2023). Difficulties finding reliable, quality childcare impact many families (Brown & Clark, 2017). In addition, ongoing care may be required throughout the child's adolescent years (and even adult life) if the child cannot be safely left alone. The need for ongoing childcare may also impact a parent's career options due to restrictions on travel and working hours (Brown & Clark, 2017).

The financial impact of having a child with a disability is significant for many families. A decrease in working hours and income for parents of children with disabilities has been reported (Marquis et al., 2019; Wondemu et al., 2022), especially for mothers. In fact, the more severe the disability, the more profound was the effect on the mother's ability to remain employed (Wondemu et al., 2022). These financial stressors coexist with increased expenses for many parents, including treatment costs and travel to appointments (Cheng & Lai, 2023), higher health care costs (Heiman, 2021), as well as longer-term childcare costs.

Navigating the educational system has also been described as a significant stress for many parents of children with special needs (Heiman, 2021). Parents of children with ADHD, for example, described the stress of responding to frequent negative reports and complaints from school staff about their child's behavior (Mofokeng & van der Wath, 2017). A synthesis of articles analyzing the impact of the educational system on families of children with special needs in North America and Britain highlighted high levels of stress for parents due to poor communication, lack of support in the school setting for the child, as well as negative opinions expressed by some teachers (Ott, 2015). Additional stressors have included time pressures

(such as missing work to pick up a child at school) and the emotional impact on parents when school relationships break down (Bennett et al., 2020).

For many parents the prospect of "lifelong" parenting (Heiman, 2021) creates an unpredictable future. Datoo (2021) aptly stated that following a diagnosis, there is a shift from being "quintessential parents to being perpetual parents" (p. 216). Indeed, parents of children with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities reported such grave concerns regarding who would care for their child in the long term, that some parents hoped that they would outlive their adult child (Kruithof et al., 2022).

Grief Versus Possibilities

Over time, the stages of grief identified in the sentinel work of Kübler-Ross (1969) on death and dying have been applied to many experiences of loss (Ross Rothweiler & Ross, 2019), including having a child with special needs (i.e., the loss of a "normal" child). The stages of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression have been described as a process of emotional reactions parents may experience leading to ultimate acceptance of their child (Rositas et al., 2023). A type of "cyclical grief" has also been described (Bravo-Benítez et al., 2019) whereby many parents experience fluctuating emotions over time ranging from painful feelings (such as sadness) to periods of acceptance and happiness. It is important teachers understand that parent reactions may reflect a complex process of "ups and downs" whereby challenging emotions may exist at the same time as a sense of resolution, especially during times of transition (Barak-Levy & Paryente, 2023). Acceptance of the child may be demonstrated by parent participation in the child's activities, support for the child's communication skills, providing guidance and encouragement to the child, and ultimately accepting the child without judgment (Rositas et al., 2023).

Allred (2014) suggested that the traditional model of loss has resulted in a negative view of child disability through the lens of burden and tragedy, with an inevitable grief response. Alternatively, Allred proposed a strength-based approach that identifies the "intrinsic resources" that parents bring, the need to honor the parent's vision for their child, and the potential for personal growth, even during times of stress and pain. Indeed, there are a growing number of studies reporting the positive impacts that parents of children with special needs have identified, including personal growth, strengthened bonds between family members, and enriched social relationships (McConnell et al., 2015). Parents have reported increased resilience and appreciation for life and for their child (Wai Chau & Furness, 2023). Faith and commitment have also helped many parents develop a positive

outlook (Tekola et al., 2023). Indeed, many parents function well (Barak-Levy & Paryente, 2023) and are fully committed to the best education possible for their child (Estojero, 2022). Thus, while it is important that teachers recognize and appreciate the potential reactions and stressors that parents experience with empathy and compassion, it is also important to recognize and acknowledge the developing strength and resilience that most parents demonstrate in the face of significant loss, grief, and ongoing stress.

Parents as Experts

Both teachers and parents have been described as having an "expert" role with respect to children (Munthe & Westergard, 2023). Expert teachers have "well-developed pedagogical content knowledge", reflect extensively on their practice, build strong interpersonal relationships with their students, and are continuous learners throughout their careers (Anderson & Taner, 2023, para. 1). Parents of children with special needs have been described as experts on their own child. They hold the entire child's experiences within their memory (Solvason & Proctor, 2021). Parents can provide valuable details regarding the child's history, characteristics, strengths and needs, routines, schedule, interests, and motivators, all very helpful information for teachers. Indeed, parents "have an unspoken record of details about their child which can provide the keys to success at school" (Jorgensen, 2023, p. 144). Parents have been described as the "constant" in their child's life, and many become experts on the child's disability over time (Kervick, 2017).

Parents of children with special needs have a "close and highly emotional relationship to their child for which they are broadly responsible" (Gartmeier et al., 2017, p. 7). Their parenting experiences include managing behaviors, teaching household chores, addressing sibling issues, as well as supporting their child's communication skills (Estojero, 2022). Many parents become experts on their child's medical status with respect to their child's well-being, the child's level of pain, and important knowledge to improve care (Kruithof et al., 2020). In addition to typical day-to-day parenting responsibilities, parents have also attended school meetings to identify learning goals, engaged in conflict resolution when needed, coordinated with multiple professionals, and navigated complex special education processes (Smith, 2016).

Parents of children with special needs often develop lived experiences and expertise taking on various roles beyond that of typical parenting. These are often roles that the parent did not expect nor feel qualified for, including

case manager, interventionist, and advocate (Shepherd et al., 2017). The role of *case manager* is a common experience for parents whose children have multiple service providers (e.g., educators, healthcare professionals, and/or various therapists; O'Hare et al., 2023; Shepherd et al., 2017; Smith, 2016). This involves coordinating and scheduling services with different professionals and responding to various strategies or interventions recommended to support the child. Indeed, parents of children with intellectual disabilities reported they were in a state of "perpetual navigation" (Bennett et al., 2020). Parents must prepare for upcoming transitions and engage in future planning that may require coordination with a whole new set of professionals and services (e.g., transition from preschool to school, or high school to adult services). Case management for parents may also include managing health-related and insurance documentation, as well as other paperwork related to educational, health, and therapeutic services.

Many parents also take on the role of *interventionist* with their child (Shepherd et al., 2017). This role involves parents actively working with their child at home to develop and reinforce skills (e.g., eye contact, toileting, feeding, positive behaviors). A review of child-focused parent interventions indicated that many parents were initially doubtful in their capacity to do so; however, they developed confidence through their interactions with health professionals (Burney et al., 2024). Indeed, parent intervention programs designed to reduce challenging behaviors of children with developmental disabilities have shown positive results (Ragni et al., 2022).

Lastly, parents of children with disabilities often take on an *advocacy* role. Parents translate their "experiential knowledge" to "objective knowledge" to access a range of needed supports and services for their child (Kruithof et al., 2020, p. 1146). Parents described key themes in their advocacy role including the need to develop knowledge and skills related to laws and policies, as well as knowledge of their child's disability. Parents also described key personal characteristics including determination, persistence, and tenacity (Taylor et al., 2019). Parent advocacy has been described as a "dynamic process" that changes over time depending on evolving circumstances and needs of the child (Smith-Young et al., 2022). Typical parent advocacy activities over time may include expressing initial concerns; seeking help, assessment, and diagnosis; acquiring services; addressing barriers to advocacy (e.g., limited time, financial restraints, lack of available services); and the development of advocacy skills. Indeed, "parents must continually anticipate their next course of action to acquire necessary supports for their children throughout the life course of their condition" (Smith-Young et al., 2022, p. 10).

Some parents described advocacy as their "job", including the need to "push" for services and accommodations for their child (O'Hare et al., 2023). That said, parents have also reported feeling overwhelmed and frustrated with the advocacy role due to the amount of learning required, feelings of guilt for missed opportunities, the sacrifice of personal time, and the loss of employment income for some (Rossetti et al., 2021). Parents were also sensitive to the "perceived stigma" of being regarded as the "painful parents" by school staff (O'Hare et al., 2023).

Building Trust

The concept of trust is complex and multifaceted. Considerable research over time has addressed the various elements involved, different types of trust (e.g., interpersonal vs. institutional; Bormann et al., 2021a), as well as ways to enhance trust. Within the educational context, parents place considerable trust in educators each day when they send their child to school (Solvason & Cliffe, 2023). Parental trust in their child's teachers supports student learning (Lerkkanen & Pakarinen, 2021), improves parent involvement (Santiago et al., 2016), and helps to resolve conflicts and reduce due process complaints (Wellner, 2012).

A review of the literature focused on trust in the home–school context from 2000 to 2020 identified several common themes (Shayo et al., 2021). Trust was described as occurring within a relationship involving a degree of vulnerability, confidence in the other, as well as trustworthiness characteristics, all of which take place within the context of shared goals. Trust is built over time based on "repeated mutual positive experiences" (Bormann et al., 2021b, p. 125) through different types of interactions. For example, mothers of children with disabilities reported their level of trust was dependent on the teacher's response when they raised concerns about their child (Stoner & Angell, 2014). When teachers were asked how they built trusting relationships with parents, they identified the openness of the school, informal contacts with parents, as well as their own outreach to invite parents to the school (Leenders et al., 2019).

Several models of trust have been proposed over time with respect to home–school communication. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) initially described "*Five Faces*" of trust including: benevolence (kind and well-meaning), reliability (understandable and predictable behavior), competence (skill and professionalism), honesty (serious and well-founded statements), and openness (transparent sharing of relevant information). Combs et al. (2018) outlined four "*C's*" of trust including: competence, care

(kindness), character (including honesty and transparency), and communication skills. A more recent framework described a relational model of trust including respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity (consistent behavior) (Shayo et al., 2021). The importance of open and respectful communication to both develop and maintain trust has been highlighted (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023).

Teachers are encouraged to take a proactive approach to develop trusting and collaborative relationships with the parents of children with special needs (Lake et al., 2019). An important initial strategy is for teachers to establish communication with parents early in the school year "before there is anything substantial to talk about" (Leenders et al., 2019, p. 529). Based on the literature, key actions that are instrumental for teachers to build trust with parents include: welcoming families, reaching out to parents, acknowledging the expertise of parents and listening to their story, focusing on the child, avoiding jargon and deficit-based language, responding to parent questions and concerns in a timely manner, explaining special education processes and procedures, establishing positive and frequent communication with parents, inviting parents to participate on the team and share in decision making, providing information geared to both mothers and fathers, following through on agreed upon actions, and preserving privacy and confidentiality for the child and family (Chase & Valorose, 2019; Cliffe, 2023; Lake et al., 2019; Smith, 2016; Stoner & Angell, 2014; Wellner, 2012).

It takes time for trust to develop built on consistent and positive interactions. Parents of children with disabilities reported that trust in their child's teacher varied from year to year (Stoner & Angell, 2014). Parents were more likely to trust teachers they viewed as competent and child focused (Niedlich et al., 2021). Parents also reported higher levels of trust when teachers contacted them in-person or by phone which provided "rich" opportunities for feedback, cues, and the potential to manage conflicts (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). In fact, in-person communication has been noted as a key predictor of parental trust.

While there are many definitions of trust, Cliffe (2023) identified two basic elements, describing trust as relational in nature, and involving expectations about both competence and a willingness to engage. Shayo et al. (2021) conceptualized trust as a state, a process, and a relationship. As such, teachers are encouraged to intentionally develop trust with parents by reaching out using effective communication skills to build bridges between school and home.

Communication Skills

Use of effective communication skills will help build positive relationships with parents to support collaborative planning to maximize children's learning. Effective communication skills build on the exchanges that have gone before and, importantly, set the stage for the communication exchanges to come.

Fiore and Fiore (2017) described communication challenges as "the root of most issues and misunderstandings" (p. 45). They described communication as a complex process involving three steps: (1) formulating ideas (internal process); (2) putting ideas into words; and (3) interpretation of the information by another. The authors noted that the potential for miscommunication with parents occurs when we fail to communicate our ideas effectively, when we choose a channel that may not suit the information, or when the message is not interpreted as intended. Many factors can lead to a communication breakdown such as the reading level of content, language and/or cultural barriers, as well as sensory barriers (e.g., vision or hearing loss). Misunderstandings may also result from varying communication styles and preferences (Major, 2023). It is important for teachers to ensure a thoughtful approach when communicating with parents of children with special needs given the complexity of the process as well as the sensitivity of the content to be discussed, resulting in increased potential for miscommunications to occur.

A review of teacher training programs in England identified communication skills with parents as essential for teachers, particularly the skills needed to run parent–teacher meetings and to manage difficult conversations (Jones, 2020). Indeed, the potential for teachers to face difficult conversations with parents of children with special needs is very real given that the framework of special education seems "built on adversarial relationships" (Wellner, 2012, p. 16). Effective communication becomes challenging within the context of complex special education processes and the potential for due process disputes. Thus, it is important for teachers to develop the skills needed to communicate effectively with parents, other educators on the team (including administrators and paraprofessionals), as well as specialist service providers who are involved.

The gap between the need for teacher training and practical skills to be trained was highlighted by Graham-Clay (2024b) who discussed a range of communication skills for teachers to support difficult conversations with parents. These included the use of clear vocabulary, active listening strategies, and the use of I-messages to own the message content. Questioning,

paraphrasing, and summarizing techniques help to obtain and clarify information received from parents. Indeed, Jorgensen (2023) suggested that open-ended and invitational questions will encourage parents of children with special needs to feel more comfortable providing information, for example, using sentence starters such as "What are some…?" and "How might…?" (p. 145).

Use of leveled information as a communication strategy was also described by Graham-Clay (2024b) based on the work of Tharinger et al. (2008). This approach categorizes information to be shared based on the parent's perspective of the child. Level 1 information is consistent with the parent's view of the child and is easily accepted. Level 2 information requires some reframing of the parent's view, such as explaining a concern from a different perspective. Level 3 information conflicts with the parent's view of their child, with the potential for a reactive response unless there is sufficient trust and relationship built with educators to support the disconnect. Lastly, the importance of attending to nonverbal communication was also highlighted (Graham-Clay, 2024b). Nonverbal messages may include body language, touch, paralinguistics (e.g., tone, pitch, volume, speed), personal space, as well as physical characteristics (e.g., hygiene and professional attire). Indeed, your body can speak for you even when you are not speaking (Kullar, 2020).

It is important that teachers strive for clarity in both their verbal and written communication. This includes the use of vocabulary that is expressed as simply as possible, use of conversational language, as well as avoiding technical terms and educational jargon as much as possible (and defined when needed; Weinzapfel, 2022). Communications should be accessible to parents, including the mode of communication (e.g., technology) as well as the language of the content. The readability of written communication is also an important consideration (i.e., the ease with which a reader can read written text). The American Medical Association (AMA) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) have recommended that the readability level for adults should not exceed the sixth-grade level. Unfortunately, the readability of many education documents intended for parents is much too high (Gordon et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2019; Nagro & Stein, 2016). Teachers and school district staff are encouraged not to make assumptions regarding the readability of their written materials and to seek to make written content accessible to all parents. Various methods to estimate text readability are available and described online.

Based on teacher interviews, Major (2023) summarized a series of key ingredients designed to maximize effective communication with parents

including regular contacts, common language use, a positive attitude, and appropriate use of technology (including sensitivity to families who lack access). Additional important interpersonal communication skills have included honesty and kindness (Solvason & Proctor, 2021) as well as openness and an individualized approach for each child (Sulistiyaningsih et al., 2022).

Ultimately, the "little things mean a lot" according to parents of children with disabilities who provided firsthand accounts of teacher–parent communication skills that facilitated partnerships (Mann et al., 2024, p. 102). Parents reported that effective partnerships were based on welcoming and relaxed day-to-day interactions (e.g., polite greeting, saying the parent's name, engaging in casual chats as the teacher would with other parents), regular emails (including general feedback and updates on the child's progress), and positive nonverbal communication (e.g., smiling, eye contact, warm tone of voice). Parents appreciated the use of "we" language. They also appreciated being informed of upcoming meetings including who would attend, the agenda, the timeframe, parameters of the conversation, and the objectives of the meeting. When difficult conversations were needed, parents preferred a private and quiet space with more time provided. Mann et al. (2024) noted that parent–teacher relationships thrived on "positive solution-focused communication," and it was important to parents that teachers saw "their child rather than the disability" (p. 112).

Content, Mode, and Frequency of Communication

Teachers often need to communicate differently with parents of children with special needs. Not only is there general information to share, such as school and classroom specific details (e.g., supplies, events, activities), there is often additional specific information to share, such as the child's schedule, specialist supports, health information, as well as a range of learning and behavioral goals and strategies in place. Teachers may find it difficult to determine the strategies that will work best "for the array of messages that must be communicated while individualizing the communication form" (González & Frumkin, 2018, p. 6). Thoughtful consideration is needed regarding the content, mode, and frequency of communication. When considering communication approaches with parents of children with disabilities, it is helpful for teachers to think about the relationship that currently exists with the parent(s), how the information may be received, the parent's preferred mode of communication, and whether personal interaction will be needed to support the message (Graham-Clay, 2024a). Teachers should also ensure that the communication practices they use are

consistent with their school district and union/association guidelines, policies, and procedures.

Content

Parents of children with special needs were more likely to contact teachers about certain topics, including academic concerns, classroom behavior, and health issues (Hobday, 2015). Parents of children with ASD wanted "concrete and tangible" information from teachers such as specific activities to do with their child as well as books to read (Azad et al., 2018). Of note, parents of children with special needs were not always sure what information they "could or should" share with teachers (Butler et al., 2019). Teachers expressed a need for information from parents that would help the teacher prepare for potential challenges at school, even simple information such as how the child's morning went before coming to school.

The impact of informative versus negative communication content on levels of parent engagement is important to note. Based on national parent survey data, informative communication (i.e., child's progress, how to help with homework) was consistently associated with much higher parent engagement than negative content from school (e.g., behavior challenges and problems with schoolwork; Hine, 2022). That said, the families of students with disabilities reported receiving higher levels of negative communication content from teachers. Indeed, Kuusimäki et al. (2019) stressed the need for more balanced and encouraging feedback to parents and commented there is too much emphasis on a child's needs versus strengths. Ultimately, Hine (2022) stated that "words matter" and stressed that informative and positive communications signal to families that schools want to build home–school partnerships. Teachers were encouraged to ask themselves how they personally would like to hear the message or what they would want a written message to say, and in doing so, be a "kind, considerate communicator" with parents of children with special needs (Jorgensen, 2023, p. 154).

Teachers also provide parents important content information regarding special education. Surveyed teachers indicated that schools encouraged parents to access several sources of information as well as to contact the special education teacher (Farley et al., 2022). The questions parents most frequently asked related to services and accommodations, eligibility, transitions, and the academic progress of their child. The majority of teachers (67.6%) described parents as satisfied with the special education information they received from schools. That said, teachers also wanted better resources for parents regarding advocacy and services.

Mode

Schools have at their disposal a broad range of both one- and two-way modes of communication. One-way communication occurs when the information flows in one direction (e.g., newsletter, email, report card) and two-way communication provides for "reciprocal dialogue" in real time (e.g., phone call, in-person or virtual meeting; Graham-Clay, 2024a). Powers (2023) reported that the most common modes of home–school communication included emails, phone calls, texts, apps, daily report/communication charts, parent–teacher conferences, handwritten notes, report cards, and informal meetings.

During the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, teachers went to "extraordinary lengths" to connect with all families and recognized the strategies that were most efficient (such as texting and mobile apps when phone calls and email with parents were not successful; Starks & Reich, 2022). Virtual platforms were also described as convenient and efficient to meet with parents (Scheef et al., 2022). The challenge for teachers is to determine the best mode of communication to use for the information they need to communicate.

Parent use of technology has also become more equitable post-pandemic (Cleveland et al., 2024). Most school-related matters or behavioral concerns can be appropriately dealt with through digital communication between teachers and parents (Kuusimäki et al., 2019) for parents who have access to and use technology. Emails and texts were rated as appropriate and efficient by parents when both had "a mutual understanding of the message" and the message required little interpretation (such as schedules; Hamm & Mousseau, 2023, p. 13). Parents appreciated that they could reread email messages before responding (Thompson et al., 2015). Powers (2023) also reported that most parents preferred an email from the teacher over a phone call. An innovative approach by Kawa'a (2022) incorporated digital photos as a mode of communication. Photos helped to provide parents a visual of the child's day, to clarify written content, to link activities to IEP goals, and to personalize communication interactions.

Teachers are encouraged to use face-to-face meetings or phone communication with parents when information to be shared is sensitive in nature (e.g., social or health concerns; Kuusimäki et al., 2019). Many parents preferred personal contact with the teacher to discuss and better understand the concern and have their questions answered (Chase & Valorose, 2019). According to Hamm and Mousseau (2023), phone or in-person communication provides feedback, cues, and natural exchanges, thus reducing the potential for miscommunications to occur.

A key recommendation when communicating with parents of children with special needs has been to individualize the approach and establish a preferred mode of communication early in the school year to meet parents "where they are" (Shamash et al., 2022, p. 86). These authors outlined a series of sample survey questions for parents regarding their communication preferences including the timing, language, and mode of communication. Jorgensen (2023) created a communication plan template designed for teacher use, including information about the parent's preferred mode of communication, priority topics, as well as timeline and frequency of interaction. Powers (2023) further encouraged teachers to learn and understand what type of communication format will "resonate" with each family. This is particularly important for the parents of children with special needs as they often face increased stress and decreased time availability.

Frequency

Although frequent, high-quality communication between teachers and parents of children with special needs is "necessary and expected," unfortunately this is not always achieved (Azad et al., 2018, p. 64). Several authors have described variable frequency of contact between teachers and parents in the special education context. Hobday (2015) reported that contacts ranged from once or twice a month to not at all, across four modes of communication. Woods et al. (2019) reported contacts ranged from daily to weekly to infrequent. More recently, Mann et al. (2024) reported the frequency of preferred contacts by parents was highly variable, ranging from every two weeks to three to four times per year. Some parents of children with ASD desired monthly communication with their child's teacher (Syriopoulou-Delli & Polychronopoulou, 2019).

Parents reported that the frequency of communication was often too little until a problem arose (Hobday, 2015). Regular and frequent parent–teacher communication was considered particularly important when the child did not have language to support sharing his or her school experiences with parents (Mann et al., 2024). Insufficient communication between teachers and parents resulted in parents having difficulty accessing information about their child's educational status (Odeh & Lach, 2024).

Overall, research suggests that parents of children with special needs want frequent and positive communication with teachers about their child (Butler et al., 2019; Shamash et al., 2022; Woods et al., 2018). Parents are increasing their use of technology to connect with school which will help set the stage for more frequent and efficient communications going forward (Cleveland et al., 2024). "Clear and frequent communication is the

foundation for establishing trust among families and educational teams" (Shamash et al., 2022, p. 78).

Individualized Education Program Meetings

IEPs are an integral component of special education service delivery. The IEP itself is a written document that outlines a child's performance, goals, and services including a range of modifications and accommodations in place, as well as transition planning for the future. Based on IDEA legislation (in the U.S.), the IEP team is multidisciplinary and includes the child's parents as well as school professionals representing regular education, special education, a representative of the local education agency, and relevant service providers (Guerrero et al., 2023). Examples of service providers may include specialists who work with the child directly (e.g., speech-language pathologist, educational diagnostician, physical and/or occupational therapist, school psychologist) as well as paraprofessionals (also known as teacher aides, teaching or educational assistants, and paraeducators). Indeed, the changing nature of the IEP team members makes it challenging to create consistency across meetings for teachers (Beck & DeSutter, 2020).

The IEP meeting is a key interaction opportunity with parents of children with special needs. Indeed, the IEP is a legally binding document that implies a "higher expectation for communication between parents and teachers" (Powers, 2023, p. 118). Parent participation is essential to the process but may be negatively impacted by lack of knowledge needed by parents to participate in a meaningful way, a feeling of being overwhelmed by the information provided, or feeling uncomfortable in the school setting (Strunk et al., 2022). It is recognized that IEP meetings can be challenging and stressful on many levels for all involved, including extensive paperwork and time demands, use of complex language, and the potential for disagreement between school staff and parents regarding a child's placement, goals, and services.

Schools are responsible to create a "safe, welcoming, and enabling environment" where parents can express their opinions and concerns regarding their child's IEP (Datoo, 2021, p. 224). However, many parents feel considerable trepidation when they attend an IEP meeting for their child and see a group of people sitting around the table (Brown, 2022). Parents have described feeling "blindsided" (Brown, 2022), "outnumbered" (Kurth et al., 2019), "overwhelmed" (Datoo, 2021), "powerless" (Mueller & Vick, 2019), "unprepared" (Means, 2023), and an "unwelcome participant" (Garraway,

2019). One father commented that the focus on his daughter's deficits during the IEP meeting was "painful" to endure (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Parents reported feeling listened to, but not truly heard (Means, 2023). Indeed, based on the analysis of parent input noted in IEP documents, Kurth et al. (2019) reported about one-third of parent concerns and priorities were not captured on IEP documents. When parents were surveyed regarding their experience in IEP meetings, over half (54.6%) reported a negative experience including a deficit-focus, a predetermined plan limiting parent input (e.g., IEP written prior to the meeting), and school professionals who lacked knowledge or withheld information (Sanderson, 2023).

The use of "educational jargon" in IEPs has been highlighted by several authors as a notable concern. Walker et al. (2022) recommended that teachers write IEPs with language that clearly specifies "how, when, and where" services will be provided. It is important that key ideas, phrases, acronyms, and technical terms are defined and explained to parents to ensure their understanding. Importantly, Clark (2023) cautioned educators to be sensitive to the use of labels that may detract from a focus on the student and his or her individual needs.

Several authors have recommended a pre-meeting with parents before the formal IEP meeting occurs (Beck & DeSutter, 2020; Brown, 2022; Jones & Peterson-Ahmad, 2017; Lynch, 2023). An informal mini conference was suggested one to three weeks before the IEP meeting for about 20 to 30 minutes, with an interpreter arranged if needed (Jones & Peterson-Ahmad, 2017). Potential topics include the role of meeting attendees, explanation of technical terms and jargon, discussion of IEP procedures, a review of parental rights, updating parents on the child's progress, and discussing possible new goals for the child. Collier et al. (2020) also suggested that when educational diagnosticians reviewed their child's assessment results prior to the IEP meeting, parents were able to "process the information in a less stressful circumstance" and were thus better able to "participate as a partner" in their child's IEP meeting with school staff (p. 48). Indeed, parents of children with special needs reported that pre-meetings set the stage for more successful IEP meetings (Lynch, 2023).

A number of key strategies are summarized below to support communication with parents during IEP meetings based on recommendations from the literature (Beck & DeSutter, 2020; Chang et al., 2022; Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018; Crockett et al., 2019; Elser, 2017; Fiore & Fiore, 2017; Goscicki et al., 2023; Parkin & Tyre, 2022; Sapp, 2021; Sistek-Chandler, 2017; Walker et al., 2022):

- Welcome all participants.
- Provide a checklist for each participant with details and expectations for their role.
- Ensure language and cultural considerations, including an interpreter/cultural liaison if needed, translated documents, awareness of cultural factors that may impact parent interactions, etc.
- Engage in initial small talk to accommodate the language use of participants.
- Clearly explain the purpose, process, goals, and expectations of the meeting.
- Ensure parents are aware of the importance of their role and their legal rights.
- Provide a written agenda including time frames to provide a reference point for discussion.
- Arrange for ample meeting time to ensure each participant has a chance to speak.
- Prepare in advance: gather and review relevant documents, data, and reports.
- Maintain a calm and friendly demeanor with a positive tone.
- Complement parents and use I-statements to frame concerns.
- Focus on the child. Highlight the child's strengths and successes.
- Review the student's past performance related to previously stated goals.
- Bring student work samples to provide visual examples.
- Use active listening strategies.
- Be sensitive to and validate the feelings of parents.
- Use open-ended questioning, paraphrasing, and summarizing to promote understanding.
- Attend to verbal and nonverbal communication (eye contact, tone of voice, body gestures).
- Model respect for the opinions of all participants and commit to consensus-building.
- Model and encourage feedback to signal misunderstanding ("I'm not sure I understand").
- Encourage parental input in the writing of goals and objectives for their child.
- Be open to new information and resources.
- Close the meeting with a brief review/summary of the IEP that has been developed.
- Discuss next steps and express appreciation to all participants for attending.
- Conclude the meeting with all participants leaving at the same time.

Panico (2019) suggested using a projector screen during the IEP meeting to allow participants to see "real time changes" as the IEP is being developed (p. 55). Use of technology has also become common to hold virtual IEP meetings with parents since the COVID-19 pandemic. Continued use of virtual IEP meetings as an alternative to in person meetings has been recommended to provide both parents and IEP team members with "flexible and accessible options for engagement" (Guerrero et al., 2023, p. 15).

"The majority of negative experiences and exchanges between parents and educators typically precede, and then become heightened at the IEP meeting" (Mueller & Vick, 2019, p. 100). Positive interactions with parents over time are a critical ingredient to successful IEP meetings. Parents reported that it was meaningful to them when school leaders took time before the IEP meeting to observe and get to know their child (such as learning about the child's interests; Brown, 2022). Special education teachers reported that bonding with parents was built on trust, reciprocity, openness, and attentiveness when working on the IEP together (Dor & Stern, 2022). Parents of children with special needs focused on leadership attributes including honesty, empathy, listening, and asking for and being open to input (Lynch, 2023). According to Parkin and Tyre (2022), effective collaboration in special education meetings is built on "credibility, clear and logical communication, and acts of caring" (p. 14). Educators have been encouraged to imagine that the IEP meeting was about planning for someone they loved, and in doing so, hold parents through the process with gentleness and care (Elser, 2017).

Culturally Responsive Practices

The student population in American public schools is becoming increasingly diverse. Based on National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, Irwin et al. (2023) reported that over 50% of public-school students were considered non-White, reflecting Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native backgrounds. Immigration in the past number of years has increased this diversity even more. However, the workforce is not diversifying at the same rate (Lavin et al., 2021), with only about 20% of public-school teachers identifying as individuals of color (Billingsley et al., 2019; Irwin et al., 2023). Given the significant potential for cultural and linguistic differences to exist between teachers and parents, it is critical that teachers adopt culturally responsive practices to communicate with the parents of all their students.

Within the context of special education, the "intersection" of diversity and disability becomes even more complex (Fallah & Murawski, 2018; Kaplan & Celik, 2023). The overrepresentation of children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds in special education programs has been an ongoing concern for many years (Grindal et al., 2019; Kulkarni, 2020; Morgan, 2020; Ortiz et al., 2020). Concerns have been raised regarding the rapid increase and concentration of CLD students in rural areas and the implications for special education programming (Johnson et al., 2018). In addition, CLD parents of children with special needs have themselves described the special education process as challenging and have highlighted the need for teachers to develop greater cultural competency (Garraway, 2019). Teachers must be sensitive to the fact that CLD parents must "navigate a system that does not share their unique cultural views, beliefs, and parenting styles" (McLeod, 2022, p. 25).

Several important barriers have been discussed in the literature that impact teachers' ability to communicate with CLD parents of children with special needs. These include:

- language and communication challenges (Fallah & Muraski, 2018; Kaplan & Celik, 2023; Lakhwani, 2023; Rossetti et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2021);
- cultural differences in nonverbal messages that may impact communication (Gašpar et al., 2023; Ren, 2014; Soukup, 2019; Tamzarian et al., 2012; Tiechuan, 2016);
- parent's lack of familiarity with the school system, special education services, and relevant legislation (Burke et al., 2020; Datoo, 2021; Lakhwani, 2023);
- differing views regarding disability and intervention (Harry, 2018; McLeod, 2022); and
- racial stereotypes, social stigma, and a deficit view of CLD children and families (Cherng, 2016; Fallah & Murawski, 2018; Walker et al., 2022; Zimmermann & Keynton, 2021).

However, even though the communication challenges are complex, there are many steps that teachers can take to improve communication with CLD parents of children with special needs.

Mindset

Teachers are encouraged to develop "cultural self-awareness" to create a positive climate for collaboration with CLD parents to occur (Chang et al., 2022, p. 133). This is an individual journey (Lavin & Goodman, 2023) that requires a mindset of self-reflection as well as an openness and willingness

to learn and an appreciation for the significance of diverse points of view (Chang et al., 2022; Harry, 2018; Singh, 2023). To accomplish this, Rossetti et al. (2017) proposed three guiding questions for teachers to consider that will facilitate relationship building with CLD parents of children with special needs (p. 174):

1. *How culturally responsive am I?* Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their own cultural beliefs and experiences and how these may influence their personal perspectives of diversity.
2. *Who is this family?* Teachers are encouraged to convey an interest in and learn about the family's culture, experiences, primary language, perceptions of disability, and goals for their child.
3. *Have I developed a collaborative partnership with this family?* Teachers are encouraged to assess the quality of their interactions with CLD parents (such as during IEP meetings) and identify areas for improvement that will improve culturally responsive practices.

Building on the concept of self-reflection, Lavin and Goodman (2023) promoted the use of reflective journaling as part of an undergraduate course in special education to encourage preservice teachers to explore their own beliefs and practices as well as their own biases and "notions of deficit about others" (p. 8). Indeed, "culturally responsive practices require educators to develop cultural competence, challenge biases and assumptions, and actively engage with students, families, and communities" (Singh, 2023, p. 45).

It is important to recognize that definitions and practices related to disabilities are "culturally constructed" (Harry & Fenton, 2017, p. 161). This includes parental perspectives regarding their child's general development (Kaplan & Celik, 2023), the potential cause of the child's disability (e.g., genetic, fate, karma; Chen & Lee, 2021), as well as goals for their child that may differ from the norm (e.g., interdependence versus independence; Tamzarian et al., 2012). For example, differences in perspective regarding the meaning of disability was reported in a group of teachers and a multicultural group of parents (Lalvani, 2015). Teachers tended to view disability as "biologically defined" (i.e., physical, neurological, or cognitive limitations) whereas parents aligned with sociocultural views of disability. Teachers viewed labels as guides to educational planning, whereas many parents considered labels as restrictive and reflecting stigma or lowered expectations for their child. Thus, an understanding of the parent's cultural values regarding disability is critical for teachers to establish mutual goals that will support the child's learning.

Strategies

In addition to self-reflection, teachers are encouraged to use proactive strategies to remove barriers to engage with CLD parents of children with disabilities. It is important that strategies are individualized and based on the family's strengths, needs, and experiences (Rossetti et al., 2017). Indeed, there is no "one-size-fits-all" line of action (González & Frumkin, 2018).

Gerzel-Short et al. (2019) outlined four general approaches teachers can use to support cross-cultural communication: *interpret*, *invite*, *interact*, and *intend*. The first approach (*interpret*) involves recognition that language is a "lifeline" for CLD parents (Love, 2019). In fact, language has been described as one of the greatest obstacles to creating reciprocal relationships with CLD parents (Rubin et al., 2021). Recognition of language differences starts with welcome signs in the school building that represent the population of families in the school. Interactions with CLD parents include making interpreter services available to families, such as during IEP and other meetings (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019). Similarly, special education documents should be translated into the parent's primary language (Walker et al., 2022). Additional language strategies include the use of "supportive dialogue" with CLD parents by defining key terms, ideas, and phrases; using "discourse markers" (e.g., signaling when topics change, repeating key words); prompting parents for comments and suggestions, and using visuals such as work samples to illustrate concepts (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018).

It is helpful for teachers to understand that differences in communication styles between cultures may become the source of miscommunication. Educators tend to use "low context communication" that involves direct and explicit communication based on words. Many CLD parents, on the other hand, rely on "high context" communication that stresses nonverbals (such as body language, facial expressions, and the timing of silence; Fallah & Murawski, 2018). As a result, CLD parents may interpret teachers as cold and distant, while teachers may interpret CLD parents as disengaged. Some CLD parents may also present as passive and lacking enthusiasm when in fact the parent may be respectfully deferring to the teacher's expertise and authority (Fallah & Murawski, 2018).

The second approach involves being *invitational*. Teachers are encouraged to get to know CLD parents and to show an interest in their culture (Mortier et al., 2021). Teachers can invite parents to share their cultural beliefs, perspectives, and approaches as well as their hopes and dreams for their child within a friendly and supportive context. Teachers are encouraged to

use active listening skills to ensure that parent voices are heard. Teachers can also invite CLD parents to visit the classroom and to participate in activities at the school, such as bilingual game nights, cultural celebrations, and creating family books (Protacio et al., 2020) to build connections.

The third approach to engaging CLD parents is to *interact* with purpose (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019). As previously noted, teachers are encouraged to reach out to CLD parents early in the school year based on their preferred language and mode of communication. Teachers are then encouraged to interact with CLD parents regularly through the school year to review their child's progress (Feeney et al., 2024). Teachers should ensure equitable introductions during meetings (i.e., state the first and last name of each participant versus "Mom/Dad" for the parent; Harry, 2018), provide extra time for conversations with CLD parents, and follow up with parents for a post-meeting conversation a few days after the IEP meeting (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018).

Virtual IEP meetings have been highlighted as particularly helpful to engage CLD parents versus mandating in-person meetings (Feeney et al., 2024). To meet the specific needs of CLD parents, these authors suggested providing plenty of advance notice to allow parents to arrange for work and childcare, ensuring language supports are in place for the meeting (i.e., interpreter and translated documents as needed), and determining the technology needs of parents when a virtual meeting is planned (including the potential to provide a school device and training if needed). It was recommended that each participant be visible on screen and reminders provided during the meeting regarding participation options (e.g., chat, raise hand, mute/unmute, and emoticons).

The use of "cultural brokers" has been discussed in the literature as an additional way to engage CLD parents in the special education process. Mortier et al. (2021) described cultural brokers as mainly volunteers, many of whom were also parents of children with special needs. They supported parents by providing information (e.g., explaining the roles of IEP team members), encouraging parents to trust their knowledge and voice, assisting parents to understand documentation, and providing emotional support (e.g., after diagnosis and after IEP meetings). Sheehey et al. (2018) noted that paraeducators may serve an important role of cultural broker including interpreting and providing information to CLD families.

Finally, teachers are encouraged to be *intentional* in their approach to engage CLD parents. Chang et al. (2022) provided two practical checklists designed for teachers to support CLD parents/families through the IEP process. The "Levels of Understanding of the IEP" checklist helps

teachers assess how much support CLD parents may need to actively participate, ranging from limited to extensive understanding of the process. The "EPIC" checklist (explain, provide, inquire, coordinate) then outlines cultural considerations and practical actions teachers can take to support meaningful interactions with parents before, during, and after the IEP meeting. Intentional practices include use of active listening, being aware of power differentials, seeking parent input, using accessible language, providing parents with multiple opportunities to ask questions, and offering flexible ways for parents to participate (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019).

Final Thoughts

"We have the potential to learn so much more from parents, as individuals and as experts on their children, from their experience, their traditions, their values, and their cultures" (Solvason et al., 2019, p. 201). Indeed, communication with parents of children with special needs is not only legally mandated but also offers teachers rich information to support student learning. As the number of students receiving special education services increase in our schools, it is critically important that both regular and special education teachers are trained to effectively communicate with the parents of students who require individualized supports and services. This article provides teachers with a clear foundation from the literature to inform their practice as they seek to communicate with the parents of children with special needs.

An important first step is for teachers to appreciate the potential impacts on parents and families of having a child with a disability, including the "additional financial, physical, psychological and social" burdens that may occur (Cheng & Lai, 2023, p. 9). With humility and respect, teachers are encouraged to view parents as experts on their children. Information from parents about their child complements the expertise teachers bring in pedagogical content knowledge and practices, including knowledge about their learners (Anderson & Taner, 2023). Teachers are encouraged to use proactive strategies to build trust with parents, recognizing that trust develops over time based on consistent and positive interactions. Use of effective communication skills are an important component of building trust with parents, particularly when difficult conversations are needed.

Communicating with parents of children with disabilities also requires careful attention to the content of communication, the mode of interaction, and the frequency of contacts. Frequent positive contacts using the parent's preferred mode of communication have been recommended. Use

of technology appears to be appropriate for most interactions with parents, ensuring a plan for those parents who do not have access. Conversations with parents about sensitive topics, however, require a more personalized approach. A key interaction point is the IEP meeting which many parents of children with special needs (and teachers) face with trepidation. A series of strategies have been outlined based on the literature that will facilitate communication during these important discussions with parents that set the stage for student learning. The goal is to create a "shared vision" for the child (Walker et al., 2022, p. 5).

An intentional plan is recommended to communicate with CLD parents who have a child with a disability, including use of interpreters and translation services. It is important to recognize that "people perceive reality through the prism of their culture and experience acquired with it" (Twardowski, 2022, p. 48). To support CLD parents, educators are encouraged to first look within and reflect on their own cultural biases and assumptions. Teachers are then encouraged to approach cross-cultural communication from a place of empathy, respect, and curiosity, and to use culturally responsive approaches and practices that seek to break down barriers to build trusting partnerships with all families.

Teachers have the "chance to encourage parents and help give them hope" (Jorgensen, 2023, p. 143). It is important to "find the right words to be honest" (Solvason & Proctor, 2021, p. 470) while at the same time nurturing parental dreams and expectations for their child (Simon, 2020). Parents will remember teachers who demonstrate professionalism, small acts of kindness, a friendly and welcoming attitude, a willingness to reach out and listen, honesty and openness to learn, a nonjudgmental approach, as well as the ability to see beyond the disability and to value the whole child and family.

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Barriers and Facilitators to Accessing Primary and Secondary Education for Students With Disabilities in the Central Gondar Zone, Ethiopia

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Abstract

In Ethiopia, there is low enrollment of children and youth with disabilities in the education system. Lack of access to early childhood, primary, and secondary education can reinforce cycles of poverty, limiting access to future employment opportunities and opportunities for independent living. Moreover, with children with disabilities out of school, there can be negative repercussions on their guardians due to lost productivity related to caregiving responsibilities. It is critical to better understand specific barriers faced by children and their families, as well as facilitating factors, to help increase access to education in alignment with Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. To that end, we conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with students with disabilities and their families in the Central Gondar Zone of Ethiopia to explore their experiences of barriers and facilitators to accessing government, private, or church schools. Findings reveal five critical factors affecting education access: (a) attitudes of family members, students, and community/society; (b) key individuals influencing access to education; (c) family and student advocacy and savviness; (d) material and financial support to access

schools; and (e) institutional readiness. Participants also proposed recommendations to enhance access to public education. These findings provide insights to alleviate barriers and foster inclusivity in the primary and secondary education systems.

Key Words: students with disabilities, education access, Ethiopia, Africa, inclusive education, primary, secondary schools, barriers, facilitators

Introduction

In Ethiopia, as in many other countries, disability puts individuals at a disadvantage because of misconceptions, negative attitudes, lack of resources, and poor policy framework and implementation (Breffka et al., 2023; Ndlovu, 2023). Many children in Ethiopia are exposed to various vulnerabilities due to low community awareness of child rights (Tefera et al., 2015). For example, children with disabilities are more likely to sustain violence or abuse (Boersma, 2013; Okyere et al., 2019; Tefera et al., 2015), and very few attend formal schooling (Humanity & Inclusion, n.d.; MoE, 2016). In rural Ethiopia specifically, disability has long been perceived as a manifestation of parents' or ancestors' sins or an outcome of demonic possessions that lend to justifying isolation or stigmatization of persons with disabilities (Beyene & Tizazu, 2010; Diassa & Dano, 2021; Singal & Muthukrishna, 2014). It is not uncommon to find families who either hide their children with disabilities or limit their outside-of-the-home activities—including schooling—for fear of bearing community stigma or their children sustaining psychosocial or verbal abuse by peers, community members, or teachers (Sarton & Smith, 2018).

Further, despite improvements over the years, many Ethiopian teachers do not feel comfortable including children with disabilities in their classes (Ginja & Chen, 2021). As a result, many children with disabilities who enroll in schools do not benefit due to limited institutional capacities and resources, as well as physical inaccessibility and cultural barriers (MoE, 2016; Schiemer, 2017). Additional barriers to inclusive education (i.e., students with disabilities learning alongside those without) in Ethiopia include families not being aware of available schools or believing that children with disabilities could only attend segregated schools designed for children with disabilities (Franck & Joshi, 2017; Hirpa, 2021). Literacy rates are another barrier; according to the 2007 census in Ethiopia, 64.1% of adults (aged 15 and above) were illiterate (African Child Policy Forum, 2011).

Ethiopia's education system includes primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Primary education focuses on basic literacy and numeracy, while secondary education extends to Grades 9–12, leading to tertiary (higher) education access. Primary education is compulsory in Ethiopia, meaning that all children are required to attend school. Students in the higher secondary level in Ethiopia have the option to choose between natural sciences and social sciences as their focus (Teferra et al., 2018). Private schools in Ethiopia, funded by tuition fees, play a crucial role in the country's education system, though they sometimes focus on profits alongside their educational goals (Woldetsadik et al., 2017).

Special education in Ethiopia has shifted from a segregated model to a more inclusive approach, aiming to integrate students with diverse needs into mainstream classrooms. The number of schools in Ethiopia has increased significantly in recent years, with primary and secondary schools experiencing 8% and 17% growth, respectively, from 2015–16 to 2019–20 (UNICEF, 2021). These schools are intended to accommodate students with various disabilities, including physical, sensory, intellectual, and developmental disabilities (Müllegger & Chapman, 2024). While inclusive education has been a priority, the implementation of policies has been poor, and children with disabilities face significant challenges in accessing and benefiting from education. Inclusive education has seen notable progress in recent years, especially in relation to students with disabilities (Yorke et al., 2023); however, inaccessible infrastructure poses a challenge for children with disabilities to access education (Beyene et al., 2023). Despite the Ethiopia Federal Ministry of Education's introduction of the "Special Needs Education Programme Strategy" in 2005, limited progress has been made in implementing inclusive education due to financial challenges, a lack of accurate data on children with special needs, and inadequately qualified teachers (Semela, 2014). Financial investment, improved identification processes, disability-friendly schools, attitudinal changes, and training and support for teachers and professionals are needed to promote inclusive and special needs education in Ethiopia (Yorke et al., 2023).

Ethiopia's education system is progressing towards inclusivity and equity for students with disabilities despite challenges, but many are left without access to schooling (Tefera et al., 2015). It is critical to draw from the lived experiences of students with disabilities and their family members to understand barriers and facilitators to access primary and secondary education and identify ways to improve educational access. As such, this article explores the following research question: What do family members and students identify as barriers and facilitators to accessing kindergarten

to Grade 12 (K–12) education for students with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities in Gondar, Ethiopia?

Methods

Data Collection

This study was reviewed and approved by Ethiopian and Canadian institutional ethics review boards prior to the commencement of any contact with participants. We completed 35 in-person, semi-structured interviews (20 students with disabilities, 15 family members) in four *kebeles* (Ethiopia's smallest administrative units) in the Central Gondar Zone of Ethiopia: in Gondar, QolaDiba, Delgi, and Chilga. As the availability of community resources varies between *kebeles*, we purposively selected these locations for participant recruitment to represent diversity in available community resources to support access to education – including the University of Gondar Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) program, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and governmental organizations that have interventions to support educational access. We also sampled purposively from these *kebeles* to obtain diverse experiences based on residential patterns—urban, rural, and semiurban—as well as the typical socioeconomic status of individuals in a particular location. Table 1 provides further details about the study sites.

We identified students with disabilities (age 15+) and family members of children with disabilities through the CBR networks and other disability and social service professionals working in the study sites, as well as through local school principals and teachers. Once members of the research team were connected via telephone with families, they explained the study and, if they were willing to participate, arranged a time to meet in person in a convenient location (e.g., in participants' residences, school compounds, or offices) and complete informed consent prior to the completion of the interview.

This study included 35 participants, including 20 students with disabilities and 15 family members of students with disabilities. Of these, 15 students and their family members came from the same households. For the other five students, we did not interview a family member because we were not able to locate their family members. These students lived in rented houses in semiurban or urban areas for higher secondary education, while their families resided in remote villages. Tables 2 and 3 offer further participant details.

Table 1. Interview Site Descriptions

Site	Key Characteristics
Kebele 4 – Gondar City	- Home to the Tsadiku Yohannes General Elementary School that enrolls 203 students with disabilities attending special and regular classes - Urban - Many supports anticipated to be available
Kebele 2 – QolaDiba	- Six education facilities, enroll many students with disabilities - Relatively diverse community support options - Urban
Kebele 1 – Delgi	- Semiurban town in a predominantly rural district - Some students with disability enrolled in a local school - No current presence of CBR or NGO programs targeting disability or inclusive/special education - Some organizations providing support to "vulnerable children"
Kebele 1 – Chilga	- Nine education centers - Limited CBR support; however, some organizations supporting school-aged children (e.g., Association for Nationwide Action for Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect; World Vision) are operational - Semiurban

Table 2. Participant Information – Students With Disabilities

Gender	Grade	Impairment	Living Arrangement	Site
Girls (9); Boys (11)	Grades 3–5 (6); 6–8 (5); 9–12 (9)	Hearing (2); Intellectual (3); Mobility (7); Visual (9)	With family, non-rented (7); Rented with or without family (7); Boarding school (2); Organizations of Persons with Disabilities Charity House (2); Missing data (2)	Chilga (5); Delgi (5); Gondar (5); Qola Diba (5)

Notes. For Grade: In Ethiopia, many students are not listed in age-appropriate grades. As such, although grades are listed as low as Grade 3 here, all participants were aged 15 or older. For Impairment: Some students reporting having multiple impairments, so each identified is listed in the table.

Students with disabilities and family members were interviewed separately to encourage open and confidential conversations and to capture their unique perspectives on shared events (Reczek, 2014). Different interview protocols were developed for each group, with questions tailored to

reflect their specific roles. Each protocol included six primary questions, most of which were followed by several subquestions. Despite the tailored approach, the interview questions generally focused on key areas, including experiences accessing education, support that enabled access, available community resources to promote inclusion, barriers to access, and experience with family–school–community collaboration. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was facilitated by one of the Amharic-speaking co-authors (BMA, GS, MAG, SD, or MA). Some co-authors who conducted interviews also have lived experience with disability, and this helped to establish rapport and understanding with research participants. We conducted, audiorecorded, and transcribed the interviews in Amharic (the language spoken at home in the region) and then translated the transcripts from Amharic into English.

Table 3. Participant Information – Family Members of Students

Gender	Relationship With Student	# of Children	Occupation	Site
Women (12); Men (3)	Mother (11); Father (3); Sister (1)	1-2 (3); 3-4 (3); 5-6 (4); 7-8 (1); Missing data (4)	Laborer (3); Cleaning (2); Farmer (2); Housewife (2); Baker (1); Health Extension Worker (1); Prison police officer (1); Missing data (3)	Chilga (3); Delgi (5); Gondar (3); Qola Diba (4)

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, all co-authors read a selection of the transcripts and generated initial descriptive codes (Miles et al., 2014). Meeting as a full team in person, we discussed these initial codes and questions that arose from our study of the data. Talking through our initial descriptive codes and finding quotes to support each, we negotiated clear definitions and wrote a detailed codebook. Then, two team members independently completed the coding of all transcripts using the established codebook using NVivo software. The two coders, one from the U.S. and one from Ethiopia, met to discuss and amend the codes (we added one code and clarified the definitions of a few others). Using this refined codebook, one researcher took the lead on coding all family interviews, and one researcher took the lead on coding interviews with students with disabilities to complete first cycle coding (Miles et al., 2014). We met virtually to discuss the data

once first cycle codes were completed and to generate pattern codes that threaded together the codes into overarching themes. We presented these themes to the authorship team along with supporting data in outline form. We agreed that these themes represented the data, and we present them in the findings section that follows.

Positionality

In this study, we acknowledged our positionality and the influence it may have on our research focus, methodology, and data interpretations (Yip, 2024). Our research team consisted of researchers from Ethiopia, Canada, and the U.S., several of whom are fluent in Amharic and all of whom are fluent in English. Our research team included individuals with extensive professional and academic expertise in disability studies and inclusive education, comprising Ethiopian students with disabilities, educators from North America and Ethiopia, and community-based rehabilitation leaders from Ethiopia. Ethiopian team members' backgrounds fostered a deep understanding of the context and empathy towards the participants' experiences. Having representation from North American team members enabled us to probe potentially taken-for-granted assumptions of the Ethiopian team members and translate to a more global audience. To enhance the credibility of our findings, we maintained reflexivity throughout the study, critically examining how our tacit knowledge, assumptions, values, and potential biases might shape the research (Cutcliffe, 2003). For example, the research team met monthly via Zoom to discuss the data. During these meetings, we made time for questions and explanations of data and our interpretations.

Findings

Participants identified the following five factors that facilitated or impeded access to K–12 education: (a) attitudes of family members, students with disabilities themselves, and society; (b) key individuals influencing access to education; (c) family and student advocacy and savviness; (d) material and financial support to access schools; and (e) institutional readiness. Additionally, participants offered recommendations for improved access to public education.

Attitudes of Family Members, Students With Disabilities Themselves, and Society

Participants indicated that positive attitudes towards both education and disability facilitated access to education for students with disabilities in the Central Gondar Zone. This included both family and societal perceptions or attitudes about education for children with disabilities. Having high expectations for children with disabilities was a facilitating factor noted by participants. On the other hand, negative attitudes towards both education and disability hindered the inclusion of students with disabilities in public education settings. This included families' limited perceptions or attitudes about education for their children with disabilities, hiding their children in the home because of stigma associated with disability, perceiving education as not relevant to their children, and fear that their children would be made vulnerable by attending school. Societal perceptions of children with disabilities, including low expectations and stigma, also hindered their access to education.

Many participants explained that there was an outdated way of thinking about disability and indicated that a different conceptualization of disability would be preferable. One mother (F5) stated:

> You know our society. People…say, "What is wrong with her?" But, she hears them talking behind her as she passes by them. They constantly harass her. I encourage her to not be afraid of them and talk to them freely.

Participants indicated that teachers and school administrators must be more cognizant of the need to educate all students, including those with disabilities, instead of having what one participant considered to be a lack of concern and awareness. Furthermore, people with disabilities need employment opportunities to help maintain positive attitudes toward education. As one participant noted, it is challenging to maintain inspiration and motivation to pursue education if there are little to no employment prospects afterward. One parent (F3) explained that the challenging attitudes described above are slowly changing to be more positive: "Many people are giving up hiding their children, saying that 'this is the will of the Creator.'" In addition to describing how attitudes can affect education access of students with disabilities, participants also described the strong influence that key individuals had on overcoming negative attitudes and accessing public education.

Key Individuals Influencing Access to Education

Participants identified numerous key individuals who facilitated access to public education for students with disabilities. Many participants explained that these individuals helped them have high expectations, taught them how to support their child with a disability, and provided encouragement. The key individuals sometimes helped enroll the student with a disability in school, provided necessary accommodations to access school, or supported students or families in other ways. Key individuals were both part of the formal social welfare system in the country or were less formally established as supports and more external to the established system.

Formal Helping Individuals

Many formal helping individuals, working in their capacity as paid employees of organizations, identified and assisted children with disabilities who were not attending school. They accomplished this by going door-to-door and gaining trust in the community. One of the most prevalent groups of individuals highlighted by participants were CBR workers employed by the University of Gondar, who provide community-level rehabilitation support and help connect people to specialized services when needed. The power of these individuals cannot be overstated, as they were often the *only* people identified as helping families of individuals with disabilities, as stated by a parent (F2): "[CBR worker, A.] is the only one who visits me. She is the one who helps me." Another parent (F9) stated, "[CBR workers] are ones who helped him to be considered as human. There is no one except them." One student (S7) stated, "There is no support from any organization at all. It is only [staff members of the CBR program] who are fighting for us." CBR workers gain trust with families and encourage them to send their children to school. Another parent (F13) explained that her child "was disabled when she was born. However, I didn't do anything until CBR workers came to find her house to house. It is after that and with their support that she went out of the house."

CBR workers helped families gain skills to care for their children with disabilities. One parent (F3) explained that the CBR worker:

> Teaches us to keep calm, to take good care of the children, to work towards their needs, and to keep them strong and healthy. She is the one who made him do sports. She often advised him to run every morning. She is the one who is trying hard for the improvement of everyone's life.

Another parent explained that the CBR worker also helped her to start saving money, which can help alleviate financial burdens associated with

education. Furthermore, participants identified that CBR workers advocated for them, helping them obtain access to schools and the assistive devices they needed to participate in the schools (e.g., a wheelchair). One student (S15) told us that after trying to enroll in a local school without success:

> CBR sent [my local school] a letter that said: "We ask you politely to accept him. Otherwise, we will report you to the district educational office." Following this, a committee was organized in the school that discussed my issue and the committee gave me a week of trial time.

Participants recognized health extension workers as another valuable formal support for individuals with disabilities and their families. When health extension workers go door-to-door, meeting with families in their homes, they gain trust within the population and, as a result, learn about people with disabilities who may be hidden away from the public. One family member (F5), who is also a health extension worker, stated, "When we go door-to-door, we find many types of disabled people. We find many hidden things.…Since we know all the houses in the town, there is nothing that can be hidden from us. We get everything."

Participants also discussed organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) and individuals who work for them as key to supporting their access to school. Workers from OPDs helped individuals and their families understand that it is possible to attain an education as a person with a disability. When sharing about a member of the OPD who worked as a shoeshine boy and was a good student who graduated from a university and was employed afterward, a student (S4) noted: "He is well-paid…I want to be like him." OPD workers also advocated for support and access for participants. One student (S10) stated, "[The OPD member] went to the school and told them about me."

Participants identified advocates with disabilities in the religious sector who were key supports to them as well. For example, one parent (F4) recalled that a religious father in his neighborhood had been born paralyzed but had gone to school and succeeded in the church. When the participant's child "lost his health…at the age of 9 or 10," he started to refuse to go to school. The participant sought the help of the religious father, who shared his own experiences with exclusion as well as the support given to him by key people in his life. This religious leader encouraged the parent to keep the child in school and not to see physical disability as a barrier to education.

Natural Helping Individuals

Participants also identified key individuals who supported access to school for individuals with disabilities but did so due to a relationship with

the individuals and families, not because it was an expectation of their professional role. These natural supporters included friends, family members, and individuals who have experience with disability.

Several individuals with disabilities identified their friends as critical to their ability to physically access school. One student (S7) told us:

> I have very good friends. We are like brothers. They take me places and get me home. We are like family…we come to school together when there are tutorial classes. That is how my friends are supporting me in my schooling. It is all because of them that I continued going to school. I couldn't have done it on my own.

Participants discussed, in particular, the support of their friends in physically getting to and around school. Students who used wheelchairs sometimes benefitted from friends pushing their chairs to help them get to and around the school. One mother (F5) explained that her daughter got tired walking to school, so

> I told her and her friend to come together and walk slowly. When they go to school, I tell them to set off early so that they won't be in a hurry. The teachers let them in even if they are late for class because they know us and understand the situation.

Another parent (F7) explained that she used to carry her daughter to school, but now "good people have started to bring her from school by bicycle, and some are carrying her piggyback." Another parent (F2) explained:

> Before he was given a wheelchair by the school administration, he used to walk with one leg hanging on. Later, the school gave him a wheelchair, and now he uses it to go to and come from school. His schoolmates help him on his way to school or home by pushing the wheelchair.

Yet another parent (F13) described how her daughter faced challenges both on the way and within the school due to uneven pathways. Her daughter's friends helped by lifting her and assisting her into the classroom. The route to school included slopes and rocky terrain, adding to the difficulties.

Participants also expressed that their family members offered them informal support. For example, one student (S15) explained that their mother fell ill and could no longer support them:

> It is my sister who is responsible to support me. It is she who gives me different care, like she washes my body, she washes my clothes, and she generally helps me to keep my hygiene as a student. Unless we go to school with proper hygiene, there are psychological pressures

> students impose on you even though they do not tell you explicitly. Generally, for me to go and come to school and from school on time, to attend my classes attentively equal with my peers, the role of my sister is very significant.

Numerous participants also explained extraordinary lengths that their parents took to ensure their access to school. One participant explained that her mother carried her to school on her back since they did not have a wheelchair. Another parent explained how he did not have the means to buy a wheelchair, but he was able to work out a deal in which he made an exchange of cattle that they owned for a wheelchair so that the child could go to school independently. In addition to key individuals, participants also noted internal strengths and abilities that enabled them to access school—in particular they discussed their advocacy skills.

Family and Student Advocacy and Savviness

The ability of families and students to advocate facilitated access to education. In addition to advocating for their needs, participants also demonstrated savviness in navigating resources and knowledge of available opportunities, as well as perseverance and a strong goal orientation. At times, individuals with disabilities needed to advocate for their own right to education, even if their parents disagreed. In contrast, we also heard about attempts at advocacy that did not succeed.

Participants indicated that enrollment was at times difficult. Participants expressed that age requirement policies were unclear (e.g., often children with disabilities are enrolled in school at a later age than their peers) and required advocacy efforts to navigate. Parents reported that they needed to be savvy in order to advocate for their children, a challenge further compounded by Ethiopia's high illiteracy rate. One mother (F12), a widow, explained:

> Children whose fathers died were being supported, but I did not know about it; I am illiterate. Although people knew that the government was helping orphans, they did not want to tell me. People are envious; they tell me after the opportunity passes.

Some instances of advocacy were successful, and often this success seemed to align with the savviness of the family. One parent (F11) described putting her son in four schools and having him run into difficulty at each school. Some of these schools were private, and some were run by the government. Her son had a physical impairment, did not talk, and had difficulty regulating his emotions, sometimes becoming violent when others teased him for walking with a limp. The son failed his exams at the end

of the year and was singled out by the teacher for his low mark. The child was discouraged, and the mother went to see the teacher. The teacher stated that he did not know the child had a disability. This advocacy helped the child receive the support he needed to succeed and also connected the teacher and the family so they could align their support for the child.

Another student (S15) shared this story, demonstrating his mother's strong advocacy on his behalf, even if it was not yet enough to gain him transportation to school:

> The first challenge was that there was a [community] belief that I can't learn.…For example, first I went to [an] elementary school for registration, but they refused my request. However, my mother insisted…she took a support letter from the CBR program. Still, they refused to allow me to join the school. They said I may damage some school properties and infrastructure, and that anyone who moves with a wheelchair may face different positive and negative misfortunes. Finally, they suggested that the school which includes inclusive students is [another] elementary school [and I should go there].… Nevertheless, my mother was living here in *kebele* 14 [and]…the distance from here to there is a great challenge for me.

The perseverance explained to us was often made possible by an orientation to achieve specific goals. One example of perseverance and a strong goal orientation was a student (S3) who lost her vision due to a reaction to "traditional medicine" when she was a child. She advocated to her family to enroll her in school, but her family "did not want me to get out of home and be seen." Finally, at age 12, her older sister found a school that could accommodate visually impaired students; it was a two hour walk from their village, but the older sister arranged for student housing for her younger sister with visual impairment. Despite being left alone to fend for herself during a period of civil unrest ("When problems arise, the first victims are the disabled ones. And even at that time, when everybody was going out leaving us alone, only we, the disabled people, are left here alone," S3), this student continued in school. She did not have access to materials in braille or a screen reader, so she relied on listening and having friends read aloud for her. Her teacher accused her of cheating because she needed to have an exam read aloud to her and have her answers scribed by a friend, but she was given no alternative.

Participating students with disabilities also expressed the need to advocate for their right to go to school within their own families. "I was denied or deprived of my right [to education], but…I wanted to learn like my brothers and sisters.…I decided that I will learn; I have to beg someone

and continue my education" (S3). This participant continued by explaining how she supported herself despite her family's desire for her to return home instead of continuing her education. Another participant shared that because she had limited support from her family, she sewed and sold materials to pay for her own needs while in school. At times, advocating for their education meant leaving their families. This student (S5) explained how she did this:

> I left my family, and I am here in this district hoping the government and other organizations will help me as much as possible. Otherwise, I don't have any family here. It's the local people who help me with the market. If it were not for them, I wouldn't have come here. My family's intention was to keep me with them in the village without letting me go to school because I grew up in a home where education is thought to be worthless for physically disabled people. That's why I abandoned them and started living here with people whom I had not known before.

The accounts of these participants highlighted how families and students played an important role in advocating for education. Their perseverance and savviness were key in navigating resources and policies. Alongside advocacy, participants indicated that it was essential to have material and financial support to enable them to attend school.

Material and Financial Support to Access Schools

Support to get to school and pay for necessary supplies was noted by participants as an important factor for their ability to access schools. Participants expressed that proximity to school, access to transportation, family economic means, and access to funding and materials facilitated access to education, and, conversely, their lack hindered access.

Some students shared that they had to travel far distances to attend school. Some students had to live in towns far from their families, often staying with relatives or even alone in rented houses. Frequently, the trip to school was exhausting, and participants were exhausted just by getting to school. One student (S7) explained that "transportation is another challenge. It is expensive, and I have to board a Sinotruk [heavy-duty truck manufactured in China] to go home or get back here. I have to spend 2.5 hours each way." Many participants identified that a wheelchair facilitated their ability to access school. One participant pointed out that a wheelchair alone was not good enough; additional assistance was still needed to push the wheelchair.

Attending school also required material support and basic needs being met. Participants identified their labor contributions to making a living as an issue in accessing education. One student (S15) explained that he did not register for school until he was eleven years old because:

> I was born and grew up in a rural community.…This rural community has no intention to send you to school, but it needs you to care for cattle, since I was not living with my biological parents.…Since I was a servant (living with my uncle), they wanted me to work, but they sent their own children to school.

When financially struggling families need support for their children with disabilities, they occasionally receive some financial support or the purchase of some school supplies. The financial support is equivalent to a bar or two of soap per month, and the school supplies may be pens, exercise books, or notebooks. In addition, some families and students mentioned receiving student housing when they needed to be away from their families to attend school. A few participants mentioned receiving some food support, as well. Some participants also explained that they received a wheelchair or crutches from the government. Many participants explained that they had been "forgotten." A few participants mentioned that they had received support from NGOs such as *Birhan Lehetsanat* (Light for the Children) and World Vision that provide children with learning materials. In addition to needing material and financial support to attend school, students and family members also discussed the critical importance of the educational institution being ready to include students with disabilities as well.

Institutional Readiness for Educating Students with Disabilities

Participants noted the importance of institutional readiness, which included teachers' willingness to include students with disabilities and ensure that students with disabilities were valued members of the school community. This readiness also involved providing physical access to all spaces and offering appropriate assistive materials and accommodations in the classroom.

There were varying degrees of teacher preparation and willingness to educate students with disabilities. After fighting for enrollment, one parent (F2) expressed a common sentiment with this explanation: "after [the challenges of] registration, there was a problem with the teachers." One student (S5) summed it up for us like this: "Obviously, human personality is different, and therefore, while some teachers wholeheartedly assist the disabled to learn well and achieve their end goals, others ignore them and do little to bring them to a better position."

As the previous quote indicates, there was a great deal of variability of institutional readiness, including teacher attitudes and behavior, across and within individual schools. For example, one mother (F15) told us:

> No sooner had she got registered than her teachers complained that she was too much of a nuisance to attend lessons. When one of her teachers told me not to bother her to come to school and to keep her at home, instead, the other one came close to me and said, "Don't worry. I am here to help her. Send her to school. She should learn to write her name."

The relationship teachers fostered with families was an important part of institutional readiness. We heard about educators who helped families have hope and high expectations, like this mother (F13) shared: "The teachers cared for her happily, and they used to encourage me to have hope for her. They used to say, 'Help her; she will achieve what students without disabilities can achieve.' Really the teachers encouraged me."

Unfortunately, such uplifting relationships were not ubiquitous. There were numerous examples of teachers excluding or even harming students with disabilities. For example, one mother (F12) stated, "One of the teachers even said that he would not get into the classroom in my child's presence and asked me to take him out of the classroom. He added that he would rather retire than teach in the presence of this student." A number of participants made claims of corporal punishment and physical abuse of teachers toward students with disabilities in the classroom. We also heard about families being shut out of educational decision-making and feeling frustrated yet powerless about how their child was treated. This mother (F2) shared a powerful example:

> There were times [the teacher] beat him. One day, he went to school wearing a pair of canvas shoes. It didn't have a bad smell, but this teacher embarrassed him by saying, "Why do you come wearing canvas shoes?" I was about to cry when he told me what she said to him. She puts all the blame on him for any misbehavior committed by students. For example, she hits him when the other kids mess up. And since she is his teacher, I did not want to tell her off, and therefore, I preferred to keep quiet lest I should offend her.

Perceiving students as individuals and having high expectations for them were critical components of institutional readiness for inclusive education, and having low expectations was a strong barrier to education. One student told us about his teacher encouraging him to leave his inclusive school to attend a school for students with disabilities. The student (S15)

told us that the teacher said, "you should go there because it is very difficult for you to keep up with students without disabilities. It is that school which concerns you. It is meaningless for you to stay in this school." One mother (F2) reflected on the low expectations from teachers toward her child, explaining that "they do not check his progress, maybe because they think that he doesn't know or speak about what is going on around." This mother (F2) also expressed her frustration with the lack of support from teachers:

> Even in school, there is nothing special teachers do to support him. It may be because they feel he doesn't know anything, I don't know. I feel hurt because of him a lot [because of how others treat him]. They are trained for this, but I don't know why they behave like this. Even if he doesn't talk, his mental capacity is good. The teachers don't understand this, and it is their problem, they just think he doesn't know. Because of that they do not [support] him.

One participant (S3) attributed lack of institutional readiness to knowledge rather than attitude. She explained that only the special needs teacher understood their needs, while others were not well-informed. The participant noted challenges in keeping up with notetaking because writing in Braille is slower than handwriting, making it hard to match the pace of her peers.

Some of our data also indicated that institutional readiness might vary, depending on the nature of the student's impairment. For example, a parent of a child with an intellectual disability (F3):

> tried to explain his problems to the teachers so that they would tolerate and encourage him. No one has registered him to join any club. No one cares about him. The hearing-impaired and visually impaired students even do not want him to work with them. They are on their own. Regarding mentally impaired ones, there is nobody to organize them, and he has no friends.

Once students could enroll in schools and physically access the school building, they needed to be able to access all components within the school (e.g., classrooms, bathrooms). This presented a challenge for many participants. We heard from a participant (S15) who explained that "many teachers gave me tests in upper buildings many times," and he could not access them in his wheelchair. At one primary school, a student (S5) explained:

> There are only three or four classes that are suitable for the disabled. Others have a lot of ups and downs. Offices too are not comfortable for us to get to and communicate with the teachers or the school principals.

Another student (S7) explained that:

> There is only one class in the school that is accessible to me. Otherwise, I sometimes have to stay outside while my classmates are in class or my friends have to carry me with my wheelchair and get me in. The school is not accessible because persons with disabilities were not considered when it was constructed. Even when I was assigned to a special class of high achievers, I took exams outside of the class because the class was not accessible.

There were also some facilitating factors improving physical accessibility within school campuses. For example, we heard from a student (S15) about CBR workers who built ramps at their school. "As a result, it is comfortably built for wheelchair entrance. After that, my friends helped me when I entered and exited."

Another factor of institutional readiness, according to participants, is access to materials like assistive technology, wheelchairs, and general school supplies. Some participants explained that the school buys supplies like "exercise books, pens, luggage, and a uniform," though that was not always the case. We also heard of some students having access to Braille, wheelchairs, crutches, white canes, and slate stylus to support their education. Other students, like this one (S3), when asked what they were given, stated, "No, not much, we don't have anything."

Recommendations for Improved Access to Public Education

Participants also shared recommendations about improving access to public education. First and foremost, participants recognized that the whole society needs to be more inclusive and that rural areas need to be prioritized when trying to understand and address educational inequities. Specifically, public perceptions of people with disabilities need to be improved in order to facilitate their inclusion in education. Participants highlighted that individuals with disabilities benefit when families, teachers, and community members had high expectations, provided moral support, and encouraged students to follow their dreams. Related to having high expectations for individuals with disabilities is creating a society in which their outcomes are valued enough to invest in their education and employment prospects. We include specific recommendations participants shared with us in the following subsections.

Shift Mindset About Disability

Participants recommended that community members must treat students with disabilities humanely to enable education access. A student (S3)

shared this example: "I think it would be better if the community at least came out and…[led] us in the correct direction if we are lost and going in the wrong direction. To me, it would also be better if they should encourage us, accompany us, and give us good advice rather than insulting us."

Many participants spoke about being hidden by their families (or hiding their children), being told to hide by community members, and being treated as less than full citizens due to their disabilities. Participants asserted that governmental and nongovernmental agencies should work together to find individuals with disabilities and deliver the support and services they need. In particular, participants recommended that agencies should focus on people with disabilities with poor and/or rural backgrounds, as these are the populations that tend to hide people with disabilities and do not have access to support and services. One student (S20) said:

> Rural people do not think that children with disabilities can be highly educated. Many people with disabilities are kept hidden in their houses. Their parents think that the family will be insulted if these children come out, so they hide them in houses.

A specific recommendation from one student (S12) with a visual impairment was to

> make a survey both in rural and urban areas and identify people who are in need of special support.…Parents of people with disabilities do not give attention to letting their children go to school. NGOs mostly prefer to work in big cities and not in rural districts.

This student (S12) also emphasized the need for targeted support for visually impaired children in rural areas:

> It is better for governmental and/or nongovernmental organizations to go to the rural area where a large number of visually impaired children are concealed in their parents' huts. Particularly, female visually impaired children do not receive necessary support. Their parents hide them, fearing that they would become pregnant and give birth if sent to towns for education.

Participants highlighted that changing societal perspectives and raising awareness about possibilities are key to increasing the inclusivity of education. Two participants called this "awareness creation." Another student (S11) pointed out that community members need to "realize that persons with a disability can reach a higher position and are qualified for responsibility. The most important thing that I expect is that the perception of society should be changed." One student (S13) said:

> I think that if the families have that kind of awareness and understanding and know that the disabled person will learn and change and achieve a lot of serious things, the family will have positive pressure and good attitude towards the learning of the disabled individuals.

Design a More Inclusive Society

Inclusion in education cannot be expected without inclusion in the rest of society. Participants mentioned the importance of creating accessible infrastructure and including people with disabilities in the government. They indicated that it is also critical that public spaces are accessible for people with disabilities. Increasing public accessibility would enable people with disabilities to move around freely, without relying on others. One student (S13) said:

> Poles should be stood in the right place, and roads can be fixed; potholes are covered and repaired in a systematic manner. Again, there are many disabled people who walk in wheelchairs, not for us, and I suggest that the ground floor is for them. If the government pays attention to it and fixes it, then the society and the disabled person will change, and the country will grow.

Participants indicated that this accessibility should expand to schools. One student (S11) pointed out that policy requires accessibility in educational structures, but "these things are put on paper, but practically they don't exist at all." Even though "there is an understanding that classes should be constructed in a way that is convenient for persons with disability," they are built in inaccessible ways. In short, "the government makes the law, yet it doesn't enforce and put it into practice down to the lower level of administration" (S5).

Additionally, participants identified that leadership must be inclusive of people with disabilities to break down barriers to education access. Participants called for including individuals with disabilities in public positions. They also pointed out that regional government meetings at the *kebele* level are not accessible/open to people with disabilities. One student (S13) shared: "Specially, the government should pay attention to people with disabilities. For example, even now, when we have a meeting, people with disabilities are not included even in *kebele* meetings."

Increase Access to Basic Support Needs, Materials, and Training

Participants indicated that to better enable access to education for students with disabilities, those students and their families need assistance to support their basic needs and necessary school materials. Furthermore,

participants recommended that NGOs focus on facilitating education for students living in poverty, as shared by this student (S15): "From my experience, many children with disabilities are not getting the opportunity to enroll in school because their families live in poverty so that they can't help them to learn. As a result, NGOs…should help these children." One way to support students with disabilities, and especially students with disabilities living in poverty, is to provide support for basic needs that enable them to participate in education. One student (S13) said, "There is the issue of life, at least what we need right now is the need for food. That is what affects us so much. There is the issue of house and clothes." Participants also noted that charity organizations and philanthropists could provide food and cash to students to enable their ability to attend school.

In addition, participants expressed the need for access to updated educational and mobility materials. Some examples of specific educational materials mentioned include: a digital recorder, Braille paper, stylus, Dictaphones, wheelchairs, and white canes. One student (S5) specified, "I need…textbooks. Secondly, one of my wheelchairs has broken down. I got this one fixed when the other one broke down, but someone stole it as soon as it was fixed." A student (S17) who has a visual impairment stated, "It will be better if the other organization gives us additional white canes, because as I told you, it is very difficult to move on this unleveled road. As a result, our canes are broken." Numerous participants explained that they needed access to technology and training on using it. We heard from a student (S11): "The government and organizations should connect disabled people with technology. Since we are far from technology, we are the first victims." Specifically, participants with visual impairments underscored the inequity when students take tests on the computer, but students are not trained in or given access to braille computers, especially in rural areas. A student (S12) said, "In rural areas there are a lot of people who do not even know how to use the memory card of a mobile phone." One student (S3) explained that they do not even advocate for braille computers at times because they are not aware of the possibilities.

Discussion

This study explored barriers and facilitators to accessing education from the perspective of students with disabilities and their family members in the Central Gondar Zone, Ethiopia. Participants identified that key individuals, such as formal support providers (e.g., CBR workers), friends, and family members had great influence to enable access to education for youth

with disabilities, but they also identified that if key individuals, such as immediate family members, are not supportive of the child with a disability accessing education, this can be a critical barrier as well. These findings align with a previous study by Aldersey and colleagues (2024), which discussed both helpful contributions and harmful attitudes of key individuals, affecting their decision to continue or discontinue their education. Future interventions to enable access to education for children with disabilities in Gondar might seek to build upon strong natural support systems already in place in the country (e.g., encouraging peer support networks, implementing mentorship initiatives with community leaders with disabilities) and target interventions at the family and community levels to mitigate the stigma of disability and promote the value of education for children with disabilities.

An important contribution of this study is the empirical evidence generated by students with disabilities and their families, which indicated the strong value of CBR programming for these families in the Gondar region. CBR, a strategy for community development that assists in the identification of individuals with disabilities, supports their human rights, and promotes awareness to the community about disability (Deepak et al., 2014; Khasnabis & Heinicke Motsch, 2010), has historically lacked evidence as to the effectiveness and impact of its approach (Mason et al., 2017). Thus, findings such as those from this study can be useful in illuminating the value and impact of CBR and its particular contributions. In this instance, of particular value to our participants were CBR workers identifying children with disabilities who were hidden in the homes and not actively participating in the education system, encouraging families and supporting with advocacy to get the students enrolled into the school system, and helping families to access important assistive devices that students needed for full participation. Studies from other contexts have also demonstrated the value of CBR in fostering school enrollment, breaking down barriers, and ensuring that individuals with disabilities can access public education (e.g., Khasnabis & Heinicke Motsch, 2010; Lalu et al., 2023). This finding may imply that local, provincial, and federal governments might increase investments in CBR as one strategy to support students with disabilities and their families to access local public schools and succeed once there (e.g., through support for environmental accessibility, accommodations, and assistive device provision).

In addition to CBR workers, this study demonstrated that using local health extension workers in the community could be another effective way to identify children with disabilities and advocate for their access to

education. In Ethiopia, there is a community level healthcare program called Health Extension Program, designed in 2003 under the Federal Ministry of Health to achieve universal health coverage, primarily among rural populations (but it has extended to urban settings too). Practically, the Health Extension Program is implemented by health extension workers, who are members of the local community, often females. The Health Extension Program is deeply embedded within the community and provides primary level preventive interventions at the household/community level and some curative services at health-posts such as first aid, family planning, and referral services to health centers. Health extension workers are deployed at *kebele* level (the lowest unit of geographic administration), mostly two to three health extension workers per *kebele*. They are expected to know each family member of the households within her designated catchment area. Given that they are typically of the local community and hold significant amounts of community trust, and in recognition of the role of education as a social determinant of health, health extension workers should be seen as a vital resource for identifying individuals with disabilities and enabling their access to education (e.g., through identification, referrals, and advocacy; Iqbal, 2023).

Studies have begun to explore the role of community health extension workers in supporting disability inclusion in Ethiopia (e.g., Asher et al., 2021; Iqbal, 2023; Tilahun et al., 2019). This potential avenue to increase education access could also address the participant recommendation to focus efforts in rural areas first, given these workers' embeddedness in rural spaces. The Government of Ethiopia might consider what additional training and support might be offered to further enhance these workers' capacity to support the educational rights of children with disabilities. Future research might apply the vast existent literature on disability training for health workers (e.g., Rotenberg et al., 2022) to understand what might work to best enable Ethiopian health extension workers to identify and refer children with disabilities in the community to enable them to access education. Some work to this end has already begun on a small scale; for example, Tilahun and colleagues (2019) tested an intervention to educate Ethiopian health extension workers about children with autism, in particular.

Participants also shared that they or their family member with a disability was able to access public education by individual perseverance, savviness, and advocacy. For example, mothers would fight for enrollment of their child with a disability in the local school and would engage other advocates to ensure they did not take "no" for an answer. While a large body of studies has addressed self-advocacy for students with disabilities

in higher education (Abera & Negassa, 2019; Abrahams et al., 2023; Tedla, 2017), this study highlighted the importance of both family advocacy and self-advocacy for students with disabilities at the primary and secondary education levels. Family advocates, both individually and collectively through parent associations, have been recognized as crucial for championing the right to inclusive education, securing services for students with disabilities, facilitating educational progress, and supporting other families of children with disabilities by sharing information and resources (Aldersey, 2012; Burke et al., 2022; Chatenoud & Odier-Guedj, 2022; McConkey et al., 2016). This study also drew attention to situations where families had limited perceptions on educating children with disabilities, requiring students to advocate for their right to education within their own families. Advocacy involves collaboration among families, schools, and communities to address barriers and drive system improvements, with teachers playing a crucial role in creating a positive atmosphere and building strong partnerships with parents (Chatenoud & Odier-Guedj, 2022; Greenbank, 2023). Franck and Joshi (2017) indicated that tackling stigmatization and discrimination is a difficult but essential first step for promoting inclusive education in Ethiopia and that schools can encourage parents to enroll their out-of-school children through community outreach activities. Future research could further investigate strategies and support systems to eliminate negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities and strengthen advocacy efforts.

Furthermore, students and families in the study indicated that they needed material and financial support to access local public schools, and that the lack of such support was a significant barrier. To attend school, some students had to travel long distances, live far from their families, and face financial difficulties, often relying on minimal support from the government or NGOs. This study addressed the need for providing transportation support, addressing students' basic needs, and providing financial assistance to economically disadvantaged families. Similarly, previous studies have identified inadequate materials, transportation, and financial support as barriers to students' access to education in Ethiopia (African Child Policy Forum, 2011; Franck & Joshi, 2017; Tefera et al., 2015).

Participants indicated that institutions that were welcoming, prepared, and equipped to welcome students of diverse abilities were a critical factor in enabling access to schools for students with disabilities. Institutions that were ill-equipped or directly in opposition to the inclusion of students with disabilities, on the other hand, created great barriers. These findings align with the work of Abebe and colleagues (2023) and Abrahams and

colleagues (2023), who also identified critical institutional and societal barriers to inclusion in education. A particularly pressing challenge highlighted in the current study was physical inaccessibility both within schools and on the way to them. Students reported difficulties accessing various parts of their schools, such as classrooms, offices, and exam locations. Similarly, Gaurav and colleagues (2024) found that children with physical disabilities in a Mumbai school faced accessibility barriers. Their study highlighted the need for accessible school spaces and emphasized the value of informal areas, such as corridors and gardens, in fostering social engagement (Gaurav et al., 2024). They advocated for inclusive school design that integrates student perspectives in shaping learning environments (Gaurav et al., 2024). Beyond in-school challenges, the current study also addressed the challenges that students encountered in reaching school as part of the broader issue of limited educational access. In addition to physical accessibility, participants in the current study emphasized the importance of teacher attitudes, knowledge, and expectations of students with disabilities as well as positive relationships between teachers and families. Supportive teacher behaviors, such as encouraging students and maintaining high expectations, contrasted sharply with negative attitudes and low expectations. These experiences highlighted the necessity of creating an inclusive school community where students with disabilities feel valued, supported, and have a sense of belonging. According to Carrington and Robinson (2006), fostering an inclusive school community means valuing and respecting their members while ensuring a safe environment for sharing views, raising awareness, and building skills collectively. Future research is needed to explore strategies to build an inclusive school community for students with disabilities in Ethiopian schools through collaboration among students, educators, families, and community partners.

While Ethiopia has made strides in recognizing the importance of inclusive education, there remain challenges to overcome. These include the need for comprehensive teacher training and reversing negative attitudes towards inclusive pedagogy (Allday et al., 2013; Florian & Beaton, 2018; Ginja & Chen, 2021; Šiška et al., 2019), the lack of accessible teaching materials (Ginja & Chen, 2021; Šiška et al., 2019), the absence of teacher and family relationships, and a void of accountability and transparency amongst different stakeholders (Bekele Abdi, 2017; Katsui et al., 2016). Although teacher education is clearly a critical component of institutional readiness, it is not enough to leave access and quality education to the whims or inclinations of individual teachers. Ethiopia has a Special Needs Education/Inclusive Education Strategy (MoE, 2012) and a Master Plan for

Special Needs Education/Inclusive Education in Ethiopia 2016–25 (MoE, 2016) that aim to promote inclusive and quality education for students with disabilities in line with the provisions of the country's Constitution and its Education and Training Policy. The Special Needs Education/Inclusive Education Strategy, specifically, identifies key strategic pillars, including strengthening educational management and administration, capacity building, strengthening partnerships, and establishing functional support systems. Although it is critical that this strategy and plan exist, it is also essential that they are implemented and monitored (Bekele Abdi, 2017). To that end, policies must have accountability mechanisms to enable enforcement (Aldersey & Turnbull, 2011). The policy can offer the guiding vision and values and detail specific mechanisms for implementation, and it will be the responsibility of all to act to ensure that the institutional environment is appropriate to welcome and enable excellence from students with disabilities. Further research could explore strategies to achieve actualization of existing Ethiopian policy mechanisms for education of students with disabilities. In addition, the fulfillment of educational supports and the advancement of technologies such as mobile apps, computer, or digitalized services are paramount for the inclusion of students with disabilities in Ethiopia, and future research could further explore the practicalities of how to improve access to these supports in this context.

Recommendations and Limitations

This study provided a range of recommendations to improve access to public education in Gondar, including working to change public attitudes toward disability and inclusion, holding high expectations for students with disabilities, and increasing access to basic support needs, materials, and teacher training. School and community leaders should actively advocate for the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. One way to inspire change is by sharing success stories of individuals who have achieved despite their disabilities. These stories challenge stereotypes, reduce stigma, and foster an environment of empowerment. Community leaders, such as village chiefs, elders, and religious figures, play a key role in changing community attitudes and supporting initiatives for people with disabilities (McConkey et al., 2016). Collaborating with community leaders can greatly impact public perceptions and help eliminate discriminatory practices (McConkey et al., 2016). Considerations of intersectionality were also brought up by participants while discussing recommendations, indicating that geographic location (rural vs. urban), gender, nature of impairment,

and income level can affect ability to access education. They, therefore, recommended that interventions and support prioritize those further behind as a result of intersecting layers of inequities.

This study is not without limitations. For example, some participants were recruited with support from a local CBR program, and this may have led to more people identifying CBR workers as critical supports than if we had not used this program as a recruitment partner. Nevertheless, we still believe this is a critical finding that exemplifies the role and potential for CBR to improve education access for students with disabilities (particularly those in rural areas). Additionally, given that the interviews were conducted in Amharic and we are presenting results in English, it is likely that there has been a loss in nuance when translating some ideas and concepts. We have mitigated this by having professional translators translate and verify the work. We also had an Amharic speaking author co-lead the data analysis in Amharic, and had the Amharic-speaking authors review and verify certain direct quotes with the original audio and Amharic transcripts whenever we had doubts about the accuracy of the translation or the ability of the translation to capture the idea provided by the participant.

Conclusion

Access to education is a right for all children. Children with disabilities are often denied this right in Gondar, Ethiopia, and in many other contexts globally. It is our hope that our data sheds light on some barriers and facilitators faced by students with disabilities and their families, and that local, regional, and federal governments in Ethiopia, along with their partners such as international NGOs might apply participant and author recommendations, so that we might fully realize the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

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Unions as Change Agents: Washington Education Association's Pioneering Approach to Special Education Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

Alternate route certification programs for special education teachers have gained prevalence for several decades as states attempt to address national shortages of teachers who are adequately prepared to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities. This article presents an exploratory case study of the Washington Education Association (WEA) Teacher Residency Program, the first teacher union-sponsored alternative pathway for special education teacher certification in the United States. The program was co-designed with families and other members of the education community throughout Washington State with the purpose of increasing the number of certified special educators in the state. The case study examined the level at which WEA included evidence-based training components during the preparation program. WEA's collaboration with partner school districts, expectations from teacher residents, and the standards addressed during the program are reported. In addition, details of the collaboration with the Center for Innovation, Design, and Digital Learning (CIDDL) are described. The WEA case study will provide other collaborative community partnerships and alternate certification programs with a blueprint for integrating strategies to diversify the special education teacher workforce while maintaining high standards.

Key Words: teacher residency programs, alternate certification program, special education teacher preparation, technology integration

Introduction

Across the United States, special education teacher shortages are most prevalent in large urban and small rural districts characterized by high poverty rates, where the teacher workforce demographics fail to reflect the diversity of the student population it serves (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). In Washington state, more than 20% of special education teachers are licensed under a conditional certificate (Washington Education Association, 2024). This is consistent with many states nationwide (Wilkerson et al., 2021). Emergency substitute teacher waivers place unprepared teachers with students who require the most intensive instruction and assessment practices. This is true across disciplines including early childhood education (Mavrides Calderon, 2024). While this shortage affects various educational domains, it is especially acute in special education. As a result, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services released a letter to State Directors of Special Education (2022) explicitly stating special education teachers should obtain certification through a teacher certification program providing "high-quality professional development that is sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused" (p. 2).

Day et al. (2023) found alternative teacher certification training programs affiliated with institutions of higher education (IHE) more closely align with traditional preparation standards. In contrast, non-IHE programs often lack comprehensive training components. Various entities, including for-profit organizations, schools, districts, and regional education service agencies, manage non-IHE programs. Despite managing fewer programs overall, for-profit entities enroll a substantial number of students (e.g., > 65,000 in 2022), raising concerns about the efficacy and accountability of these programs. The wide variability in program quality underscores the need for rigorous evaluation and oversight to ensure all teacher candidates receive adequate preparation for classroom instruction and behavior management (King & Yin, 2022).

This article presents an alternative perspective to the findings of Day et al. (2023) through an exploratory case study of the Washington Education Association (WEA) Teacher Residency Program. Developed collaboratively by the Washington State Teacher's Union and local school districts throughout the state, the program was piloted during the 2023–24 academic year. This initiative operates without direct affiliation to any in-state IHE.

Instead, it maintains membership with the Tech Alliance affiliated with the Center for Innovation, Design, and Digital Learning (CIDDL, 2023), which is a national center sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education under award #H327F200008. The article includes a discussion of the program's goals and practices for achieving high rigor and retention for special education teachers.

Alternative Teacher Certification

Alternative teacher certification programs have gained traction due to the persistent shortage of qualified teachers, especially in special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These programs aim to fast-track the certification process for individuals with bachelor's degrees in noneducation fields. For example, the New York City Teaching Fellows program offers an accelerated pathway for career changers and recent graduates to become certified teachers. The program provides participants with intensive summer training, two years of coursework, and teaching experience while working in high-need schools. Evaluative data indicated teachers in this program performed at or above satisfactory levels and demonstrated instructional and management competencies comparable to traditionally certified teachers (Yin & Partelow, 2020).

A significant aspect of alternative teacher certification programs is their ability to attract a diverse pool of candidates, including career changers and individuals from underrepresented groups (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Research indicates alternative certification programs not affiliated with IHEs have higher enrollments of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups than traditional teacher certification programs (Day et al., 2023). The flexibility of alternative certification programs also makes them appealing to nontraditional students, such as recent liberal arts graduates and career changers. These candidates often bring diverse experiences and perspectives to the classroom, enriching the educational environment. However, their lack of traditional academic training necessitates a comprehensive support system to ensure they can meet the demands of the teaching profession (McLeskey & Brownell, 2015).

The success and retention of teachers in alternative teacher certification programs significantly depends on the program's structure and support systems. Effective programs typically combine rigorous coursework, supervised field experiences, and mentoring (Dori et al., 2023). Quality educator preparation programs integrate performance-based outcomes and best practices for teaching diverse student populations, which results in higher retention rates among graduates (King & Yin, 2022). They also include

comprehensive support through intensive preservice training, ongoing professional development, and structured field experiences, which are integral to the success of alternative certification programs (Cochran-Smith & Reagan, 2021). These programs also stress the importance of preparing teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families, addressing the needs of students in diverse classrooms (Accardo et al., 2020; Day et al., 2023).

Teacher residency programs represent a specialized subset of alternative certification programs, offering a unique approach to teacher preparation that combines intensive classroom experience with targeted academic coursework. According to the National Center for Teacher Residencies (NCTR, 2024), 94% of principals reported that teacher–resident graduates are more effective than typical first-year teachers. These programs provide full-year classroom apprenticeships for preservice teachers with academic coursework closely aligned with their hands-on experiences. In addition, 95% of mentors who hosted resident teachers reported becoming more effective teachers and leaders due to participating in the program. This finding highlights the dual impact of residency programs on novice and veteran teachers in the education community.

The structure of these programs, which emphasizes the practical application of pedagogical theory and sustained mentorship, aligns closely with research on effective teacher preparation (Afacan, 2022). Teacher residency programs offer a promising model for developing highly effective educators by bridging the gap between theory and practice. This approach to alternative certification sets the stage for a broader discussion on the key components of effective teacher preparation programs and how they can be implemented across various pathways to teaching.

Effective Teacher Preparation

Darling-Hammond (2006) identified three crucial elements in effective teacher preparation programs. These elements emphasize the integration of coursework and practical experience, supervised clinical work, and strong relationships with diverse school communities.

Coursework and Practical Experiences

In modern teacher preparation programs, coursework and practical experiences are being reimagined to meet the evolving needs in diverse classrooms. Traditional pedagogical theories are now complemented by hands-on training with educational technology and exposure to innovative teaching methods. This comprehensive preparation ensures that future educators are well-versed with content-specific subject matter and classroom

management. In addition, they must be adept at leveraging digital tools and adaptive technologies to enhance learning outcomes (CIDDL, 2023). Practical experiences, such as classroom observations and student teaching, increasingly incorporate technology integration and data-driven instruction, preparing teachers to use these tools effectively in their future careers.

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) hold tremendous potential to enhance instruction for neurodiverse students, including students with disabilities (Marino et al., 2024). Neurodiversity includes an array of neurological conditions, inclusive of but not limited to autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, specific learning disabilities, and other learning exceptionalities. Each condition presents distinct educational needs and aptitudes. General and special education teachers are expected to identify and respond to the unique needs of all students in their classrooms. However, many teachers report needing to be more adequately prepared to teach neurodiverse students effectively (Chiu et al., 2023; Jensen et al., 2023). This discrepancy highlights an urgent need to empower future educators with the knowledge and skills to recognize and support neurodiversity in their classrooms.

Supervised Clinical Work

Supervised clinical work provides aspiring teachers with hands-on experience under the guidance of experienced mentors, fostering a supportive environment where theory is applied to practice and novice educators can refine their skills by leveraging expert feedback and modeling. Mentorship and coaching play critical roles in the effectiveness of alternative teacher certification programs. Mentors provide practical information, management tips, and feedback—all crucial for novice teachers. Rosenberg et al. (2023) suggested mentorship is essential for fostering professional growth and improving teacher retention rates. Mentoring should also encourage participation in professional learning communities, such as the CIDDL Community (n.d.), to support engagement with technology in the classroom (Ghamrawi, 2022). These communities can act as a hub for sharing experiences, strategies, and insights on the use of technology in education, thereby facilitating collaborative learning among educators (Vogel & Wood, 2023).

Additionally, collaborative partnerships among local educational agencies, IHEs, and state departments of education can enhance the success of alternative teacher certification programs. These partnerships ensure such programs are aligned with state and local standards for teacher preparation and provide realistic, rigorous field experiences. The collaborative efforts can enhance special education teachers' recruitment, development,

and retention (Accardo et al., 2020). Partnerships also facilitate sharing resources and expertise, which are essential for the continuous improvement of alternative certification programs.

Strong Relationships With Diverse Schools

Establishing strong relationships between teacher preparation programs and diverse school communities yields significant benefits for all involved parties. For novice teachers, these partnerships provide rich, immersive experiences in varied educational settings, fostering a deeper understanding of diverse student needs and culturally responsive teaching practices. Research indicates exposure to ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse classrooms enhances the development of critical pedagogical skills and cultural competencies, equipping future educators to address the complexities of multicultural and special education (Young et al., 2024). Additionally, such experiences promote reflective practice and adaptability as novice teachers engage with different teaching styles and classroom dynamics, thereby enhancing their professional preparedness and resilience (Franco et al., 2023).

For IHE faculty and novice teachers at the partnered schools, these relationships facilitate access to the latest pedagogical research and innovative teaching strategies. Collaborative engagements between schools and teacher preparation programs can lead to the co-creation of curricula and professional development initiatives tailored to the specific needs of the school community, thereby improving educational outcomes (Mu et al., 2023). Furthermore, these partnerships often bring additional resources, such as teaching assistants and educational materials, which can alleviate some of the resource constraints underfunded schools face (Sohn et al., 2023). By fostering a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources, these collaborations contribute to a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape, enhancing the learning environment for all students.

Center for Innovation, Design, and Digital Learning

The University of Kansas, along with the Toni Jennings Exceptional Education Institute at the University of Central Florida, CAST, and the Metiri Group, serve collectively as the CIDDL team (CIDDL, 2022). CIDDL disseminates the latest information, strategies, and challenges associated with faculty use of technology in special education, early intervention, related services personnel preparation, and leadership personnel preparation programs. CIDDL is currently working to develop and disseminate research-based strategies and resources regarding effective technology use in

education. Dissemination is grounded in a networked community model (Networked Learning Editorial Collective, 2021) known as the CIDDL Community.

The CIDDL Community enhances access to fellow educators, contextualized examples, and research-based resources supporting the increased use of various educational technologies in preparation programs. Peer-to-peer connections within the community and sustained engagement with resources and services meet the targeted needs of its constituents. The CIDDL Community is an innovative approach to facilitate communication about the use of technology among current and future faculty members (Ghamrawi, 2022) and support the integration of technology into preparation programs so that future educators will be prepared to utilize technology in their teaching while effectively engaging with families.

Ten institutions participated in CIDDL's Tech Alliance during the 2023–24 academic year. The Tech Alliance aims to improve faculty capacity to integrate educational technology during special education teacher preparation using a collaborative approach to circumvent barriers within preparation programs. The Alliance included five minority-serving institutions from a diverse array of Carnegie classifications, ranging from small liberal arts to research-intensive programs. The WEA Teacher Residency Program was one of the partners in this collaborative endeavor.

The following sections describe WEA's development of a unique teacher residency program designed to meet the needs of future special education teachers by incorporating technology during the teacher preparation process. The WEA Teacher Residency is the first union-led teacher preparation program in the United States. The program prepares aspiring educators who are committed to equity, focused on student-centered teaching, and dedicated to working with students with disabilities. The program is designed to recruit and retain teachers who reflect the diversity of the communities they will serve.

WEA Teacher Residency Program Purpose

The WEA Teacher Residency Program was designed to address several challenges associated with teacher preparation. First, there is a sustained national need to bolster the number of teachers for students with neurodiverse learning profiles (Bettini et al., 2023). Second, in Washington State, special education teachers represent the largest area of need, with every school district reporting a need for certified special education teachers (Washington State Professional Education Standards Board, 2024a). Third, significant discrepancies exist with the alignment of demographic features

across students and teachers statewide. For example, while the student distribution of males and females is 51.5% and 48%, respectively, the teachers were 74% female and 26% male. In 2024, most Washington students were White (49%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (26%), Asian (9%), two or more races (9%), Black/African American (5%), Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (1%), and American Indian/Alaskan Native (1%). Teachers of the students were predominantly White (85%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (6%), Asian (3%), two or more races (2%), and Black/African American (2%). Less than 1% were American Indian/Alaskan Natives or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islanders.

The WEA created the Teacher Residency Program in response to critical teacher shortages and the lack of diversity in the educator workforce. The program's purpose was to collaboratively create an alternate pathway for certification through a robust clinical training experience. The residencies were designed using an iterative development process with the goal of reducing barriers for underrepresented groups by providing strategic mentoring and coaching along with financial incentives (WEA, 2024).

Research Questions

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to investigate how the WEA union-led, non-IHE-affiliated teacher preparation program provided training for preservice special education teachers during the 2023–24 academic school year. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: *At what level were evidence-based, comprehensive training components included in the WEA Special Education Teacher Residency Program?*

RQ2: *At what level were emerging technologies incorporated in the Teacher Residency model?*

RQ3: *What types of incentives were provided to the teacher residents?*

Methodology

Research Design

An exploratory case study design was identified as most appropriate methodology due to the novel nature of the program. Developing an exploratory case study requires a systematic approach beginning with a clear research question and a well-defined purpose. According to Yin (2014), the initial stage involves identifying the research problem and setting the boundaries of the case. Researchers must articulate the specific phenomenon to be explored and justify the choice of the case within the broader context

of the research objectives. In this study, the development and implementation of the WEA Teacher Residency Program formed the phenomenon under investigation. The clarity in the problem definition ensures that the case study remains focused and relevant, providing a solid foundation for the inquiry. Thomas (2019) emphasized the importance of bounding the case by specifying parameters such as time, place, and context, which helps maintain the scope of the study.

The second phase involved data collection, when multiple sources of evidence are utilized to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the case. The program's structure was examined through a needs assessment, followed by a coursework and field experiences analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teacher residents, mentor teachers, academic coaches, and program instructors. Observations of teacher residents and their mentors were conducted during their field placements. Additional information was obtained from the program website at https://www.washingtonea.org/events-training/residency/.

Yin (2014) suggested employing various data collection methods, including individual and small group semi-structured interviews, classroom observations of teacher residents, their mentors, and coaches, and document analysis from course materials, field notes, and websites, to capture the complexity of the case. Triangulation of data sources enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings by allowing for cross-verification of information. Harrison et al. (2017) recommended creating a detailed case study protocol outlining the data collection and analysis procedures, ensuring consistency and replicability were followed. This protocol served as a guide for systematically gathering and organizing data, facilitating a thorough case examination.

The researchers in this case study began by administering a technology needs assessment to course instructors, resident teachers, mentors, and coaches associated with the WEA project. Researchers collaborated with these participants at three points (i.e., fall, winter, and spring) during the case study period. The research team provided professional development for WEA stakeholders on using artificial intelligence (AI) for data analysis, enhancing technology selection for students with unique needs, and incorporating Universal Design for Learning in the curriculum. The investigative team conducted embedded observations and interviews across diverse settings, ranging from professional development sessions in Olympia to classroom environments in three of the participating school districts.

The final stage of the case study involved data analysis and interpretation as the researchers synthesized the collected data to draw meaningful

conclusions. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), data analysis in case studies should involve coding and categorizing the data to identify patterns and themes. This process enabled the researchers to construct a detailed narrative to explain the Teacher Residency Program while linking empirical evidence to the research questions.

Setting

Eight Washington school districts participated in the development of the WEA Teacher Residency Program: Auburn, College Place, Federal Way, Mukilteo, Pasco, Peninsula, Sumner Bonny-Lake, and Walla Walla. These districts each have a need for special education teachers. Three of the eight districts (i.e., Federal Way, Mukilteo, Walla Walla) hosted resident teachers during the case study period. Demographics from the hosting districts are included in Table 1.

Table 1. District Demographics

OSPI Report Card	Washington Students	Washington Teachers	Federal Way Students	Federal Way Teachers	Mukilteo Students	Mukilteo Teachers	Walla Walla Students	Walla Walla Teachers
People of Color	50%	13%	79%	23%	65%	17%	48%	18%
White	50%	87%	21%	78%	35%	83%	52%	82%
Low-Income	48%		70%		55%		60%	
English Learners	13%		24%		22%		14%	

Note. OSPI Report Card Data (2022)

Participants

Sixteen teacher residents participated in the 18-month training program with the goal of receiving K–12 special education teaching certification. Prospective teacher residents needed a Bachelor's degree to be eligible for the program. They were vetted by both WEA and the districts where they hoped to complete their residency. Applicants submitted their contact information, demographic information, college transcripts, and a personal narrative describing why they wanted to be a special education teacher prior to admittance to the program. In addition, they completed a basic skills assessment and participated in a simulated teaching experience and reflection process using Mursion simulation software (Dieker et al., 2020; Mikeska et al., 2021). Finally, they submitted reference letters and a resume.

Prospective teacher residents were interviewed if they met the minimum requirements for program admission.

In-person interviews included two components, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Component 1 was a personal interview between the candidate and interview committee members (i.e., WEA members and district representatives). Component 2 consisted of a group reading experience and teaching dilemma with three to five potential residents who would form a cohort in the districts. Demographic information for the 16 participants in the first cohort is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic Information for Teacher Residents by District

	Federal Way	**Mukilteo**	**Walla Walla**
Residents Applied	25	20	10
Residents Screened	20	17	5
Black, Indigenous, & People of Color	24%	35%	14%
Hispanic/Latinx	0%	18%	14%
First Languages Other Than English	Hindi, German, Farsi, Tamil & Korean	Ukrainian, Spanish, Indonesian	Spanish
Emergency Sub Cert	57%	24%	43%
Number Interviewed	18	16	5
Selected	8	4	4

While 25 candidates applied for the program, 16 teacher residents were admitted across the three districts. Cohorts of four teacher residents (i.e., one for each placement in the 9-week classroom rotation) were organized in each district. Federal Way had two cohorts, while Mukilteo and Walla Walla each had one. Of the accepted teacher residents, 38% (n = 6) were from diverse non-White racial or ethnic backgrounds; 31% (n = 5) spoke a language other than English as their primary language; 63% (n = 10) had emergency substitute teacher status at the time of admission; 56% (n = 9) had experience as a paraprofessional; and 14% (n = 2) of teacher residents reported having a disability.

Results

RQ1: *At what level are evidence-based, comprehensive training components included in the WEA Special Education Teacher Residency Program?*

The WEA Teacher Residency Program incorporated evidence-based, comprehensive training components across multiple levels of its structure and curriculum. At its core, the program was built upon a foundation of cultural competency, equity, diversity, and inclusion, aligning closely with the Multiethnic Think Tank's (2007) position statement on cultural inclusivity and lifelong learning.

This foundational commitment manifests in several key areas of the program. Firstly, the recruitment and retention strategies employed strongly emphasized supporting resident teachers from racial and ethnic minorities. This was accomplished using a multifaceted approach, including strategic marketing to diverse district paraprofessionals and substitute teachers. Teachers, administrators, and other members of the WEA staff also directly contacted individuals identified as potential candidates for the program.

Family engagement formed another crucial component of the program's evidence-based approach. Recognizing the invaluable roles of families in education, the WEA program actively integrated K–12 students' families as partners by including them during focus groups, interview committees, and professional development events. By doing so, the program enriched the training experiences for residents by effectively preparing them to engage with diverse communities in their future roles. This is consistent with research by Antony-Newman (2024) who identified parent engagement as critical for effective teaching. It also considers the importance of involving preservice special education teachers with parents during the preparation process as advocated by Greenbank (2023).

The curriculum design of the residency program further exemplified its commitment to evidence-based practices. Courses were developed, taught, and assessed using the Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024) framework, ensuring that lessons were planned using the inclusive and accessible teaching model the program aimed to instill in its teacher residents. Finally, the program maintained a solid connection to state educational standards, carefully aligning its core academic standards with the Washington State Essential Academic Learning Requirements to prepare its teacher residents to meet the state's expectations of competency.

Coursework

In terms of instructional delivery, the program employed a Hyflex (or hybrid–flexible) model (Howell et al., 2023), included face-to-face and

online curricular materials, synchronous and asynchronous courses, and class meetings. This process accommodated diverse learning preferences and schedules. Coursework was mapped across four domains: (1) understanding self and others; (2) education equity; (3) student, family, and community engagement; and (4) learning partnerships. Teacher resident expectations and assessment domains are presented in Tables 3–6 (Washington Education Association, 2024).

In addition to the expectations described in these figures, the WEA strategically mapped each of the Teacher Residency Program experiences (i.e., coursework, assessments, four special education placement experiences) to the Washington State Teaching Standards for special education. The Washington State Professional Education Standards Board (2024b) developed the standards. They include six domains: (1) knowledge of foundations of special education; (2) knowledge of characteristics of learners; (3) knowledge of assessment, diagnosis, and evaluation; (4) knowledge of planning, content, and practice; (5) knowledge of managing student behavior and social interaction skills; and (6) skills and instructional methodology. The case study coincided with the inaugural cohort's second year of program participation. Therefore, persistence rates of teacher residents in the program, certification rates at the state level, and retention rates for special education teachers (i.e., former residents) could not be calculated.

The teacher residents spent the first six months as paraprofessionals in districts where they would serve. The WEA provided seven weeks of coursework in summer one for the teacher residents, one weekend a month of synchronous face-to-face instruction during the residency, and seven weeks of coursework during the summer of year two. The program utilized a competency-based approach to assess the teacher residents during their coursework and four field placements. Teacher residents noted during semi-structured interviews that the diverse instructional formats within the Hyflex course model offered flexibility, enabling participation in synchronous or asynchronous sessions according to their individual needs and schedules.

Table 3. Understanding Self and Others

Understanding self and others: Awareness as diverse cultural beings to better serve others across a range of human differences			
Assessment:	Understanding Self: Educators demonstrate knowledge of self from their perspective and others as related to human diversity	Understanding Others: Educators actively seek to understand, learn, and question their own assumptions about others	Responsiveness: Educators employ the principles of cultural competence, diversity, equity, and inclusion to build connections with communities
Educators are expected to show/ illustrate:	• How concepts* shape identity, perspectives, worldviews • Understands self-identity as: ○ a fluid ongoing learning process ○ impacting the work of serving students, families, and others • Themes of: ○ understanding of intersectionality ○ marginalized identities compared to dominant identities ○ power of privilege and dominant perspective ○ The extent to which those identities match or do not match those they serve	• Knowledge of students and staff • Identities • Community • Neighborhood demographics • Culture • Awareness of potential biases based on: ○ social group categories, ○ identities of students, ○ families, ○ communities, ○ and all school staff	• Responsiveness to others in ways that are: ○ asset-focused ○ flexible—changing approach as needed • Application of practical, culturally responsive strategies in all school environments • Strength-based approaches to all students • Accommodate/adapt to diverse student strengths and learning strategies • Centering on cultural competence and cultural humility • Engage, motivate, promote students, families, and other educators by: ○ identifying strengths and adapting accordingly ○ acknowledging emotions ○ providing comfort and assistance when appropriate ○ proactively anticipating needs

Note. *Concepts such as race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, age, educational status, religion, geography, primary language, culture, and other forms.

Table 4. Education Equity

Learning for education equity: Creating opportunities and removing barriers			
Assessment:	Self-Reflection: Educators analyze and reflect on their strengths, biases, and privileges to advance cultural competency, diversity, equity, and inclusion	Commitment: Educators understand the history of U.S. schooling, the ways in which it has been used historically and in present times to maintain an unequal social order	Advocacy: Educators actively pursue a just education system for the common good of all; educators identify and change policies and practices that harm students, families, and communities (zero-tolerance policies, punitive practices, disproportionality in discipline, etc.)
Educators are expected to show/ illustrate:	• Acknowledge ways of being that may cause harm to students, families, and other educators • Consider strengths that might be used to produce a change in their sphere of influence • Examine evidence to identify opportunity gaps in their own practice • Seek feedback from students, families, and colleagues to improve their practice • Pursue professional learning that addresses opportunity gaps in their own practice	• Work to improve the education system for historically underserved populations • Examine the history of schooling in the U.S. and its impact on various populations • Hold themselves to the highest ethical standards using equitable and inclusionary practices in all places at all times • Engage in positive and productive professional learning communities that support and sustain all educators	• Empower the voices of students, families, and educators • Demonstrate a sense of advocacy for change • Work collectively to solve persistent problems of practice in education through inquiry and innovation • Partner with diverse students, families, communities, and other educators to improve classrooms, schools, and districts • Seek out opportunities to learn about and lead sustainable change in education

Table 5. Student, Family, and Community Engagement

Student, family, and community engagement: Including students, families, and communities as valued contributors			
Assessment:	Relationships: Educators continually form authentic, trusting relationships; adapt approaches; and reflect on their own identities, perspectives, and socialization	Communication: Educators can explain how communication styles may differ across cultures and adjust content or conversation to others' lived experiences and interests	Service: Educators serve and care for students, families, and communities by centering their voices, building on their experiences, and understanding their needs and strengths
Educators are expected to:	• Apply the power of authentic relationships with students, families, and staff • Understand the power of socialization of identity • Apply culturally responsive strategies, creating a classroom culture • Listen and respond with empathy • Seek out ideas and perspectives • Initiate caring and positive social experiences • Share space and engage in activities	• Learn strategies to adjust to student cultures based on individualism and collectivism (group/tribal focus) • Provide additional resources and strategies for multilingual communication with families and communities • Adapt communication strategies to match the preferred communication styles of others • Compose or select written materials using the principles of plain talk and multiple languages • Employ a variety of strategies to maintain communication with students and families	• Learn inclusive strategies for community voices in classroom curriculum and activities • Learn how to integrate student/community focus data into classroom curriculum and instruction • Learn how to integrate restorative practices to resolve classroom discipline • Provide time, space, and opportunity for students, families, and communities to share their experiences and assets • Design experiences with and for students, families, and educators that engage, reflect, and honor their uniqueness in the community • Provide effective and timely help to resolve problems with and among students, families, and communities

Table 6. Learning Partnerships

Learning partnerships: Creating conditions that support partnerships and shared responsibility for learning			
Assessment:	Shared Expertise: Educators create an environment that welcomes all students and families by recognizing that the school belongs to them and the community	Collaboration: Educators support partnerships by shifting focus on the individual to the collective "we"; educators collaborate with a variety of roles inside and outside the school community	Shared Decision-Making: In a diverse society, students, families, and communities are recognized and valued for the assets and perspectives they bring; educators seek their input and pursue shared decision-making

Educators are expected to:	School faculty, staff, and administration:
	• Highlight, center, and apply community knowledge and expertise for partnerships and to support learning
	• Introduce strategies that create a welcoming environment to:
	  ○ students
	  ○ families
	  ○ community entities
	• Co-design learning spaces that represent people, histories, and cultures reflected in communities
	• Provide ways for students, families, and communities to participate and take risks that support learning
		• Provide specific protocols to include student, family, and community leaders as part of the school culture and decision making
		• Provide specific strategies, conversations to help build relationships among families, communities, students, and staff
		• Build partnerships based on shared interests and desired outcomes
		• Set cooperative learning goals for classrooms, schools, and districts
		• Facilitate collaboration across populations
			• Provide strategies to create school community based committees that participate in shared decision making
			• Provide strategies to include community stakeholders in the design process prior to completing the product (focus groups, equity teams)
			• Share ownership for learning by sharing decision-making power with those impacted by the decision whenever possible
			• Allow students, families, and community members to provide input in decision-making processes
			• Ensure adequate research has taken place before making decisions that impact others

Mentors and Coaches

Mentoring has improved teacher performance and retention in the field (Evashkovsky & Osipova, 2023). The WEA paid mentors in the program for their work with the residents. Each mentor had at least three years of teaching experience and letters of support from their school districts noting their aptitude to become a successful mentor. Mentors underwent a comprehensive training regimen comprising 16 days of intensive preparation during the initial summer, monthly Saturday sessions throughout the academic year, and a five-day reflective workshop for program evaluation and refinement in the subsequent summer.

Coaches, who were senior members of the district faculty, provided regular guidance to mentors and teacher residents during weekly or biweekly meetings. In return, they received release time and a stipend to perform their duties. It is essential to note that the district administration and the WEA vetted the mentors and coaches who volunteered for the project before assuming their roles. Coaches focused on posing reflective questions and suggesting high-leverage practices to enhance the residency experience (Rakap & Balikci, 2023). In addition to their direct support roles, coaches actively participated in the curriculum planning and attending monthly meetings or more frequently as needed. Their integral involvement in program development, coupled with the stipends provided by the WEA, underscored the value placed on their expertise and contributions.

Assessment

Teacher residents were formally assessed by field supervisors who were compensated by WEA as independent contractors at the midpoint and conclusion of each placement experience. Teacher residents demonstrated competency in the standards and high-leverage practices identified at the beginning of each field placement. An example of the special education rotations a teacher resident might experience, depending on the district, would be (a) elementary self-contained classroom, (b) middle school resource room, (c) self-contained life skills high school classroom, and (d) inclusive co-teaching high school classroom. Each teacher resident had unique experiences based on the needs of their placement district(s). Small rural districts were able to partner to ensure four unique placements could be offered to the teacher residents. Cohorts rotated through the same placements within the district(s). The current resident assisted the next resident during the transition process to a new placement. This rotational cohort model allowed residents to develop bonds within their cohort and across the school district(s).

RQ2: *At what level were emerging technologies incorporated in the Teacher Residency model?*

The program incorporated Mursion software to assess potential teacher resident interactions with virtual students with disabilities at different grade levels. Mursion incorporates AI to develop these virtual students with disabilities. During these interactions, potential teacher residents interacted with virtual students with disabilities, spanning from low incidence (i.e., students with intellectual disabilities) to high incidence (i.e., students with specific learning disabilities). The virtual students expressed varied degrees of stress, anxiety, behavior challenges, and executive function deficits. Potential teacher residents were presented with scenarios in which they needed to teach the students a specific content standard. They reflected on the interaction with members of the interview committee, discussed their strategies, and identified areas in need of improvement.

Emerging technologies such as Google's Jamboard and mobile-based speech generation devices were integrated throughout students' coursework and seminars. Technology goals were linked to Washington State Standards and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Standards. In addition, teacher residents evaluated and implemented both assistive and instructional technologies with their students during their four nine-week rotations. These assistive and instructional technology evaluations were resident teacher and K–12 student specific. Meaning, each teacher resident experienced different types of technology based on their individual placement and K–12 students during the rotation. The experiences were discussed and analyzed during the seminars. This process was overseen by their mentor teacher, instructional coach, and WEA supervisor. In addition, WEA leadership participated in monthly professional development with CIDDL faculty, who provided comprehensive professional development at several events during the winter and spring.

RQ3: *What types of incentives were provided to the teacher residents?*

The teacher residents were paid a living wage and health insurance, provided a venue for four nine-week residence placements, and provided mentors and instructional coaches within the district. In return, the Residents committed to working in the district where the residency occurred for three years upon obtaining licensure. Teacher residents finished their certification with employment at the highest degree obtained (e.g., bachelor's degree) plus 90 clock hours of professional development. This translates to income of approximately $72,000 annually in their first year as certified teachers.

Funding for the teacher residents was split between the WEA, who provide funding for the coursework, mentors, coaches, and placement evaluators, and local districts who provided funding for a salary of at least $40,000 a year and benefits including health care. The WEA offset benefit costs for the district by providing $12,000 per teacher resident to the districts. A grant from the State of Washington, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction #20220852 supports WEA funding. An additional grant from the Department of Labor to the State of Washington to support this work was recently secured but has yet to be executed at the time of writing this article. Grants supporting this innovative program total more than 10.5 million dollars to date. This funding provides evidence of the program's importance to the future teaching needs in the state.

Discussion

The WEA Teacher Residency Program represents a pioneering approach to alternative teacher certification, particularly within the special education sector. Unique in its union-led structure, this program addresses the urgent need for special education teachers and the broader goal of diversifying the teaching workforce. By recruiting individuals from underrepresented racial or ethnic groups, emergency certified teachers, English language learners, and paraprofessionals, the program creates a teaching force that is more reflective of student demographics (Carver-Thomas, 2018). The use of strategic recruitment aligns with national efforts to enhance teacher diversity, which has been shown to improve educational outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds (Kimmel et al., 2020).

Implementing culturally responsive teaching practices is another crucial component in effective alternative teacher certification programs. Research has consistently emphasized the importance of equipping teachers with the skills to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Theobald et al., 2022). Culturally responsive teaching practices have been shown to enhance educational outcomes for diverse students and prepare teachers to create inclusive learning environments that celebrate and leverage students' cultural backgrounds (Hammond, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2016). Recognizing this imperative, the WEA Teacher Residency Program has integrated culturally responsive practices at its core, aligning with the Multiethnic Think Tank's (2007) position statement on cultural inclusivity and lifelong learning. The program centers its approach on the Think Tank's principles of culturally competent education, culturally and linguistically responsive education, and alternative

assessments for measuring student academic achievement, demonstrating a commitment to addressing the historical exclusion and underrepresentation of certain populations in the teaching profession.

WEA has implemented intentional recruitment strategies targeting historically excluded populations to support this commitment further. This approach is crucial, as research indicates that teachers from diverse backgrounds can positively impact students of color, serving as role models and improving academic outcomes (Gershenson et al., 2018; Redding, 2019). Additionally, the program offers financial incentives to support these candidates, addressing one of the primary barriers to entry into the teaching profession for many individuals from underrepresented groups (Baker-Doyle & Petchauer, 2015). The measures are particularly important given the persistent disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes for students from historically marginalized communities (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Milner, 2013). Programs emphasizing culturally responsive teaching practices not only enhance the educational outcomes for diverse students, but also prepare teachers to create inclusive learning environments (Dignath et al., 2022).

The program's design incorporates evidence-based activities through a structured curriculum adhering to the UDL framework, ensuring accessibility and effectiveness for all learners (CAST, 2024). This synchronous and asynchronous curriculum, combined with competency-based assessments and diverse field placements, prepares residents to effectively meet special education students' complex needs (Lohmann et al., 2019). The inclusion of dynamic support mechanisms, such as experienced mentors and nonevaluative coaches, further enhances the professional development of teacher residents (Guha et al., 2016). These supports, alongside financial incentives like a living wage and health insurance, address significant barriers to entering the teaching profession (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017), particularly in high-need areas like special education (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

Technological innovation plays a significant role in the program's success. Using AI for data analysis and the Hyflex course model offers flexibility and enhances the learning experience for teacher residents (Howell et al., 2023). For example, teacher residents could take some courses using a synchronous or asynchronous method depending on their weekly schedules. The options were flexible, meaning they could join a synchronous meeting one week and participate asynchronously the next. These elements ensure the program remains aligned with contemporary educational trends, promoting continuous improvement and adaptation based on emerging needs and technological advancements.

Recent advances in AI have instigated a paradigm shift across a myriad of sectors, including teacher education (Gangone & Fenwick, 2024; Maphosa & Maphosa, 2023). Originating in the mid-20th century, AI transcended from theoretical frameworks to intricate systems mimicking human cognition during discrete tasks (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). AI is rapidly transforming industries from healthcare to finance (Green, 2023). Its integration automates tasks and creates new roles focused on AI management and ethics (Akgun & Greenhow, 2022).

For educators, this shift underscores the need to foster teacher expertise in areas such as cognitive flexibility, critical thinking, and social skill development (Chiu et al., 2023). These skills are needed to prepare students for an AI-integrated, continuously evolving job market (CIDDL, 2024). Teacher education programs must model these characteristics, ensuring future educators can guide students effectively in an AI-dominated landscape (Marino et al., 2023).

Limitations

While the program shows promise, several challenges and limitations must be acknowledged. Scalability and sustainability remain critical, particularly in ensuring consistent quality across diverse district contexts. Additionally, the short time frame and small sample size of the current study limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to track the career trajectories of program graduates and comparative studies with traditional certification routes to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the program's effectiveness.

Conclusion

This article examined the development and implementation of the WEA Teacher Residency Program using an exploratory case study designed to explore the evidence-based strategies included in the country's first union-led teacher preparation program. While focused on special education, the principles and practices demonstrated by the WEA program offer valuable insights that can be generalized to other effective teacher preparation initiatives across various disciplines. The WEA Teacher Residency Program exemplifies a robust, innovative approach to addressing the special education teacher shortage while promoting inclusion in the teaching workforce. By strategically recruiting and supporting a racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse cohort of teacher residents, the program addresses the immediate need for qualified special education teachers and contributes to a more inclusive and representative teaching workforce.

Continuous evaluation and adaptation will be crucial to sustaining the program's success and ensuring it can meet the evolving needs of special education in Washington State and beyond. The program's emphasis on evidence-based practices, comprehensive support, and technological integration provides a model that can be emulated and adapted by other states and educational organizations seeking to address similar challenges in special education teacher preparation. By fostering a diverse and well-supported cadre of special education teachers, the WEA Teacher Residency Program holds significant potential for positively impacting student outcomes, promoting educational equity, and setting a precedent for future teacher preparation initiatives.

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Family Engagement Efficacy Beliefs: Exploring Educators' Mindsets for Building Relationships With Parents Using the FEEB-E Survey

Hadley F. Bachman and Karen Stansberry Beard

Abstract

How can researchers better understand the mindsets of educators regarding their work with parents in order to build better relationships among adults to support each and every child? Before recently, a lack of clarity about the domain of educators' work when engaging with parents and caregivers stymied efforts to investigate educators' mindsets about family engagement. This study explored the nature of teachers' family engagement efficacy beliefs and developed a measurement instrument, the Family Engagement Efficacy Beliefs of Educators (FEEB-E) survey. An interpretation–use argument approach (Kane, 2016) guided the validation of its scores. Analysis of data from an administration of FEEB-E to 318 family-facing professionals indicated the FEEB-E items to be representative of family engagement efficacy beliefs, an adequate and reliable representation of the beliefs of the sample, without extraneous sources of variability, and, taken together, appropriate for use as a research instrument.

Key Words: parent involvement, family engagement, teacher efficacy, validation, scale development, educator beliefs, survey instrument, FEEB-E

Introduction and Statement of Purpose

A disconnect persists between educators' beliefs in their capabilities for family engagement, also known as parental involvement, and the benefits

of family engagement for students demonstrated by decades of research. In their report introducing the *Dual Capacity-Building Framework*, Mapp and Kuttner (2013) describe an ongoing challenge of educators' low confidence in working with parents from research gathered as early as 2008. In fact, educators continue to report parents as a significant source of stress and burnout over a decade later (Pressley, 2021). Even when they see value in evidence-based family engagement practices, most teachers would prefer not to continue implementing them, citing a lack of time or buy-in from parents (Sheldon et al., 2024). Yet, significant positive outcomes of well-implemented, evidence-based family engagement have been demonstrated by numerous studies (e.g., Domina, 2005; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; LaRosa et al., 2025; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014; Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Without a thorough exploration of the source of the disconnect, remedies such as improved preservice preparation, professional development, or mentoring can only partially address the gap.

How can researchers better understand the mindsets of educators regarding their work with parents? Before now, there was no measure demonstrating valid and reliable interpretation and use of scores for researching the family engagement efficacy beliefs of educators. A major barrier to the creation of such a measure was a lack of consensus about the nature of educators' work with parents, or even what constitutes parent involvement (Ferrara, 2009). In 2022, the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) published the *Family Engagement Core Competencies*, which significantly contributed to the understanding of educators' work in family engagement —a previously underexplored domain. The *Family Engagement Core Competencies* are aspirational, as all sets of professional standards are. In other words, they are intended both to mirror everyday reality but also to create a high bar towards which current educators may strive for improvement.

The *family engagement efficacy beliefs of educators* construct is defined as the extent to which an educator believes themself capable of organizing and executing courses of action required to partner with parents to improve instruction and student learning. We sought to better understand how educators conceive of their own knowledge and skills for building relationships with parents; thus, our study's main objective was to investigate the construct of family engagement efficacy beliefs of educators—a construct rooted in social cognitive theory. To accomplish the main objective, two more goals were necessary: the establishment of a measure, and the analysis of the items' relationship with the latent construct. As such, a

survey measure was developed to explore the construct. The interpretation and use of its scores were validated through an interpretation–use argument (Kane, 2016).

Literature

In this section, major constructs undergirding the development of family engagement efficacy beliefs of educators—namely, family engagement and self-efficacy in education—are defined, and relevant literature and prior survey instruments are reviewed. The section closes with a rationale for developing a new measure. For the purposes of this study, family engagement is defined as a balanced and equitable partnership between educators and parents characterized by open and reciprocal relationships built on mutual trust and regard for one another's roles. The purpose of the partnership is to promote conditions for student learning and well-being through shared knowledge, skills, and resources. This definition adopts a positive psychological lens but also aligns with the definition promoted by the U.S. Department of Education (Weiss et al., 2010). Whereas prior research literature has often used the term parental involvement, among others, this study adopts the term *family engagement* intentionally to indicate bidirectional, equitable, and goal-driven collaboration. Only when prior researchers named scales or constructs using *parental involvement* will the term be retained. The terms *parents* and *families* are used interchangeably to refer to the caregiving adults (e.g., biological parents, foster parents, guardian grandparents, etc.) of the children whom educators teach.

Review of Family Engagement in Education

The benefits of family–school collaboration have long been demonstrated for students, teachers, and parents. For students, strong family engagement has been linked to academic achievement (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Grolnich & Slowiaczek, 1994; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014), higher rates of attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), and improved behavior (Domina, 2005; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Teachers with strong relationships with their students' parents are more willing to experiment with new practices, which increases their instructional repertoire and improves their sense of efficacy as a teacher (Hoy et al., 2006). Teachers also report lower burnout when they perceive high family engagement (Pas et al., 2012) and a greater ability to motivate students and help them value education (Bachman et al., 2022). Parents benefit through an increased understanding of

their children's learning (Epstein, 1986) and an increase in their perceptions of positive experiences in the school and with staff (Boone, 2002; Schuck et al., 2022). Jointly, parents and educators report improved perceptions of the school increase their sense of mutual understanding and provide a greater sense that the school is improving (Boone, 2002). Thus, students, educators, and parents, as well as the school as an organization, benefit from strong family engagement practices.

However, as well-established as the benefits of family engagement may be, challenges persist that hinder the realization of these benefits. The practical framework promoted by the U.S. Department of Education, the *Dual Capacity-Building Framework* (Mapp & Bergman, 2019), identifies four primary challenges preventing educators from successfully fulfilling the courses of action necessary to partner with parents for improving instruction and student learning as: (a) not having been exposed to strong examples of family engagement; (b) having received minimal training; (c) not seeing partnership building as an essential practice; and (d) having developed deficit mindsets.

Research literature points to similar themes. A NAFSCE study of 678 family-facing professionals found that fewer than 40% of respondents believe their preservice or in-service professional development prepared them fully for family engagement (Mickie Rops Consulting LLC, 2021). "Teachers feel ill-equipped to interact with students' families" (Mapp & Bergman, 2013, pp. 8–9). As of 2020, only 51% of educator preparation programs nationwide offered a standalone course in family engagement (NAFSCE, 2022). In addition to a lack of exposure and training, educators' mindsets about family engagement may also be lacking. In a seminal study of teachers in parent partnerships, Becker and Epstein (1982) found that teachers articulated "common stereotypes of parents—'pushy' upper-middle-class parents, 'helpful' middle-class parents, and 'incapable' lower-class parents" (p. 97). These common stereotypes persist even today. Similarly, deficit views hinder engagement with parents of color; educators struggle to perceive the assets of these families (Grice, 2020). When parents of color attempt to engage with schools, their attempts are frequently interpreted by educators as hostile (Ishimaru, 2020). Despite educators' perceptions, parents of color exhibit high rates of family engagement through educational expectations, learning at home, and academic socialization (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016). Thus, the exploration of the gap in educator mindsets and their practices is critical for the equitable educational experience of all children.

Review of Self-Efficacy in Education

Self-efficacy beliefs are one's perceptions about one's own ability to organize and execute a course of action to achieve a goal (Bandura, 1997). Teacher self-efficacy has been defined as "teachers' beliefs that they can teach, that their students can learn, and that they can access a body of professional knowledge when they need it" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987, p. 429). Teacher self-efficacy is an umbrella term encompassing various discrete aspects of a teacher's job. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) defined teacher self-efficacy as "the teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context" (p. 233). Teacher self-efficacy, therefore, has two dimensions: task complexity analysis, and personal competence analysis.

Self-Efficacy Scale Review

For the study, a full review of teacher self-efficacy scales, family engagement efficacy belief scales, and other efficacy belief scales in education was conducted (Bachman, 2023). Only scales deemed psychometrically sound or relevant to the construct are reported here.

Bandura's Teacher Efficacy Scale. Not the first self-efficacy belief measure, but one created by the theorist himself, Bandura wrote a scale that included 30 items with seven subscales. One subscale is efficacy to enlist parental involvement, with only three items (Bandura, 1997). However, according to Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001), Bandura never published reliability/validity data. Bandura's scale, while not widely used, remains important because of its contribution to researchers' understanding of how to write efficacy belief items.

Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale. Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2001) described the development of an improved measure for gauging teacher sense of efficacy. Fifty-two items were piloted and rated regarding the importance for effective teaching. Principal-axis factoring with a varimax rotation led to a reduction to 32 items. The refined scale was piloted again, and another principal-axis factoring with varimax rotation was performed, and three factors emerged. Finally, items were reduced to 18 based on factor loading. The three factors were called efficacy for student engagement, efficacy for instructional strategies, and efficacy for classroom management. The three subscales revealed one strong factor measuring the underlying construct of efficacy. Reliability for the scale was determined by Cronbach's alpha of 0.95. Additional items were added to the final instrument, resulting in 36 items. It was tested with a final sample of 410 respondents; reliabilities were high, and intercorrelations were strong. Intercorrelations for long and

short forms were also high. Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2001) concluded it is a superior instrument to previous teacher efficacy belief measures, and it remains the gold standard for assessing teacher sense of efficacy.

Principal Efficacy Beliefs for Instructional Leadership (PEBIL). Principal efficacy beliefs for instructional leadership are similar to family engagement efficacy beliefs because they are both social self-efficacy beliefs for organizing and executing courses of action to engage *others* to assist with achieving a goal. Goddard et al. (2021) defined "school principals' sense of efficacy for instructional leadership as the degree to which principals believe themselves capable of organizing and executing the courses of action required to support teachers in improving instruction and student learning" (p. 476). The measure was developed by a panel of experts who reviewed content literature, generated items, and consulted with principals. Then, a sample of 95 principals piloted the measure. In their analysis, researchers first checked the normality of data and subsequently used confirmatory factor analysis to validate the measure using Mplus with a maximum likelihood estimator with robust standard errors. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess reliability, and confirmatory factor analysis revealed all items were loaded on a single factor. In the study, principal efficacy beliefs for instructional leadership were found to have a significant influence on teachers' collective efficacy, and teachers' collective efficacy significantly influenced student achievement. Accordingly, social self-efficacy in achieving proximate goals remains promising.

General Teacher Efficacy and Parental Involvement. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1987) were the first known researchers to consider a link between teacher efficacy and family engagement. The team used the "Teacher Opinion Questionnaire" with 11 items, $\alpha = .87$, to explore the link between teacher efficacy beliefs and parent involvement practices. The efficacy portion of the scale assessed each teacher's certainty in the effectiveness of their instructional skills; sample item: "I feel that I am making a significant difference in the lives of my students" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987, p. 425). The research article does not describe the validation of the measure. Teacher efficacy scores were significantly correlated with all five criterion variables for parent involvement: parent–teacher conference participation, parent volunteers, parent tutoring, parent home instruction, and parent support.

Family Involvement Teacher Efficacy Scale. Garcia (2004) developed a scale to measure teacher efficacy for family engagement. Originally presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, the scale consists of 35 Likert-type items from 1–6 matching tasks in Epstein's family engagement model, and using an I can/Teachers can

dichotomy from a prior teacher efficacy scale (Gibson & Dembo, 1984) no longer recommended for teacher sense of efficacy research (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Internal consistency was demonstrated at an alpha of .85. Scores are summed. The full scale, however, is not published. In the study, teacher efficacy significantly correlated to and predicted five types of family involvement based on the Epstein model. However, because the Epstein model is an organizational-level model for family engagement, items in the Garcia scale do not well represent the work of individual educators.

Assessment of Parent Involvement Efficacy Scale. Stuckey (2010) developed a measure for assessing teacher efficacy beliefs for family engagement. First, she conducted a pilot study of 38 preservice teachers. Her initial measure consisted of 11 items on a scale of 1–4 from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* with no neutral response. Items are worded primarily as "I will be able to." Principal component and reliability analyses were conducted to explore the construct validity and reliability of the measure, which revealed an alpha of .83. Self-competency beliefs carried 51% of the variance with an eigenvalue greater than 1.00, and expectancy beliefs loaded on the second component and accounted for 10% of the variance. Then, Stuckey used the measure for a pretest–posttest nonequivalent control-group quasi-experimental design.

Rationale for Developing a New Measure

Prior efficacy belief measures in education fall short of capturing the family engagement efficacy beliefs of individual educators for one of two reasons. First, many efficacy belief measures in the past have been overly broad, focused more on instruction and classroom management rather than being task-specific to family engagement work. According to Bandura (2006), "There is no all-purpose measure of perceived self-efficacy. The 'one measure fits all' approach usually has limited explanatory and predictive value because most of the items in an all-purpose test may have little or no relevance to the domain of functioning" (p. 307). Hence, if researchers and policymakers wish to explain the outcomes of family engagement efficacy beliefs or predict what contributes to their development, there must be a measure tailored to this purpose.

Second, until recently, there has been little agreement about the work of individual educators. Absent a "good conceptual analysis of the relevant domain of functioning" (Bandura, 2006, p. 310), the few prior scales (e.g., Garcia, 2004; Stuckey, 2010) attempting to assess efficacy beliefs for engaging families have failed to accurately reflect the tasks at the individual educator level. Prior efforts over-relied on the Epstein model for family

engagement, an organizational-level model. Fortunately, NAFSCE completed a comprehensive, multiphase project to document the practices, knowledge, and skills of individual family-facing professionals (including teachers) in 2022. Their work illuminated a set of core competencies upon which an efficacy belief measure can be grounded.

Therefore, prior efficacy belief measures have either been too broad to capture the family engagement efficacy beliefs of educators with adequate sensitivity (e.g., Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale) or have failed to manifest the nature of the construct accurately and completely (e.g., Assessment of Parent Involvement Efficacy Scale). Now that consensus has been achieved about the domain of work of individual educators for family engagement, the development of a new measure is appropriate.

Theoretical and Practical Frameworks

Both theoretical and practical frameworks guided the development of the Family Engagement Efficacy Beliefs of Educators (FEEB-E) survey instrument and the subsequent validation study. As an abstract construct, family engagement efficacy beliefs lack concrete specificity (McCoach et al., 2013). Therefore, the theoretical and practical underpinnings of the construct guiding the development of the survey instrument are described. For each, the connection between the framework and the design of the FEEB-E is clarified.

Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks anchor the design of the FEEB-E. Social cognitive theory was advanced by Albert Bandura, and ecological systems theory was proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. Each is summarized and connected to the development of the FEEB-E.

Social Cognitive Theory

Drawing from social cognitive theory, which emphasizes the triadic reinforcement among behavior, personal thoughts/feelings, and the environment (Bandura, 1997), a teacher's efficacy beliefs are shaped by their behaviors and the environment in which they operate. Efficacy beliefs are primarily strengthened through four mechanisms: mastery experiences, in which an individual sets out to accomplish a task and successfully completes it; vicarious experiences, in which an individual observes a similar peer experience success at a task; social persuasion, in which others convince an individual of the likelihood of success; and physiological and

affective states, which refer to the biological and emotional feedback interpreted as positive or negative by an individual, such as heart racing or feelings of strength, which then contribute to an individual's assessment of success likelihood (Bandura, 1997). Successful collaboration with parents establishes relational trust, enabling a teacher to take risks, learn from setbacks, and raise student achievement (Hoy et al., 2006).

According to social cognitive theory, efficacy beliefs are the foundation of humans' intentions for action or their human agency (Bandura, 2001). Social self-efficacy beliefs, the beliefs one holds in the ability one has to influence others, influence proxy agency (Bandura, 2001). Proxy agency is the intention to act to achieve a desired goal (such as improving a student's behavior) by activating the efforts and talents of another person, for example, the parents. The FEEB-E is a measure designed to capture an individual's assessment of social self-efficacy beliefs. Social cognitive theory informs the FEEB-E measure through the design of each question as an assessment of the interplay between an individual's actions, the environment, and their own thoughts/feelings about their capabilities in the present moment.

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1992) proposed the ecological systems theory to conceptualize children's development. In this model, humans exist in nested environments: initially, only direct contact with a caregiving home (the *microsystem*), which gradually broadens to direct contact with other domains such as the school. When these environments interact, the nature of the interactions results in changes and development for the individual (the *mesosystem*). Events also occur in the greater society that do not directly involve the individual yet still have an impact (the *exosystem*). Finally, an individual is affected by their cultural history and spheres of identity (the *macrosystem*).

Applied to family engagement, the sphere of interaction between the school and parents occurs in a child's mesosystem. These interactions may be collaborative and thus have a positive influence on the child's development, or they may be rife with conflict and thus cause dissonance for the child. Government policies like IDEA and Title I, along with events such as COVID-19 that shifted family–school roles (Beard, 2018), influence family engagement at the exosystem level. These factors also profoundly impact a child's development, depending on how successfully they are implemented. Finally, the historical and social context of the broader community also influences the family–school relationship. An example of this would be the complex stereotypes an Asian American family may face when interacting

with a school, affected both by a cultural history as being perceived as an immigrant group as well as being regarded as a "model" minority.

Ecological systems theory grounds items in the FEEB-E through its focus on the multiple systems at work in a child's sphere of influence. These include the educator's direct influence over a child's learning (microsystem); the educator's communication with parents (mesosystem); the recognition of external goals (exosystem); and the broader social and historical context (macrosystem).

Practical Frameworks

Two practical frameworks anchor the FEEB-E: the *Dual Capacity-Building Framework* and the *Family Engagement Core Competencies*. Each framework is described, and its connection to the design of the FEEB-E is elucidated.

Dual Capacity-Building Framework

The *Dual Capacity-Building Framework* (Mapp & Bergman, 2019) emphasizes the need to build the knowledge and skills of educators and parents to address the structural barriers to partnerships through systemic, integrated, and sustained policies and programs. In the framework, educators and parents each face separate sets of challenges hindering their efforts at successful collaboration. For educators, these challenges include a lack of training and deficit mindsets, among others. The framework then proposes several essential conditions, divided into process conditions and organizational conditions, required for collaboration. These include that family engagement be linked to learning and development (process condition) and sustained with resources and infrastructure (organizational condition). Then, the framework posits specifically that four capacities must be developed for both educators and parents: capabilities, connection, cognition, and confidence. As a result of this dual capacity-building, educators are empowered, and parents engage in diverse roles; thus, effective partnerships support student achievement.

The *Dual Capacity-Building Framework* has made a significant contribution to the field's understanding that a challenge in family engagement work lies not just with parents' capabilities but also with educators' preparedness to work with them (Beard, 2018). The FEEB-E is grounded in this perspective, and the study provides a survey instrument to gauge educators' mindsets for their capacity to engage with parents at the time they take the survey. This will provide useful data to school leaders and policymakers for informing professional preservice and in-service development, as well as demonstrate changes in mindsets or attitudes over time.

Family Engagement Core Competencies

This study adopts NAFSCE's *Family Engagement Core Competencies* (2022) as a framework for conceptualizing educators' practices in family engagement. These competencies include: (1) respecting, honoring, and valuing families; (2) embracing equity throughout family engagement; (3) building trusting relationships with families; (4) fostering community partnerships for learning and family well-being; (5) co-constructing learning opportunities with families; (6) linking family and community engagement to learning and development; (7) taking part in lifelong learning; and (8) advocating for systems change. The *Family Engagement Core Competencies* were the basis for the development of the FEEB-E items used in this exploratory study.

NAFSCE is a professional organization devoted to supporting and advancing family engagement and family-facing professionals. Over two years, the organization endeavored to "identify and understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that family-facing professionals bring to forming these strong family, school, and community partnerships" (NAFSCE, 2021, p. 1). NAFSCE identified and drafted family engagement competencies with input from the National Education Association, state education agency administrators, and university faculty members. The competencies were then cross-walked with the professional organization standards of various family-facing professions and vetted by several focus groups. Finally, a field survey of 600 family-facing professionals across the U.S. provided final impressions and revisions. Therefore, the competencies selected represent the most accurate conceptualization to date of the work of teachers and other family-facing professionals engaged in collaborating with families for student success.

Methods

There were three goals guiding this study. The first was to explore the family engagement efficacy beliefs of educators construct, defined as *the degree to which an educator believes herself/himself capable of organizing and executing the courses of action required to partner with families for improving instruction and student learning*. The second goal was to create a valid and reliable measure of the construct. A 30-item scale, the FEEB-E, was developed and piloted as a research tool for the field, and its interpretation and use were validated. The validation of the interpretation and use of the survey scores was guided by an interpretation–use argument (Kane,

2016). To explore the factor structure, a survey measure, the FEEB-E was developed, and a study was conducted to collect response data. The third and primary goal of this study was to investigate the relationship between the observed variables (items) and the latent factor of family engagement efficacy beliefs to ensure the validity and reliability of a useful measure.

Instrument Development

The FEEB-E survey instrument was developed through an iterative process involving seven stages: literature review, review of existing instruments, item generation, subject matter expert feedback, response-scale selection, crafting directions, and user testing. Each stage informed and shaped the final instrument tested in the study. For the first two stages, a literature review and review of existing instruments were conducted. These two stages were detailed in the Literature section above.

In the third stage, 24 items were generated. Previous self-efficacy items and inventories for family engagement were crosswalked with the NAFSCE (2022) *Family Engagement Core Competencies* (see Table 1 for sources of potential items). Notably, very few prior items were found to match a NAFSCE (2022) competency. Three items were drawn from prior scales (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Bandura, 2006; Stuckey, 2010). Where there were competencies lacking items, the PEBIL phrasing structure was initially used as a guide (i.e., I am now capable of…) due to its close adherence to Bandura's (2006) efficacy-belief survey development instructions. Based on the work of Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998), at least one item in the set for each competency asks respondents to judge their personal capabilities against challenges in a particular context. Two NAFSCE *Core Competencies* were combined, and one additional subdomain (initially called "Efficacy for Engaging with Families in their Children's Learning") was added to capture the nature of the items from previous efficacy belief scales.

Table 1. Sources for Potential Items

Instrument	Structure	Example Items
Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001)	24 items on a 9-point Likert scale from "Nothing" to "A Great Deal." Only 1 item specific to family engagement.	How much can you assist families in helping their children do well in school?
Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale (Bandura, 2006)	28 items representing things teachers do, for which respondents rate degree of confidence from 0–100. Only 3 items specific to family engagement.	Get parents to become involved in school activities. Assist parents in helping their children do well. Make parents feel comfortable coming to school.
Assessment of Parent Involvement Efficacy (Stuckey, 2010)	11 items on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."	I will be able to effectively engage parents in fostering good studying and learning habits in children.
Principal Efficacy Beliefs for Instructional Leadership (PEBIL; Goddard et al., 2021)	5 items measuring principal efficacy for expressing proxy agency.	I am now capable of working with teachers in ways that improve their instruction.
Family Engagement Core Competencies (NAFSCE, 2022)	8 competencies, each with 2–4 subskills.	Build trusting reciprocal relationships with families. • Cultivate mutual trust. • Communicate effectively. • Create welcoming environments. • Reach out actively to families, especially those who might be most underserved.

In the fourth stage, four subject matter experts were consulted, and items were revised based on their feedback. All subject matter experts are considered experts in their particular fields. Each subject matter expert met with the researchers via videoconference, during which screen-sharing showed the survey draft. Items were previewed, with the overall goal of the instrument and rationale behind each item explained. Formative feedback

item-by-item was generated, focusing on which items to keep as written, which items to retain with revisions, and which items to review. Subject matter expert 1 is an expert on the NAFSCE *Family Engagement Core Competencies* and focused on providing feedback on the representativeness of items based on the domain of family engagement as it is expressed in the *Competencies*. Subject matter expert 2 is a director of family engagement programs at a research university and focused on providing feedback on whether items represented content congruent with family engagement theory and research. Subject matter expert 3 is an associate professor of educational leadership with expertise in school and community relations, race and policy, and positive school leadership. Her feedback focused on whether items fully captured competency with engaging nondominant families (Ishimaru, 2020), as well as the avoidance of bias in item wording such that items would be equitably accessible regardless of the cultural identity of respondents or the population they serve. Subject matter expert 4 is a research development specialist at a university and an expert in survey development and validation; her feedback focused on item wording congruent with test development theory. Based on subject matter expert interviews, several items were revised, and six additional items were generated, bringing the total number to 30.

In the fifth and sixth stages, the response scale was selected, and directions were written. A review of prior scales in efficacy research was conducted to select the response scale for the FEEB-E. A "reflect me" scale was selected because it best matches a survey in which a respondent is assessing the fit of an item to themself (McCoach et al., 2013).

7. Very true of me
6. True of me
5. Somewhat true of me
4. Neutral
3. Somewhat untrue of me
2. Untrue of me
1. Very untrue of me

A 7-point version of this scale was chosen for adequate nuance (Bandura, 2006) and to provide a neutral option. Directions were crafted to avoid the use of the term "efficacy" or other technical jargon that would bias or confuse respondents (Bandura, 2006). The instructions advise the respondent to assess each statement based on the current time, as befitting efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 2006). To minimize social desirability bias, instructions assure respondents that answers will be kept strictly confidential (Bandura, 2006).

Finally, in the seventh stage, the FEEB-E survey draft was tested by sample users, all of whom were family-facing professionals who worked in schools. The users provided feedback regarding the clarity of terms used in scaling and items, whether the directions were easy to follow, the flow of items, the survey's two-item eligibility display logic, and the tone of the end-of-survey messaging. Based on user feedback, final revisions were made, and the 30-item FEEB-E was prepared for distribution.

Sample

The sample was recruited widely. A recruitment email was sent to all recipients of the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center *News & Guidance* e-newsletter, consisting of 1,500+ primarily school and district leaders. These people were invited to forward the survey to their staff. An invitation to take the FEEB-E was also posted to the NAFSCE message board and was shared via email by several other partners (e.g., Ohio Department of Education, Ohio Federation of Teachers, Ohio Afterschool Network, State Support Teams, etc.). Attendees of a conference session at the Institute of Educational Leadership Community Schools and Family Engagement Conference in Los Angeles, CA, in June 2022 were also recruited, as were attendees of a meeting of the Family Engagement Leaders of Ohio network group.

The potential for volunteer bias is a limitation of this method. Certain response patterns may emerge among those who chose to take the survey after being invited. However, the final sample is representative of the national profile of educators, indicating the sample is appropriate for exploring the validity of the interpretation and use of the FEEB-E.

The final sample consisted of 318 educators working in school buildings located in Ohio and other states across the United States. The majority of respondents in this sample were White female teachers between the ages of 40–49, with 21–25 years of teaching experience and holding master's degrees. These characteristics align with the national teacher profile in terms of age, race, gender, and education level. However, the sample had a higher number of years of experience compared to the national average, likely due to the inclusion of administrators in the sample. The sampled educators worked in diverse school contexts, representing various school levels, urbanicity, and economic status.

Data Collection

Respondents accessed the FEEB-E survey either via a link in an email or by scanning a QR code during synchronous professional development. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics. Respondents could take the survey

wherever they chose, on any preferred device, during the window of data collection. After reading the consent information, respondents decided whether or not to consent to participate in the research. Consenting participants were then given two items to screen for eligibility for inclusion: (1) Are you an educator currently employed at a public school building serving students who are between PreK through 12th grade? (2) Do you have direct contact with students and their families through your work as an educator in your school? If either question elicited a negative response, the respondent was taken to the end of the survey and informed that they were not eligible for inclusion.

After their eligibility for inclusion was determined, participants responded to 30 items on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from *very true of me* to *very untrue of me*, with a neutral option. Following the items focused on family engagement efficacy beliefs, nine additional items gathered demographic information. No incentives were provided for participation in the study.

Data Analysis

The data analysis involved conducting an exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28.0.1.0(142) and Mplus 8.7 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017) to examine the factor structure. Additionally, a parallel analysis was performed by comparing the eigenvalues derived from the original data matrix with the mean and 95th percentile of eigenvalues obtained from a Monte Carlo simulated matrix using random data. A reliability analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the survey instrument. Based on the results of the data analyses, final revisions were made to the FEEB-E, with items removed to reduce redundancy and improve parsimony of the scale. Three items were also added to capture missing aspects of the construct's domains, and a few items were reworded after seeming to cause confusion to respondents, such as negatively worded items reworded to the positive. The end result is a survey measure comprising 20 items (See Appendix A).

Findings

Four primary findings were inferred from the evidence by employing an interpretation–use argument approach (Kane, 2013). Interpretations and uses can be considered valid when the inferences in the interpretation–use argument are credible based on either the evidence provided or are highly plausible based on logic (Kane, 2013). Different types of infer-

ences require distinct types of evidence, either procedural or empirical. Procedural evidence relates to how the FEEB-E was constructed and administered. Empirical evidence was gathered from the data analysis of an administration of the FEEB-E in the study.

Finding 1. FEEB-E Survey Items Are Representative of the Target Domains

The study's first finding concerns the FEEB-E items' accurate representation of self-efficacy beliefs and the family engagement aspect of an educator's job. Each part of this finding is discussed in turn, with procedural evidence presented from the process of developing the FEEB-E instrument.

Claim 1. Items on the FEEB-E Accurately Capture Self-Efficacy Beliefs, Congruent With Social Cognitive Theory

Procedural evidence supports Claim 1. A literature review on social cognitive theory and self-efficacy belief measures provided the basis for FEEB-E items. A review of teacher efficacy belief instruments by Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) concluded that teacher efficacy consists of two distinct facets: an assessment of one's capabilities, and an analysis of task complexity. For example, the item, "I am able to connect classroom learning to my students' home lives," directs respondents to consider personal capabilities. In contrast, the item, "Even if a student is struggling, I am capable of helping a family engage in educational activities," steers respondents to analyze task complexity. Another crucial element of efficacy belief measurement is to ensure that knowledge and skills are assessed at the current time, not a future imagined possibility (Bandura, 2006). As such, all items were worded in the simple present tense, and clear directions indicated that responses should represent how well the statement matches the respondent's abilities at the current time. Thus, items on the FEEB-E accurately capture self-efficacy beliefs, congruent with social cognitive theory.

Claim 2. Items on the FEEB-E Fully Capture the Domain of Educators' Work With Families

Claim 2 is supported by procedural evidence, as detailed in the Instrument Development section of this article. The FEEB-E was based on the NAFSCE (2022) *Family Engagement Core Competencies*. It was further refined through an iterative process of subject matter expert feedback and revision to ensure it fully captured the domain. Each of the eight competencies corresponds to at least three items on the 30-item measure piloted in the study and to at least two items on the final 20-item measure. Because the FEEB-E is based on the *Family Engagement Core Competencies* and

further strengthened through subject matter expert feedback, the items on the FEEB-E fully capture the domain of educators' work with families.

Finding 2. There Are No Extraneous Sources of Variability

The second finding of the study examines the FEEB-E for sources of extraneous variability. In a well-crafted survey instrument, all sources of variability will relate to genuine differences in responses related to the variable of interest. Procedural evidence from the study indicates that wording, order, and scale did not introduce extraneous variability.

Claim 3. The Wording of Items and Directions Are Clear

Claim 3 is supported by procedural evidence. Items and directions were worded following methods used in prior efficacy belief scales reviewed for the study. When writing items, the researchers avoided double-barreled items, vague items, negatively worded items, acronyms, and jargon. When such items were inadvertently included, subject matter expert 4, an expert in survey development and validation, provided feedback on rewording. Additionally, 12 users (family-facing professionals not included in the study) beta-tested the FEEB-E and provided feedback. They suggested a simplified item stem, but otherwise, they found both items and directions to be straightforward, without preventing their understanding. Thus, the wording of items and directions on the FEEB-E are clear.

Claim 4. The Order of Items Promotes Comprehension

Procedural evidence supports Claim 4. Items on the final 20-item version of the FEEB-E are blocked by factor without indicating factor names on the participant-facing survey. This method reduces the extraneous load for respondents without introducing bias. Respondents can flow from one item to another in logical progression without making semantic jumps to starkly different topics. Items and factors are ordered from less challenging to more challenging, based on a survey of family-facing professionals conducted by Mickie Rops Consulting LLC (2021) of the *Family Engagement Core Competencies*. Sample users reported no issues with item order affecting comprehension during beta testing. Thus, the order of FEEB-E items promotes comprehension.

Claim 5. The Scoring Scale Is Intuitive

Claim 5, regarding the nature of the scoring scale, is also supported by procedural evidence. The scoring scale was selected from many other options because it fits the items. Items on the FEEB-E are worded as "can do" statements about specific family engagement tasks (e.g., I can use various

communication methods to reach families.). The scoring scale is a 7-point "reflect me" scale, indicating the degree to which each item is true of the respondent. Users who beta-tested the FEEB-E reported that the scoring scale was straightforward. They described the "reflect me" scale as matching the items, which are descriptive first-person, present-tense statements describing the ability to accomplish various family engagement activities. Thus, the scoring scale of the FEEB-E is intuitive.

Finding 3. The Survey Items Measure the Intended Population Adequately and Reliably

Third, FEEB-E items were analyzed to determine if they measure educators' family engagement efficacy beliefs adequately and reliably. To measure adequately, survey items must capture a range of possible response within each item as well as capture multiple dimensions within the construct if necessary. To measure reliably, items should measure a respondent consistently across a survey administration.

Claim 6. Scores From an Administration of the FEEB-E Reflect a Range of Family Engagement Efficacy Beliefs

Claim 6 is supported by empirical evidence. Descriptive statistics were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28.0.1.0(142) for each of the FEEB-E items to examine if scores reflected a range of efficacy beliefs. Item ranges varied from 3 on two items (*neutral* to *very true of me*) to 6 on 14 items (*very untrue of me* to *very true of me*), with the median range score of 5 (*untrue of me* to *very true of me*). In other words, on most items, some respondents answered with low scores, and others answered with high scores, with most answers falling somewhere between. All scores skewed negatively toward a ceiling but fell within acceptable levels between -2 and +2. This shows that, in general, educators feel more confident than not in their abilities to work with families, yet still within the level of what is acceptable on this type of survey. One possible explanation for the skew in the data is social desirability bias, or that respondents may answer in a way that aligns with their perceived best possible scenario, leading to a ceiling effect in the data (Bandura, 2006). Social desirability and teacher efficacy have been indicated to be significantly correlated in a prior study of teachers (Renfro, 2018). See Table 2 for descriptive statistics for each item on the piloted version of the survey; a table with the correlation coefficients among the items is available from the authors upon request. Thus, items on the FEEB-E capture a range of family engagement efficacy beliefs, indicating an adequate measure of efficacy beliefs.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for FEEB-E Pilot Version

	N (*N* = 318)		Median	Range	Skewness
	Valid	Missing			
I am capable of assisting families in helping their children do well in school.	318	0	7	4	-1.236
I can successfully encourage families to support their children's academics.	318	0	6	5	-1.193
Even if a student is struggling, I am capable of helping a family engage in educational activities.	318	0	6	5	-1.167
I can demonstrate respect for families that have a different culture than me.	317	1	7	3	-1.969
I am capable of valuing the perspectives of families of any background.	317	1	7	3	-1.282
At this time, I can successfully support families as children grow up.	317	1	6	5	-1.278
It's difficult to build a strong rapport with families who are different from me.	317	1	2	6	1.363
I am able to recognize my biases when interacting with families.	316	2	6	6	-1.528
I can reflect on how community history influences my relationships with families.	314	4	6	6	-1.402
I can reflect on how social context influences my relationships with families	314	4	6	6	-1.870
I am capable of reaching families who are most underserved.	299	19	6	6	-1.212
I am capable of creating welcoming environments for families.	299	19	7	4	-1.331
I can communicate effectively with families.	299	19	6	6	-1.897
I am able to build mutual trust with families.	299	19	6	4	-1.143
I can involve families in the school community.	298	20	6	5	-1.027

Table 2, continued

I am capable of building connections among families.	298	20	6	5	-.941
It's hard for me to connect all families to the school community.	298	20	3.5	6	.067
I am capable of building on family knowledge to inform my work.	298	20	6	6	-1.856
I am able to incorporate families' ideas in planning for my work.	299	19	6	6	-1.008
I am able to ask for family feedback to improve my work.	299	19	6	5	-1.386
I can communicate student progress to families in ways they understand.	285	33	6	5	-1.250
I can confidently communicate concerns for struggling students with families.	285	33	6	6	-1.675
I am capable of providing resources that expand on learning at home.	286	32	6	5	-1.029
I am able to use data systems in ways that are accessible to families.	286	32	6	6	-.840
I am able to prioritize partnering with families, even when I have a lot to do.	286	32	6	6	-1.220
I am capable of growing my family engagement skills.	286	32	6	5	-1.581
I can use data to learn how well I am engaging families in my school.	287	31	6	6	-.977
I can work together with families to advance common goals.	288	30	6	6	-1.430
When a family disagrees with the school's practices, I am able to listen to their concerns.	287	31	6	4	-1.422
I can work with families to advocate for change in my school.	286	32	6	5	-1.096

The resulting five factors were identified as: Efficacy for Collaborating for Learning, Efficacy for Communicating, Efficacy for Partnering, Efficacy

for Honoring All Families, and Efficacy for Embracing Equity. The overall fit of the five-factor model was found to be satisfactory, according to Hu and Bentler's (1999) guidelines. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) value of .071 indicated a fair fit, although it may have been influenced by the lack of data normality in the pilot study. However, both the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), which are less affected by data normality, demonstrated good fit. The CFI value of .950 suggested that the model accounted for a substantial amount of (co)variance compared to a null model, and the SRMR value of 0.48 indicated that there was minimal unexplained (co) variance in the model. See Table 3 for the fit statistics for models ranging from one to eight factors.

Table 3. Fit Statistics From Mplus Output of EFA in Pilot Study

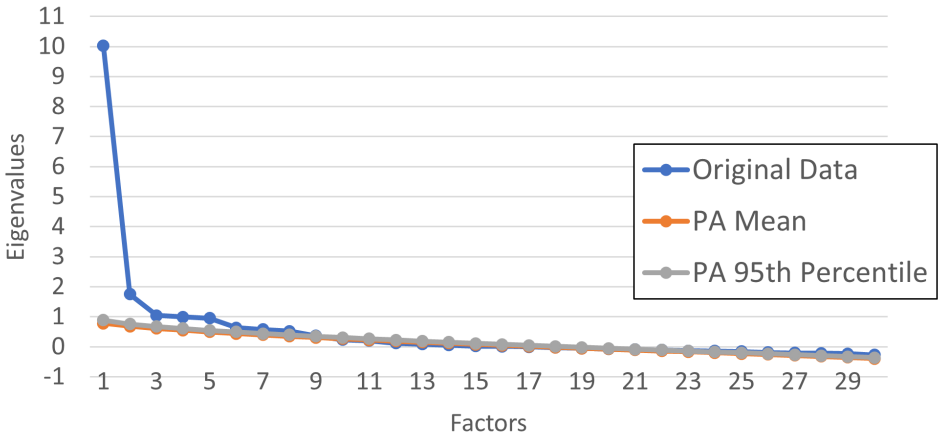
Fit Statistic	Factors							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
RMSEA	.113	.097	.086	.078	.071	.064	.058	.052
CFI	.826	.882	.910	.934	.950	.963	.973	.980
SRMR	.098	.080	.068	.060	.048	.042	.035	.030

As an additional check of the five-factor model, a parallel analysis was conducted to compare the eigenvalues derived from the original data to those generated from a Monte Carlo simulated matrix of random data. The pilot study data exhibited a clear distinction from the simulated data, with the scree plot showing a significant break at the fifth factor (see Figure 1). This indicates that a five-factor model explains the data significantly better than a null model would and that the data from the FEEB-E is quite different than randomly generated data. In other words, family engagement efficacy beliefs are not random. Instead, they follow a predictable response pattern, with responses to items grouping similarly around five similar subtopics. Therefore, the FEEB-E was able to measure five dimensions of family engagement efficacy beliefs.

Finally, one purpose of an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) is to explore the items on a new survey in order to determine which items to retain in a more parsimonious version (Tavakol & Wetzel, 2020). An EFA also allows survey developers to consider whether survey items group together based on prior theory and if new items need to be drafted for a final survey to capture unrepresented theory. As can be seen in the Pattern Coefficient Matrix table (Appendix B), all of the original 30 items were loaded on the five extracted factors. However, some loaded on more than one factor, and some

factors were overrepresented. Researchers consulted with subject matter experts to determine which items to retain, congruent with prior theory established by the *Family Engagement Core Competencies* (NAFSCE, 2022). As described previously, 17 items were retained, and three new items were constructed, resulting in a final set of 20 items (Appendix A).

Figure 1. Parallel Analysis of Pilot Study Eigenvalues With Simulated Eigenvalues



Claim 8. Scores From an Administration of the FEEB-E Reliably Reflect the Family Engagement Efficacy Beliefs of Educators

Reliability analysis of the retained 17 items indicated a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .877, demonstrating good internal consistency without redundancies. This means that the questions on the FEEB-E are consistently measuring family engagement efficacy beliefs, giving comparable results across items for someone with high efficacy versus low efficacy. The FEEB-E's strong reliability also indicates that, while the FEEB-E measures five facets of family engagement efficacy belief, these are all parts of one larger factor. Thus, scores from an administration of the FEEB-E reliably reflect the family engagement efficacy beliefs of educators.

Finding 4. The Survey Is Appropriate for Use as a Research Instrument

The fourth finding centers on the use of the FEEB-E as a research instrument. According to Kane (2016), all potential uses of measurement instruments must be justified for the instrument to be used in such a way. Uses are inseparable from the interpretation of a survey's scores, and without justifying its use, one risks the survey being used without consideration

for the adverse consequences of doing so. Use justifications require that the instrument achieves the goals of the program for which it is being used and that the benefits of its use outweigh the risks. Therefore, our study collected procedural and empirical evidence to justify the use of the FEEB-E as a research instrument.

Claim 9. The Benefits of Using the FEEB-E Outweigh the Potential Consequences

Claim 9 is supported by procedural evidence. First, during the study, The Ohio State University's Office of Responsible Research Practices reviewed the content and survey procedures of the FEEB-E and concluded that no risk of harm was posed to respondents by any identifiers being disclosed outside of research. On this basis, the study was determined to be exempt from full review. During recruitment, respondents have complete control over how and where they take the survey, which allows for full privacy. Other than the respondents themselves, no one knows if they take the survey or not. Using the FEEB-E as a research instrument provides the field of family engagement and educational administration the opportunity to better understand the mindsets of educators who work with students and their families. The FEEB-E can provide valuable insights into the specific family engagement competencies in which educators hold the strongest and weakest efficacy beliefs. Therefore, as described, potential risks for individual respondents taking the FEEB-E are minimal, whereas the benefits of its use as a research instrument are significant. Therefore, the benefits of using the FEEB-E outweigh the potential consequences.

Claim 10. The FEEB-E Is a Low-Cost Research Tool

Cost efficiency is a consideration in any research undertaking. The FEEB-E is free to use. It can be administered digitally, using common survey distribution and data analysis software. While incentives can be added to increase the response rate, this is not a requirement and was not used in this study. Therefore, the FEEB-E is a low-cost research tool.

Claim 11. The FEEB-E Is Superior to the Few Other Research Instruments for Assessing the Family Engagement Efficacy Beliefs of Educators

Evidence to support Claim 11 is both procedural and empirical. As reviewed, only two prior measures have previously attempted to assess the family engagement efficacy beliefs of educators. Garcia's (2004) Family Involvement Teacher Efficacy Scale has several notable shortcomings for use. First, it relied on the TES (Gibson & Dembo, 1984) as its model, which has both conceptual and statistical problems (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). It also adopted a systems-level conceptual model of family engagement as

the content base, not well-suited to the work of individual educators. Finally, the scale demonstrates lower reliability, and the full scale is unpublished, making it unavailable as a research instrument.

Stuckey's (2010) family engagement efficacy belief survey also presented shortcomings. First, it only represents one factor (Collaborating for Learning), inconsistent with the *Family Engagement Core Competencies* (NAFSCE, 2022). The scale was piloted with a small sample ($N = 38$); thus, it may have unresolved psychometric issues. Furthermore, items are worded in future tense, conflicting with best practices in self-efficacy belief scale development (Bandura, 2006). Finally, the scale also demonstrated lower reliability.

As argued in the first three findings, the FEEB-E accurately and reliably assesses educators' family engagement efficacy beliefs. It represents the current best understanding of educators' work in family and community partnership and self-efficacy beliefs, consistent with social cognitive theory. Analysis of data from the study indicates a factor structure aligned with theory. The survey produced reliable scores. Thus, the FEEB-E is currently the measure most suitable for assessing the family engagement efficacy beliefs of educators. Future validation studies to establish the relationship between family engagement efficacy beliefs and related constructs will further support the instrument's utility.

Conclusion and Discussion

Prior to this study, there was a lack of a valid and reliable measure to assess educators' efficacy beliefs specifically in family engagement. To address the gap between educator mindsets and the known benefits of family engagement for students, it is imperative to study the meaning and measurement of family engagement efficacy beliefs. When the family engagement efficacy beliefs of educators are better understood, their motivations to act or not act will also be better understood and can be addressed through intervention and remediation. The instrument developed in this study is based on the widely accepted *Family Engagement Core Competencies* (NAFSCE, 2022), providing a definitive description of the work teachers undertake when engaging with families.

As a next step in developing the FEEB-E, confirming the factor structure of the final survey measure through subsequent studies was a priority (Bachman & Beard, 2025). Similarly, patterns of response between educator roles and across educational contexts should be explored. The FEEB-E should be a useful tool to uncover antecedents and outcomes of family

engagement efficacy beliefs and to explore whether efficacy beliefs can be strengthened through educator preparation, in-service professional development, mentoring, or other interventions.

This study contributes to the field's understanding of effective collaboration between educators and families by addressing a critical research gap and introducing a new measure of teachers' efficacy beliefs for family engagement. Data on educators' beliefs about family engagement will help researchers, policymakers, and school leaders tailor interventions and allocate resources more effectively. This approach recognizes the power of educators' insights into their strengths and areas for growth in building strong partnerships with families. The field of family engagement requires more than just ideas; it calls for tools such as the FEEB-E to illuminate courses of decisive action to maximize relationships among adults for supporting every child in our schools and communities.

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Appendix A. Family Engagement Efficacy Beliefs of Educators (FEEB-E) Survey

Note: Content in brackets did not appear to participants. There were no line breaks between items or section headings differentiating the factors.

Participant-Facing Title: Family Engagement Survey

Directions: Please answer the following questions about your work with families at your school. The responses range from 7 (very true of me) through 1 (very untrue of me). Read each statement and select the one response that most clearly represents how well the statement matches your abilities at the current time. Your answers will be kept strictly confidential.

[Scoring]
7. Very true of me
6. True of me
5. Somewhat true of me
4. Neutral
3. Somewhat untrue of me
2. Untrue of me
1. Very untrue of me

[Efficacy for Collaborating for Learning]

1. I am capable of assisting families in helping their children do well in school.
2. I can successfully encourage families to support their children's academics.
3. Even if a student is struggling, I am capable of helping a family engage in educational activities.
4. I am able to connect classroom learning to my students' home lives.

[Efficacy for Communicating]

5. I can communicate student progress to families in ways they understand.
6. I can confidently talk with families about concerns for struggling students.
7. I can use various communication methods to reach families.

[Efficacy for Partnering]

8. I can involve families in the school community.
9. I am capable of building connections among families.
10. I am able to incorporate families' ideas to improve my work.
11. I am able to prioritize partnering with families, even when I have a lot to do.
12. I can use data to learn how well I am engaging families in my school.
13. I can work together with families to advance common goals.
14. I can work with families to advocate for change in my school.

[Efficacy for Honoring All Families]

15. I can demonstrate respect for families who have a different culture than mine.
16. I am capable of valuing the perspectives of families of any background.
17. I can build relationships with families who are different from me.

[Efficacy for Embracing Equity]

18. I can reflect on how community history influences my relationships with families.
19. I can reflect on how social context influences my relationships with families.
20. I am able to recognize my biases when interacting with families.

Appendix B. Pattern Coefficient Matrix of All Piloted Items

	Factor				
Variables	1	2	3	4	5
I can use data to learn how well I am engaging families in my school	.769				
I am able to prioritize partnering with families, even when I have a lot to do	.745				
I can involve families in the school community	.739				
I am able to incorporate families' ideas in planning for my work	.717				
I am able to ask for family feedback to improve my work	.712				
I can work with families to advocate for change in my school	.684				
I am capable of building connections among families	.638				
I can work together with families to advance common goals	.627				
I am capable of reaching families who are most underserved	.470				
When a family disagrees with the school's practices, I am able to listen to their concerns	.454				.393
I am able to use data systems in ways that are accessible to families	.371	.315			
I am capable of growing my family engagement skills	.366				
It's hard for me to connect all families to the school community (reversed)	.347				
I am capable of creating welcoming environments for families	.314				.313
I am capable of building on family knowledge to inform my work					
I can communicate student progress to families in ways they understand		.876			
I can confidently communicate concerns for struggling students with families		.842			
I can communicate effectively with families		.509			
I am capable of providing resources that expand on learning at home		.330			
I am able to build mutual trust with families		.317			

Appendix B, continued

I can successfully encourage families to support their children's academics			.820		
Even if a student is struggling, I am capable of helping a family engage in educational activities			.748		
I am capable of assisting families in helping their children do well in school			.584		
At this time, I can successfully support families as children grow up			.537		
I can reflect on how social context influences my relationships with families				.833	
I can reflect on how community history influences my relationships with families				.821	
I am able to recognize my biases when interacting with families				.564	
I am capable of valuing the perspectives of families of any background					.791
I can demonstrate respect for families who have a different culture than mine					.677
It's difficult to build a strong rapport with families who are different from me (reversed)		.304			.314

Co-Creating a Better World With Collaborators: A Design Lab Approach to Transforming Education

Emily Krysten Spencer-Mueller, Elizabeth Kurucz, Catherine Hands, Nadine Gudz, and Karin Archer

Abstract

This qualitative research examines the question: In what ways do school districts (called boards in Canada), universities, and community organizations collaborate to develop an innovative STEM program focused on the United Nations' sustainable development goals? Students, parents, teachers, high school staff, school district administrators, advisory committee members, community, college, and university partners in a Southern Ontario region of Canada participated in a collective effort to develop an innovative approach to STEM education, including: collaboratively prototyping the concept in a design workshop, further refining it with diverse constituents, and evaluating it to continuously learn from experimentation toward program goals. Data sources include participant observation, field notes, interviews, and document analysis. The key program features, its intended impact, and challenges arising from the pandemic are discussed. The article concludes with opportunities for a design lab approach applied more broadly to education.

Key Words: design thinking, secondary schools, collaboration, school reform, sustainable development goals, design lab approach, transformation, STEM education, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, Canada

Introduction

Complex ecological, social, and economic issues are currently challenging our social and physical world's sustainability. In response, the United Nations (U.N.) drafted 17 sustainable development goals (U.N. SDGs) to guide the way forward in the 21st century (U.N., 2015). Inclusive and equitable education opportunities (#4) can be used as a vehicle to promote sustainable practices regarding the Earth's natural resources and strategies to combat climate change (#6, 13, 14, 15). Teaching practices and learning opportunities can also encourage community development characterized by social justice for all (#1, 16) and inclusion and well-being (#3). Additionally, education can promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and economic growth (#8) through innovation (#9). To work toward these substantial goals and address present-day global concerns, it is necessary to examine current educational practices with a critical eye, assessing not only curricular content, but also how it is delivered.

To address these complex issues and prepare students to contribute to a world that has yet to be imagined, the education community has been advocating for learning opportunities that provide students with possibilities for developing 21st century competencies (also referred to as global competencies) since the turn of the century and earlier (Council of Ministers of Education Canada [CMEC], 2018; OECD, 2018). The most important competencies are identified as those that have a measurable impact on all individuals' education attainment, job prospects, interpersonal relationships, and health and well-being (Noweski et al., 2012; Rychen, 2003, as cited in the Government of Ontario [GO], 2016).

As in other countries, Canadian educators and policymakers are exploring strategies for combating global issues with relevant education. The provinces and territories are responsible for education (with the exception of children of Indigenous heritage and military personnel, who are under the purview of the federal government). In Ontario, for example, the provincial government has legislated common curricular expectations from Kindergarten to Grade 12 for every subject that all schools within each district are required to follow. At the same time, there is little guidance to school personnel regarding how the expectations are to be met and no established method for incorporating global competencies into learning opportunities.

The Ontario government has summarized current understandings of these competencies nationally and internationally as a starting point. It reported on 25 competency frameworks that listed critical thinking,

communication, collaboration or teamwork, and creativity and innovation, followed by problem-solving and technological and digital fluency as among the most identified and valued competencies (The Learning Partnership, as cited in GO, 2016). Cognitive competencies, such as critical thinking and problem-solving, have been touted as important to attain at all educational levels for some time; however, there is increasing value placed on inter- and intrapersonal abilities like effective communication skills and the ability to collaborate to address the current and ever-changing economic, technological, and social environments (GO, 2016).

Learning experiences to develop these competencies can and should be infused within the curriculum, in which subject content and the opportunities to explore it can be used as a vehicle for competency introduction and mastery (White & Moore, 2016). For example, cognitive content—new information and existing knowledge that is already stored in long-term memory—is intertwined with cognitive competencies, which are used to evaluate and assimilate the content (Willingham, 2009, as cited in Redding, 2014). As such, the curriculum provides opportunities to develop cognitive competencies that in turn assist in building knowledge, along with inter- and intrapersonal competencies for skills such as communication and collaboration needed for tackling complex, broadly experienced global issues. Currently, science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) subjects are recognized as a priority for youth education to ensure both personal and national success (Let's Talk Science [LTS], 2019). A recent review of international and Canadian policy recommendations indicates the need for graduates in the STEM disciplines, broadening STEM fields to meet societal demands, and systemic educational change from developing specific domain knowledge to developing global competencies (LTS, 2019). The growing need for STEM graduates reflects the global economic, environmental, and social challenges, and situates STEM subjects as a logical locus for core competencies to be introduced and mastered. Questions then arise about changes to the existing curriculum needed to incorporate the focal competencies, who influences those changes, and the ways in which the curriculum is delivered.

Curricular decisions and learning opportunities are often determined without consulting the communities the schools serve (Hands, 2005, 2023). With this approach, Canadian provinces, school districts, and schools run the risk of providing education that is culturally disharmonious with or irrelevant to the students, families, and the neighborhoods they serve (Auerbach, 2011; Boyd & Crowson, 1993; Dei et al., 2000; Hands, 2023). Moreover, reforms created without soliciting input from those with the responsibility of

implementing them can lack both fidelity and longevity. Research on education policy interpretation and implementation has demonstrated that policies are often interpreted in ways that meet the implementers' needs, adapted to the contexts in which they are applied, or if considered inappropriate, they are ignored, and in some cases, new policies and practices are implemented instead (Clune, 1990; Hands, 2023). Further, educational reforms adopted by administrators and implemented without teachers' buy-in often do not succeed; they are modified if possible, resisted if they do not make sense to the educators, or fade into obscurity because of limited support at the grassroots level (Datnow, 2000; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995). As these examples illustrate, a failure to consult with and gain the support of multiple constituents makes it unlikely that even the most well-intentioned educational reform will achieve the extent of its purpose.

In addition to educators, constituents such as families, students, and community members can contribute their insights to the education process as well as its curricular content. There have been decades of research demonstrating the importance of family engagement in education in the promotion of academic achievement and well-being (Auerbach, 2011; Epstein, 2011; Epstein et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2007; Pushor, 2019). For their part, students have been typically absent from active participation in conversations regarding their education. At times, the power differential between school personnel and students results in students being silenced (Yonezawa & Jones, 2011). In other situations, students do not always consider themselves qualified or responsible for developing learning opportunities (Hands, 2014). Regardless, there is movement toward an understanding that education is the responsibility of the entire community and needs to include multiple perspectives if it is to meet students', families', and societal needs (Biag & Castrechini, 2016; Hands, 2023; Mitra, 2007; Sanders et al., 2019). A growing number of school districts have policies and procedures to guide school–community collaboration, and more school personnel are establishing partnerships with community-based organizations (Hands, 2023). The timing is right because a collaborative approach is particularly important for developing educational reforms to better meet the needs of all constituents and enable them to address the complex economic, social, and environmental issues currently experienced. The challenge then arises how best to chart a course for developing educational reforms collaboratively.

The research on which this article is based reimagined education collaboratively with district and school administrators, educators, students, parents, and community members. The goal was to provide youth with a

unique model of high school education focused on equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that are considered necessary for individuals and society to prosper (CMEC, 2018). Our central research question was: *In what ways do school districts, universities, and community organizations integrate a design thinking approach to collaboratively develop an innovative STEM program focused on the United Nations' sustainable development goals?* We describe the collaborative design thinking process that was used to develop an innovative STEM program. In doing so, we focus on the discovery, design, and delivery phases of design thinking. We then outline the evaluation strategy to measure the program's intended impacts. We discuss the program's impact attainment in terms of the program assessment findings and the implementation challenges posed by the pandemic. Lastly, we consider the ways in which this collaborative approach could be transferable to other curricula and schools.

Design Thinking Drives Social Change

Design thinking, or human-centered design, is a creative strategy for problem-solving that is growing in popularity, being used to develop and extend social innovation from one instance to many (Brown, 2009; Brown & Wyatt, 2010). While there has been much academic and practical research in educational innovation and educational reform, increasingly there is a focus on innovation in education from a design thinking perspective (see, e.g., Hubbard & Datnow, 2020). Human-centered design includes phases of *discovery* (empathizing with the end user's needs, defining the current situation and identifying the issue, and developing a problem statement), *design* (ideating possible solutions), *delivery* (rapidly prototyping an innovation—in this case, an educational program for a high school), and *measurement* (testing or evaluating whether the solution was effective and how to further improve the design; Noweski et al., 2012; Peck et al., 2021). Educators who use design thinking in education suggest it promotes innovation, problem solving, creativity, and collaboration (Anderson, 2012; Scheer & Plattner, 2011; Skaggs et al., 2009; Watson, 2015). While design thinking has been used as an instructional approach around the globe (Anderson, 2012; Hubbard & Datnow, 2020), this research demonstrates its use in educational reform creation and modification (see also Sterrett et al., 2020), making "the transition from the experiences students are having now…[to] the experiences students could be having" (Nash, 2019, p. 9, as cited in Sterrett, 2020). Design thinking enables us to consider how to build an innovative program that meets the high school students', families', and community's needs (Sterrett et al., 2020). It also provides the opportunity

to iteratively improve the program as it scales, expanding from Grade 9 to Grade 12 and from a local STEM innovation at one high school to an approach that can potentially be adapted at other schools.

Applying a Design Thinking Method to Educational Reform: An Illustration

This article examines the collaborative, human-centered process to design and deliver an innovative STEM (I-STEM) program in one secondary school within a large, economically and culturally diverse urban center. The impetus for this reform arose from several issues. Firstly, school and district personnel wanted to provide students with competencies needed to actively participate in society, equipped to help solve pressing ecological, social, and economic issues. Meanwhile, the school's enrollment was declining, and it was under threat of closure. The school and district personnel determined it was appropriate to closely examine existing programming collaboratively with multiple constituents and make changes intended to broaden interest by better meeting students', families', and community members' needs. While this article focuses on one school, the issues it faced are common to other schools and reform initiatives. As such, there is value in considering the study school's reform process and the research that drove it as an illustration for creating and modifying a grassroots initiative designed to address similar issues.

An inductive grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1999) was used for the research and reform process, allowing stakeholders' experiences, expertise, and creativity to guide the process and work toward innovate solutions. While comprehensive school reform evaluations are typically quantitative, measuring academic outcomes such as literacy and math achievement (Goldman et al., 2012; Sonergeld & Koskey, 2011), qualitative or mixed methods approaches enable participants and researchers to acknowledge the complex social contexts influencing schooling and both academic and nonacademic outcomes (Sonergeld & Koskey, 2011). Multiple forms of data—including observations, interviews, surveys, field notes, and documents—were necessary to capture the naturalistic processes that emerged throughout the program's development and implementation. The sections that follow outline the human-centered design process that was used to discover, design, deliver, and measure the I-STEM program. Detailed descriptions are offered to provide insights into the logistics of engaging in the process.

Discovery Phase

To lay bare the community's and school district's issues and challenges, the school district established an Exploration Committee in the fall of 2017 to investigate potential school programs that could be used to best serve community needs and increase enrollment. The committee was made up of 12 constituents, including (a) teachers, parents, and students from the study school; (b) the school district's trustee and the school's superintendent; and (c) superintendents of secondary programming, innovation, community partnerships, and coordination. The Exploration Committee organized multiple opportunities for community members, educators, students, and parents to share their perspectives in the discovery phase.

Suggestion Ballots

To gather community opinions on the school program, the Exploration Committee used an online suggestion ballot between September and October 2017. Students, parents/guardians, staff, and community members from the region and beyond were invited, via school district emails and newsletters as well as through the school's and district's social media accounts (i.e., Instagram, Twitter, Facebook), to provide ideas. The district received more than 200 suggestions for the school's new programming focus. The district's research team consolidated and reviewed these qualitative data and generated 15 curriculum and/or delivery themes from the suggestions.

Open House

To identify concerns with the school's current programming and further explore the 15 themes and other reform possibilities, the Exploration Committee held an open house at the school in November 2017. The school district personnel invited constituents via email, district news releases, newspaper ads, and the district's social media accounts. Approximately 200 to 300 constituents, including parents, students, teachers, community members from the surrounding neighborhood, the school district's publicly elected trustee, a district superintendent, and the school's principal attended. A brochure including the 15 themes was provided to attendees, and tables were set up to discuss each of the themes. The administrators gathered attendees' comments recorded on sheets of paper. Also, a research team member, invited by the Exploration Committee to attend the open house, conducted observations and wrote field notes to gather additional information regarding constituents' needs and recommendations.

An "Add Your Thoughts" survey was also distributed among the open house attendees to gather any additional input on the themes and

programming discussions. Constituents who did not attend the open house or complete the survey were able to complete the survey online. The survey was also emailed to parents/guardians of all current elementary and secondary students, seeking their insights on the school's programming.

Student Focus Groups

A week after the open house, 194 Grades 9 and 10 students from five of the district's secondary schools (n = 30 from the study school, 13 of whom were in Grade 9) participated in in-person, open-ended focus groups facilitated by the school district researchers to capture the students' perspectives of an engaging secondary school experience. Students were asked (a) what they would like to learn, (b) how they would like to learn, (c) the skills they would like to develop, and (d) generally, how they would like their ideal high school to look and feel. Students were put into groups of four to eight and given seven to eight minutes to answer each question. The researchers from the school district then generated themes for each of the areas, focused on the report frequency. In summary, students reported the importance of developing global competencies, such as leadership, collaboration, creativity and innovation, as well as nurturing their well-being. They also reported wanting work-related training and practical skills while having choices regarding what they learned and how they learned it. These data were then combined with the rest of the collected data for analysis in the design phase.

Design Phase: Organizing and Facilitating a Design Workshop

The innovative STEM program was developed through a collaborative design workshop. The research team worked with a local university's experiential learning and community engagement office to co-develop and co-facilitate a design workshop in December 2017. The Exploration Committee members attended, along with 12 representatives from the local college and university, community for-profit and nonprofit businesses, and social services. The co-facilitators used data from the suggestion ballots, open house discussions and observations, surveys, and student focus groups to narrow down a potential education program for the school. The design workshop participants were led through the first three design thinking steps: empathize, define, and ideate (Noweski et al., 2012; Peck et al., 2021). At each step, the workshop co-facilitator posed a reflection question that was used to guide the discussion as participants looked for desirable program feature consistencies across the data. Reflection questions included, but were not limited to: "Considering the input from adolescents

and other relevant stakeholders, what are the key things we should keep in mind when designing from the perspective of the people we are trying to reach?" (empathize); "Considering the multiple perspectives that have been shared, how can we co-define the problem?" (define); and "Considering the problem we have co-defined, what proposed concepts appear to address the problem and how?" (ideate). Based on the aforementioned data sources, a STEM program option was selected. A research team member created a summary report, and the Exploration Committee presented it to district administration for feedback and approval.

Delivery Phase: A Collaborative Charrette to Create the Program

Once the program concept was approved by the district, prototyping—the fourth design thinking step—began in an organized charrette, or design meeting, including all constituents gathered to plan and develop the program. A district superintendent coordinated the 100- to 200-person event, which was held off-site in the community and included the district's associate director, teachers, policymakers, business leaders, and representatives of organizations with a science focus. Integration of insights from Let's Talk Science, a national charitable organization that provides engaging and evidence-based STEM programs free to Canadian youth and educators, was an integral part of the stakeholder charrette process. Key research-based recommendations provided by LTS (Canada 2067 Learning Roadmap) were incorporated into the program design (LTS, 2018). Other elements included the U.N. SDGs' focus on teaching skills needed for the future, inclusive and quality education, and the need to take positive action by creating targets that society should seek to achieve (LTS, 2018)—educational features that underpinned the program. Together, constituents created the program's intended impacts or key goals: (a) educational reform, (b) skill development, (c) student empowerment through experiential learning, (d) enhanced student engagement, (e) university preparation, (f) prospective career benefits, and (g) program scalability. Collaborators identified relevant course content and developed a curriculum delivery strategy to meet the goals.

Educators, including the study school's principal and teachers, were supported by the district administrators and curriculum consultants as well as the research team as they developed Grade 9 lesson plans that adhered to the charrette participants' program characteristics. The I-STEM program was interdisciplinary and project-based around real-world issues of interest to the students, with STEM curricula taught in service to project needs. STEM subjects were taught throughout the afternoon, with opportunities

for students to work collaboratively or on independent work in these subject areas throughout that time. Charrette participants became members of an Advisory Committee composed of community and academic partners who met several times a year to inform the innovative STEM program's evolution. They leveraged expertise and insights from members and strengthened external community connections with the program to provide experiential learning and future career opportunities for students.

Measurement Phase: Program Implementation and Refinement

The last step in the design thinking process—testing—enabled participants to reflect on their ideas, address critical feedback, and compare intended impacts with actual performance once the program was implemented (Noweski et al., 2012). There are limited global competency assessments and procedures for making information available to constituents who could use it for ongoing improvement in teaching and learning (Goldman et al., 2012). Further, existing design thinking literature on secondary and postsecondary education stops short of design thinking's test step and implications for future reform (Anderson, 2012; Noweski et al., 2012; Peck et al., 2021) or applying quantitative methods to explore learning outcomes and students' motivations and aspirations (Heinrich et al., 2021; Kurtin et al., 2021; Noweski et al., 2012).

A qualitative strategy was used in this research to appropriately assess the goals; it was reflective of the researchers' understanding that teaching and learning are embedded within complex social contexts that are challenging to unpack with surveys (see Preskill, 2023). When the program's content and pedagogical approach was created for implementation in September 2019, a series of interview questions based on the program's seven main goals were developed to measure its impact once participants were engaged in teaching and learning activities (see Kurucz et al., 2025, for an examination of the evaluation). The interview questions differed between stakeholder groups but generally focused on understanding the participants' backgrounds, their level of involvement in the I-STEM program, reasons for being involved in the program, expectations of the program and goals, the impact of the program, and additional supports needed in the program. (See the Appendix for a list of interview prompts that were used to guide the interviews.) Assessment is crucial for a reform's sustainability and scalability (Heinrich et al., 2021); as these were general goals for this initiative, we illustrate the process to provide an appreciation of how such a reform could be modified in future iterations of the program, evolving over time and with the potential to spread to other jurisdictions.

Participants

A total of 74 stakeholders participated in interviews. Of the 74 participants, 9 were advisory committee members, 29 were Grade 9 students, 24 were parents, and 12 were teachers and school district administrators. All participants provided consent. Student participants obtained parental/guardian consent in addition to their personal assent. Inclusion criteria consisted of English language fluency and being directly involved and/or impacted by the I-STEM program. The research was reviewed and approved by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board (REB # 19-10-021).

Procedure

Between January and July 2020, participants were invited via email to complete semi-structured interviews with a research team member. Once consent was obtained, interviews were scheduled in-person prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and online during the pandemic. Students, parents, school district personnel, teachers, and advisory committee members were asked 10 to 15 open-ended, semi-structured questions, and probes as needed. These questions focused on their involvement in the program, program expectations, learning opportunities within the program, valuable program aspects, challenges in the program, personal goals, and opinions of the program. The interviews for all stakeholders, except the Advisory Committee members, lasted approximately 15 to 30 minutes. Advisory Committee members were interviewed for 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

In-person interviews were recorded using a smart phone recorder that had a transcription application, and online interviews were recorded and transcribed using Google or Zoom. Transcriptions were reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy. Upon completion, the transcripts were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, comprising four steps: initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1999). The data were coded manually in Microsoft Word using the highlight and comment features. Once the data were coded, the codes along with corroborating quotes were then transferred to Microsoft Excel. In Microsoft Excel, the codes and corroborating quotes were further manually consolidated into more general themes. Data were reviewed by multiple researchers on the team to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Measurement Phase Findings

Participants highlighted the fundamental role a collaborative approach had on the innovative secondary school program. Developing the program and its intended impacts and then implementing the program required group effort with buy-in at all levels. One teacher noted, "There were so many conversations from business leaders, from different community groups from [different] stakeholder groups…I think that's why [the program] looks so different." In the following sections, the program's progress and goals are described. The March 2020 pandemic response's influence on the program's implementation in its first year is also highlighted, demonstrating how program intent can diverge from implementation when impacted by external contexts.

Measuring the I-STEM Program's Intended Impacts

All of the participants expressed concern that any program implemented had to provide students with opportunities to develop needed knowledge and skills to prepare for their future as citizens and workers. From the first discussions, participants "wanted STEM to be different, to do school differently," according to one teacher.

Infusing Global Competencies in a Novel STEM Program

While students took their non-STEM subjects in the mainstream school—traditional learning environments—the STEM program adopted a project-based approach. The STEM program centered instruction and learning opportunities around real-world challenges, with educators functioning in a guiding and mentoring role as students applied their knowledge to generate solutions. Working individually or in groups, students were introduced to curricula as they investigated real-world issues. With few pencil-and-paper assignments, students were given feedback and assessed on their projects as well as the processes by which they arrived at their solutions. Teachers and students noted the curriculum delivery strategies diverged from mainstream approaches. One student reflected on the experiences, saying, "I really enjoyed this program because I think it's definitely taking a step forward to changing the school systems." Students wanted the program to focus on competencies such as innovation and to teach them how to be creative as they gained knowledge they could use for the future.

Engaging Students and Laying the Groundwork for the Future Through Experiential Learning

Preparing students to transition to higher education or into the community was accomplished with a focus on socially relevant and experiential

learning to encourage future-ready competencies. Connecting students poised for this transition with community members and community-based organizations was an important step in that direction. Some participants highlighted the importance of relevant, problem-based activities as a way to promote students' problem-solving competence. In the process of working on community problems of practice, students had opportunities to learn about and use relevant technology with community partners' mentorship. One student noted, "Schools, nowadays, it's very boring and not very hands-on…I like building things rather than just listening." The students could see the practical application of their learning and create solutions to real-world issues, which engaged them in their learning.

The Potential for Positively Impacting Students' Future Studies and Careers

All students and parents expected the program and the students' engagement in their learning would prepare them for university studies and beyond. One parent commented, "I don't think he's treating this as a high school. He's treating it as a pre-university." From the students' perspective, they felt the program would assist their admission to a university with a strong STEM program. One student shared, "I really hope that it's given me a bit of…an edge on…people coming from different schools." Not only was the prospect of being accepted into reputable universities attractive to the students, but they had confidence the program would prepare them for their future studies and careers.

Possibilities for Extending the Program from One School to Many

Just as the I-STEM program was tailored to the needs of the students, families, and community members associated with the study school, participants were looking beyond the school at possibilities for scaling the program to other schools. One educator stated, "I-STEM is a pilot, right, but it would be great to take what worked so well and be able to scale that and make it accessible to other schools." The Advisory Committee, in particular, noted the challenge of scaling the I-STEM program to other schools. This initiative was specifically developed for this school's context. Committee members understood the program would not necessarily be replicated in its entirety at other schools; rather, research might uncover the successfully implemented and impactful elements that could be transferred.

COVID-Based Challenges

The STEM program's first implementation year was 2019–20; the pandemic's arrival in Ontario, Canada in mid-March 2020 resulted in lockdown

and a swift transition to online learning. Consequently, elements associated with COVID-19 became a key category in data collection and analysis. Issues such as limited opportunities for community partnerships, the challenges of online teaching, communication, and student engagement and well-being were all associated with the advent of COVID-19.

Innovation with Limited Community Engagement and Experiential Learning

From an innovation perspective, teachers expressed few concerns. One teacher suggested, "The pandemic created a situation where students had to learn how to conference and communicate using online platforms. What started as a challenge turned into wonderful opportunities to innovate online!" Educators used technology to enable innovation and collaborative work while working from home because of the lockdowns. In the process, students enhanced their digital fluency while engaged in their innovative projects. At the same time, online learning did not always mesh with experiential learning or community-building—key elements of the I-STEM approach.

The program was modified from an experiential, problem-based, in-person learning format to an online program, but not entirely successfully. A student acknowledged the personal impact of limited experiential learning opportunities on engagement: "I really find it hard to work now, just 'cause it's not the same environment…it's a lot less hands-on." Students did not have the same exposure to community-based partners, working side-by-side with them on problems of practice.

Online Communication Challenges Impacting Students' Engagement and Academic Progress

Completing assignments and projects was also more difficult with online learning. Whether it was as a result of personal challenges engaging with others virtually, user errors, or platform glitches and limitations, changes in communication modes impacted students' ability to complete their work and seek feedback from their teachers. One parent stated their daughter "found assignments got lost. I think that human connection was what [my daughter] needed to get inspired again." A lack of consistency across teachers as they navigated the technology challenges of switching from in-person to online classes resulted in students missing assignments and project feedback at times.

In some cases, students became more proactive about seeking feedback; however, they still experienced quality, quantity, and timeliness issues. Some teachers did not respond to emails as quickly as others or give as

much detail in their written online feedback. One student's experiences acknowledged the increased time required to teach and to give feedback online as opposed to in-person: "I know that when we saw [the teachers] in person, it was easier for them just to walk around and talk to us and give feedback."

Losing Opportunities for Collaborating and Socializing

Limitations with communication not only negatively impacted students' learning, but also pointed to the social challenges in the absence of in-person learning. A parent observed, "I think a lot of high school is about relationships and the social interaction." Students did not have the time or a suitable forum to socialize during virtual learning, and challenges with communication had the potential to limit the students' ability to collaborate with their colleagues on group projects.

Discussion

Designing, implementing, and measuring the innovative STEM program was a collaborative process, providing opportunities for constituents to contribute to the program development and evolution. Most importantly, the constituents wanted to "do school differently." They designed a program that was student-led, based on their interests. While the mandated provincial curriculum was covered, the STEM subject teachers facilitated an interdisciplinary, project-based approach, in which students were able to apply multiple subjects' curriculum content as they investigated real-world issues of interest. Toward that end, students worked individually and collaboratively in groups on projects, with the intent of also working with community-based organizations. Student assessment entailed anecdotal reports and ongoing feedback rather than alphanumeric grades, with a focus on the process as well as the end products. Taken together, these program features reflected a departure from mainstream or traditional teaching and learning approaches that are teacher-centered and academic curriculum-focused.

This shift in teaching and learning strategies was intended to improve students' engagement in their education and to promote skill development beyond curriculum content mastery—two goals for the program. Evidence suggests the program achieved these goals during its first implementation year. Due to the program focus, it attracted students from across the district who were already interested in STEM subjects, who wanted hands-on learning experiences, and who voluntarily applied to enroll in the program. Therefore, the students were highly engaged with the subjects and

the program as a whole. In addition to the subject content, the program was designed to provide opportunities for students to develop global competencies. These competencies "are those most likely to enable them to succeed as sophisticated, flexible knowledge workers and citizens of the future" (Gee et al., 1996 as cited in Anderson, 2012, pp. 43–44). The project-based work encouraged students to think creatively about real-world issues as they problem-solved to identify innovative solutions. Throughout the process, they gained practice critically thinking about the issues and the potential solutions, with opportunities to discuss their ideas with peers and teachers as they collaborated on final solutions for their projects (The Learning Partnership, as cited in GO, 2016). At the same time, the COVID-19 health protocols during the first year of program implementation altered opportunities for competency attainment in unexpected ways.

This research describes the program's intended impacts, the unintended effects of COVID-19 on program delivery, and its ability to meet the students', families', and community's needs at one culturally diverse school in an urban center. As such, these findings are not necessarily generalizable to schools in other contexts. At the same time, the research provides—through the study school's example—insights into the design thinking process and its application to school reform, which may be generalizable to other educational institutions. By considering the implications for policy, practice, and theory from the collaborative development and delivery of an innovative education program, we shed light on possibilities for a broader application of design thinking to change processes in other schools, in addition to improving the program at the study school to better meet the participants' needs.

Implications for Policy

Scholars have demonstrated the importance of educators' buy-in for successful school reform implementation (Datnow, 2000; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995; Hands, 2005, 2023). Similarly, this research finds there needs to be an interest in developing an innovative educational program from the initiative's beginning from all the school's educators to have widespread support. Without broad interest, the school ran a discrete, project-based STEM program, and traditionally delivered and assessed non-STEM courses. Extensive buy-in among the educators at the study school might yield greater curriculum delivery consistency and consequently more opportunities to collaborate across disciplines and not just STEM subjects (Hands, 2005). Support extends beyond educators' buy-in, though. Community-, district- and school-level support was needed in this study to collaboratively

develop and implement the school's new program. Engaging all constituents impacted by the reform is a hallmark of design thinking and ensures not only buy-in, but also enables changes that reflect their needs and goals (Peck et al., 2021). This strategy underscores the notion that relevant, sustainable educational reforms should not be developed at the school level alone. School and district administrators who are interested in engaging in this kind of program reform would do well to provide resources, such as the expertise and space to gather constituents together for meetings and working groups, and the time needed to arrive at shared goals, develop an initiative prototype, put it into practice, and assess it regularly over time (Hands, 2005, 2023).

Implications for Practice

The curriculum delivery, such as mode of instruction and type of learning activities rather than the curricular content, impacts the global competencies that can be fostered. The competencies chosen at the study school corresponded to those the Ontario government (2016) identified as foundational across a variety of national and international frameworks, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity and innovation, problem-solving, and technological fluency. Noting the challenge of objectively measuring non-academic competency attainment with quantitative measures (GO, 2016), learning activity and project completion served as evidence of mastery. The teaching and learning opportunities were designed to give students practice with the competencies; experiences with the study school indicate district or school personnel who are aiming to promote any global competencies or learning skills and work habits would do well to align their instructional strategies and learning activities with them, using the curriculum content as the medium in which the students develop and apply their competencies.

The pandemic response facilitated as well as challenged the program's implementation and students' competency attainment. With the rapid move to online learning in early 2020, communication technology created conditions for everyone to enhance their digital fluency. At the same time, the participants' experiences with technology highlighted some of the challenges with online teaching and learning. Overall, it might be concluded that the participants found online interaction provided a functional avenue for communication, but it was not ideal. The online classrooms were not replacements for the in-person environments where students could collaborate with one another and seek immediate feedback from teachers and community members on their projects.

In addition to communication challenges, this research demonstrated that completely online programming limited experiential learning opportunities, a key component in the I-STEM program. Any community-based, hands-on learning with specialized equipment or technology was negatively impacted. Yet, communication technology expands the community beyond the local, geographic region that can be accessed in person (Hands, 2005), allowing students to work on broadly conceived community issues nationally and internationally. A blended approach, with online and in-person teaching and learning, might be feasible.

Whether online or in person, school–community partnerships need to remain a focus for the study school if students are engaged in community-based problem-solving. This study demonstrated these relationships provided numerous and diverse opportunities for students to work towards solutions to ecological, social, and economic issues of consequence in the community. As a result, this kind of collaboration highlights the importance and relevance of their learning and promotes engagement. Regular communication among partners is essential for maintaining relationships over time (Epstein et al., 2018; Hands, 2005, 2023). To reinvigorate relationships that may have stagnated at the study school during periods when students were not able to engage in project work with community members or participate in learning opportunities off-site in the community, it would be beneficial for school personnel to reach out to community members (Hands, 2005, 2023; Sheldon, 2005) to reestablish a partner network as well as extend and diversify it with additional community-based organizations.

Implications for Theory and Research

Ongoing communication is needed to establish and maintain partnerships (Hands, 2005, 2023; Sanders & Harvey, 2002), and design thinking is particularly well-suited to this task. Design thinking's iterative nature requires ongoing communication among school- and community-based partners over time (Sterrett et al., 2020). In addition to assessing progress towards an initiative's goals (Noweski et al., 2012; Peck et al., 2021), examining the goals themselves and whether they meet constituents' needs is an iterative, cyclical process, involving feedback through dialogue or two-way communication (Hands, 2005, 2023; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). This article focuses on the discovery, design, delivery, and one measurement phase. Although the innovative program was successfully implemented, the constituents should apply the assessment findings to make any program modifications that best meet their needs. Further, data collection and analysis that extends beyond one iteration would fully illustrate design thinking

while enabling reform initiatives to remain relevant and sustainable. With a design thinking process, school reform cannot be viewed as a discrete, one-time event; rather, it is an ongoing process, responsive to social changes and evolving needs. Consistent with this approach, longitudinal research on the study school is required to determine if the I-STEM program facilitates students' admission into universities and university STEM programs of their choice, and whether it benefits their work-related competencies in their future occupations.

Research is also needed to scale the program. At this point, the study school is not in a position to scale; the first program evaluation was undertaken to examine the program's ability to meet the specific goals identified in the discovery and design phases and pinpoint areas for modification. Program refinement following additional measurement phases would ensure closer goal alignment and possibilities for scaling. That said, Coburn (2003) recommends looking at the program's depth, spread, sustainability, and possibilities for ownership shift if initiative fidelity is to be maintained from one school to another. This means engaging in a process similar to the one at the study school at each location, as it is unlikely the initiative can be transplanted in its entirety from one school to another. Following a needs assessment during the discovery phase (Peck et al., 2021) and if the I-STEM program is desired at another location, the constituents need to identify the essential features of the study school's program to be preserved and passed on (Coburn, 2003). In addition to the specific features, spread involves transferring the philosophies, beliefs, norms, and other cultural elements that are foundational to the initiative (Coburn, 2003; Curry, 1992). Once the program is implemented, ongoing monitoring to ensure the program is meeting its intended impacts promotes sustainability (Coburn, 2003). Developmental evaluation is one strategy that might be considered for such monitoring. The feedback loops are particularly valuable for innovations that are in progress, allowing activities to be adjusted over time to best meet users' goals (Gamble, 2008; Patton, 2011). Additionally, constituents need to ensure there are adequate human and material resources and the initiative is buffered at all levels of the school system from initiatives competing for the same resources (Coburn, 2003). Lastly, there needs to be a shift in ownership, such that constituents adopting the program consider it well suited to their needs and goals. The process of reflecting on the program's essential elements and how they are expressed in the new context creates buy-in and ownership, which also encourages the initiative's longevity (Datnow, 2000).

Conclusions

The research on which this article is based provides insights into an effective strategy for creating and implementing reform initiatives. Confronted with local and global ecological, social and economic challenges, the diverse constituents affiliated with one school's community banded together to plot a course to address the issues in their own way and in their own community. They used design thinking to examine the challenges and identify the curricular content as well as possible ways to present it, settling on a student-led, project-based, experiential STEM program they tailored to their students', families', school's, and community's characteristics and needs. Indeed, the I-STEM program's explicit tagline was "We won't ask what you want to be…we will ask what problem you want to solve." Creating innovative solutions to these challenges also provided students with opportunities to develop their global competencies. Critical thinking, communication, collaboration or teamwork, creativity and innovation, problem-solving, and technological and digital fluency are frequently identified as highly regarded competencies (The Learning Partnership, as cited in GO, 2016) and were targeted in the I-STEM program as a strategy for meeting the U.N.'s SDGs through education. Using design thinking, constituents were able to identify instructional strategies that provided opportunities for students to hone their global competencies and encourage agile, innovative problem-solvers (Anderson, 2012; Hubbard & Datnow, 2020) that can address the ecological, social, and economic challenges the world is facing (U.N., 2015).

Once the I-STEM program was implemented at the study school, constituents used a measurement process that required ongoing relationship-building among the constituents and frequent revisiting of goals and objectives (Peck et al., 2021) to recommend timely changes and modifications to curricular content and delivery. This article presents the first iteration of the program; however, evaluations over several academic years are needed to adjust the program qualities most closely to constituents' needs and goals. Nevertheless, the article showcases a blueprint for a collaborative reform process that promotes academically, socially, and culturally relevant education because it is based on constituents' needs and goals, with the flexibility and capacity to evolve over time. Such a strategy can be used to develop reform initiatives unique to a school or district or to scale the essential features of a reform from one school to many in a contextually sensitive way. Ultimately, a design thinking approach allows the development of educational experiences that are both engaging and relevant to the

students, their families, and the broader community—arguably the most important goals for education.

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Appendix. Measurement Phase Interview Questions and Probes for the Stakeholder Groups

Student Interview Questions

- How would you describe yourself?
- How would others describe you?
- Other than being an I-STEM student, are there other ways in which you are involved with the program?
- When did you get involved in the I-STEM program?
- Why are you participating in the I-STEM program?
- Are you learning what you want to learn?
- Are you learning what you expected to learn?
- What do you hope to be able to do by the end of the program?
    - How certain are you that you will meet your goals?
    - What do you think you will need to help you meet your goals?

Teacher Interview Questions

- Please describe yourself and your background.
- How have you been involved in the I-STEM program?
- When did you first get involved in the I-STEM program?
- Why are you involved in the I-STEM program?
- What is the most important or valuable aspect of the program?
- What are your goals for the program, your teaching, and your students?
- What kind of impact would you like to have, and how can the program better support you?

I-STEM Advisory Committee Member Interview Questions

- Please describe yourself and your background.
- How have you been involved/connected to the I-STEM program?
- When did you first get involved in the I-STEM program?
- Why are you involved in the I-STEM program?
- What is the most important or valuable aspect of the program?
- What kind of impact do you expect the program to have? What would you like to see 3 years from now?

Parent Interview Questions

- How would you describe yourself?
- How would others describe you?
- What is your occupation?
- What attracted you to the I-STEM program?
- How are your expectations being met?
- What are your goals for your child, or what are your child's goals?
    - How do you expect the program to meet them?
- How can the program better support your child?
- What do you hope your child will achieve as a result of participating in the program?
- How certain are you that your child will meet these goals by the end of the program?
- What do teachers and students need for better support in the program?

Parent Perspectives on Strong School and Community Relationships in a South Wales Valley Community

Allan Glyndwr Meredith

Abstract

This research explored the attitudes and experiences of 10 primary school parent governors whose schools (for pupils aged 5 to 11) were located in a disadvantaged South Wales Valley community to understand how they developed strategies to mitigate the effect of socioeconomic disadvantage and identify the benefits that accrue from a close family–school–community relationship. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, a semi-structured questionnaire, and a structured demographic questionnaire to gain factual information about the participants. Thematic analysis was used to find common patterns to answer the research questions. The participants' words are used to express views shared by several members. All participants constructed their identity in terms of the specific geographical community in which they lived; this contributed to a sense of belonging, shared values, and attitudes. The distinct sociocultural–geographic features of the research site promoted social cohesion and neighborliness, underpinned by extended family and kinship relationships. The participants believed when families and schools in a disadvantaged community worked together, they created a caring, inclusive ethos that supported those in most need, an ethos schools in more affluent areas are unlikely to have.

Key Words: school governors, community, inclusivity, family, school, community engagement, socioeconomic disadvantage, parent perspectives

Introduction

This article explores how parent governors in South Wales Valley schools compensated for the increased levels of poverty in their schools and how their community and school disadvantage contributed to their identity. The researcher sought to understand how school governors developed strategies to compensate for the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage and to identify any benefits. The article begins by providing an overview of the Welsh education structure within the research site. This is followed by a literature review of current knowledge in the area of parent and community involvement in their children's schools, specifically in economically disadvantaged communities, and the benefits that accrue to this relationship. This helped identify areas currently underresearched that the research questions might profitably explore. The methods section outlines and justifies the procedures and processes used to collect, analyze, and interpret data to answer the research questions. This supports the findings, discussion, and conclusion sections.

The Welsh Context

Wales is a constituent part of the United Kingdom (U.K.). England borders it to the east, the Irish Sea to the north and west, the Celtic Sea to the southwest, and the Bristol Channel to the south. It has a population of just over 3 million, compared to England's 56 million, and in size is slightly smaller than the United States of America's state of New Jersey. Figure 1 is a political map of the U.K. showing England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales.

Figure 1. A political map of the U.K.

Figure 2. Wales and the research site

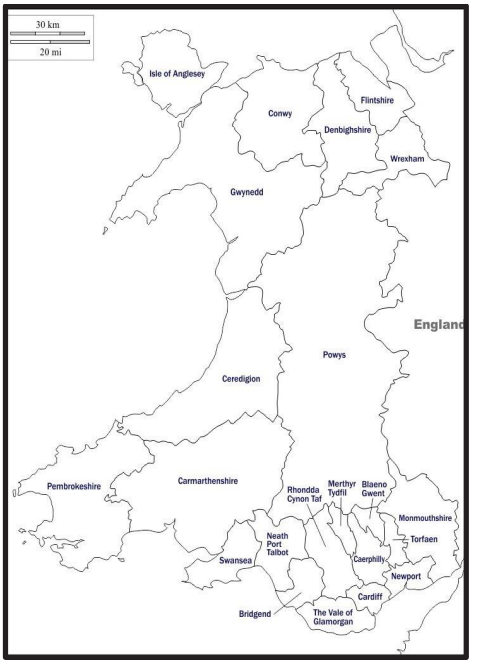

Figure 2 is a political map of Wales showing the geographical research focus, the southeast valleys Rhondda Cynon Taff, Merthyr, Caerphilly, and Blana Gwent. The research site is a former coal mining area. Since 1945 the number of coal mines declined; the last of these closed in 1990. Over this period and since the area has experienced major depopulation. Economically, it is amongst the poorest parts of Europe, with high levels of unemployment, welfare dependency, social exclusion, and educational underachievement (Egan, 2012). Figure 3 shows a South Wales Valley community, typical of the research site.

Figure 3. A South Wales Valley community, typical of the research site

As can be seen, a typical valley community consists of several hundred terraced houses clustered around where the deep coal mine once stood. It has a distinct geographic boundary, and at its heart stands the local community primary school. The meandering, snake-like rows of terraced housing

were shaped by the physical geography and industrial history. Houses were built with speed from the mid-19th century onwards to accommodate the mass influx of miners and their families (Davies, 1993). The first houses were built near the colliery and river and, after that, upon the higher valley mountain slopes.

The social characteristics of the research site resonate with the German social theorist, Ferdinand Tonnies (1887). Tonnies's classic study of social cohesion identified two idealized groups, "Gemeinschaft" and "Gesellschaft." "Gemeinschaft" characterizes social relationships in terms of "community" with significant face-to-face contact and shared values that embrace broad socioeconomic needs and interests. In contrast, "Gesellschaft," translated as "society," describe social relationships where mutual obligations, social cohesion, and wider social responsibility are weaker. The historic common source of employment, coal mining, with its inherent dangers, along with the terraced houses of the research site, promoted face-to-face contact, neighborliness, and a shared sense of identity (Clarke, 2009) which endures to the present time (Fisk, 1978).

Schools

The Wales Government has independent control over its 1,569 state community schools which are each owned, staffed, and maintained by their respective local authority. All schools have a governing body based on stakeholder principles, whose members are drawn from those interested in the school's success—the headteacher (similar to a U.S. principal), local authority, school staff, and parents. The governing body's role is to run and control the direction of the school to achieve prescribed goals. Governing bodies operate on the principles of pluralism which recognize the strengths of all members (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2016; Taylor, 1977). Governors serve a four-year term from their date of appointment and meet a minimum of three times a year as a full body, where a majority vote makes decisions (Wales Government, 2018a). Tables 1 and 2 summarize the information.

The Welsh Government is committed to community-based schools and acknowledges social, economic, and cultural factors play a major role in fostering a strong school–community relationship (Wales Government, 2018a). Further, the benefits of an enduring school–community relationship are noted, "Schools and governing bodies do not exist in isolation from their wider community; they play an important and pivotal role in the community" (Wales Government, 2018a, Chapter 2, pp. 4–5).

Table 1. Basic Composition of Governing Bodies in Welsh Primary Schools

Parent governors, elected by parents with children in the school	Between 3–5 members depending on the size of the school
Staff governors, elected by school staff	1 or 2 members depending on the size of the school
Local authority governors	Between 2–4 members depending on the size of the school
Headteacher	An ex-officio staff governor, who can decline to take up the position

Source: Adapted from *School Governors' Guide to the Law* (Wales Government, 2018a)

Table 2. Individual Governing Body Duties and Responsibilities

	Duties and Responsibilities
Headteacher	Formulates aims and objectives, policies, and targets for the governing body to consider adopting, responsible for the day-to-day running of the school. Accountable to the governing body, both for the functions performed as part of the headteacher's normal role and for powers delegated by the governing body.
Governors	Responsible for the school. Taking a broadly strategic role in the running of the school. Decide aims and set the strategic framework for getting there. Act as a 'critical friend' to, and 'support/challenge' the headteacher.

Source: Adapted from *School Governors' Guide to the Law* (Wales Government, 2018a)

The Welsh Government extol the virtues of educational cooperation. However, individual school governing bodies are charged with raising standards. This has drawn them into a market environment where schools compete against each other for pupils (Egan, 2017). The commitment to educational marketization in U.K. schools has disproportionately and negatively affected groups and communities already depressed (Newman & Clarke, 2014; Thompson & Coghlan, 2015). The consequences for schools in economically disadvantaged areas have been dire, for they are least able to compete in the market for pupils through the lure of high attainment and links with prestigious universities. Because the school's budget is related to the number of pupils on roll, the fall in the number of pupils has been difficult for these schools (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2016). Over the period 2010–21, schools in the most disadvantaged areas of the U.K. have had their budgets cut in real terms by 12% compared with 5% cuts with the least deprived fifth (Drayton et al., 2023).

Poverty in the Research Site

Of the Welsh population, over 700,000 (23%) live in poverty, including 185,000 children. This is the highest percentage rate of all four U.K. countries (McFarlane, 2023). Setting an appropriate measure by which individual schools and pupils are considered disadvantaged is contested. Entitlement to free school meals (FSM), however, provides an objective way to assess family poverty (Strand, 2014). Only pupils from families in receipt of state benefits, such as income support, jobseeker's allowance, or child tax credits (if below 60% of national median income), are eligible.

In Wales, 154,000 school-age children live in poverty (The Children's Society, 2020). However, not all children who meet the eligibility criteria for FSM receive them every day. Around 28,000 eligible children are not registered for FSM with their school, and, of those who are, each day a further 22,000 do not eat the meal (The Children's Society, 2020). Therefore, of the 154,000 Welsh school children living in poverty, only 63,000 receive FSM, meaning 91,000 children miss out daily.

The effect of living in poverty is significant. It includes a low birth rate, lower life expectancy, chronic illness, and limited work opportunities (Johnson, 2019). The Welsh Government recognizes the relationship between educational achievement and the level of entitlement to FSM. As the level of entitlement to FSM increases, the level of academic attainment falls (Wales Government, 2019).

From 2001 to 2018, the Welsh Government's anti-poverty plan was the *Communities First* program (Wales Government, 2018c). This introduced measures to help the 100 most deprived electoral divisions identified by the Wales Government's (2018b) Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD). This consisted of eight domains of deprivation: income; employment; health; education; housing; access to services; environment; and community safety (Wales Government, 2014). This program was subsumed by the Tackling Poverty Action Programme (TPAP) in 2012. This introduced the early years Flying Start program, Families First, the Pupil Deprivation Grant, credit unions, advice services, and health initiatives. Despite the Welsh Government spending £432 million on these programs from 2001–17, poverty levels remain unchanged.

Literature Review

The research literature on parental involvement in their children's schools has identified benefits for both parties and the community they

serve, across age groups and a diverse range of subjects (Dearing et al., 2015; Holloway & Kunesh, 2015; Ross, 2023). Positive family–school–community involvement is associated with the child's well-being and learning, which improves over time (Dearing et al., 2015; Pirchio et al., 2023). Partnerships between schools, parents, and communities have been shown to transform the traditional role of schools and embrace the physical and emotional well-being of children and their families (Stefanski et al., 2016). This includes supporting family well-being, establishing the domestic conditions conducive to achievement, improving attendance rates and behavior, and supporting local services for children and families (Holloway & Kunesh, 2015; Mapp et al., 2022; Pestaner et al., 2023; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

There are significant benefits when parents are welcomed into the school environment (Hill, 2015; Moorman Kim & Sheridan, 2015). First, it enables them to meet and form friendships with other parents and their children. This lets parents become familiar with the school ethos, regulations, and policies and know the teachers and school staff. This promotes good standards of behavior, attendance, and attainment, which endure (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011; Jones & Palikara, 2023). This engagement can bridge the gap in status and power between parents and school staff thereby promoting two-way channels of communication and improving parent confidence and agency (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007; Warren et al., 2009). Additionally, it can help create a child-friendly school environment by implementing antibullying programs (Fatimah et al., 2021). Cameron et al.'s (2024) study of a small disadvantaged Scottish primary school found an awareness of the importance of family–school collaboration among young children that positively enhanced short- and long-term attainment. In Wales, when school governors build close and enduring ties with their community it brings school and community together (Ranson, Farrell, et al., 2005). The authors reported school–community engagement raised aspirations that enhanced further education and employment opportunities and created a broad community spirit (Ranson, Farrell, et al., 2005).

Effective home-school communication is essential for fostering parent involvement and supporting student success (Graham-Clay, 2024). Structurally, strong family–school–community relationships tend to be built on open channels of communication with collaboration between the respective parties (Gross et al., 2015). A trusting and enduring relationship may take time to develop but the benefits for parents, school leaders, and teaching staff are considerable (Paik et al., 2019). This appears particularly so in the U.K. in areas of disadvantage where many governors are committed to

building strong relations with the communities they serve (Baxter, 2015). A significant body of evidence highlights the connection between families living in poverty and low pupil attainment which can be improved by parental engagement (Alexiadou, 2005; Egan, 2012; Lingard & Mills, 2017; Valli et al., 2013). A high turnover of teaching staff can affect standards of behavior and learning outcomes (Menzies, 2022; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). For schools in disadvantaged areas, the incidence of teacher turnover is greater and the consequences are more damaging (Arthur & Bradley, 2023). A major cause of poor teacher retention is the stress of the work and the feeling they are not appreciated (Menzies, 2022). Strong, positive relationships with parents therefore can play a key role in retaining school staff (Ibragimov et al., 2021; Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018) and can compensate for social and economic disadvantage and mitigate the effects of educational inequality (Putnam, 2015).

Despite the benefits of a close family–school–community relationship, not all parents are aware, leading Crisol-Moya et al. (2022) to recommend schools should routinely make parents aware of the positive impacts of their involvement. Further, while parent involvement in education is recognized as important, it remains weak in many communities (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Not all schools seek to build a strong family–school–community relationships. Hanafin and Lynch (2002) reported parental involvement in the school they studied was limited, and parents felt excluded from matters that affected them and their child's learning. Warren et al. (2009) argued many urban schools are isolated from the families and communities they serve; however, the authors felt community-based organizations were embedded in the lives of many families with the potential impetus for them to engage in school life.

School–parent partnerships may emerge organically out of a specific community need and types of family engagement occurring (Valli et al., 2013). A positive family–school–community relationship can act as a catalyst to address community development issues (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). For example, Talmage et al. (2018) studied an urban school in Phoenix, Arizona and reported that opening its premises to community groups during off-school hours resulted in greater community involvement. The authors recognized that for schools to serve their community, they must be *open* to the community. Maximizing these benefits requires schools, community leaders, and administrators to work collaboratively (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

While the concept of parent–school engagement is widely used, it can have different meanings (Jones & Palikara, 2023), and it is unclear whether

school governors, leaders, teaching staff, and policymakers have a shared understanding of the term. Traditionally, parent–school engagement has been understood as a home-based support mechanism where the channels of communication are open and parents ensure their children are well-behaved, have good attendance, and complete their homework tasks on time (Schmid & Garrels, 2021). Warren et al. (2009) found meaningful family–school engagement is much more than this. It involves two-way communication, shared decision-making, and leadership which can transform the learning environment. This finding is supported by Bolívar & Chrispeels (2011) who reported that policies and actions designed to encourage parental engagement in schools have resulted in parents both individually and collectively gaining agency and confidence and becoming involved in school leadership which has benefitted their children. Dove et al. (2018) found a family's sense of connectedness to their child's school community is related to their level of participation. So parents who actively engage with their local school strengthen the school community. When parents are engaged with their children's school, the teaching staff gain a better understanding of the family's social circumstances and can tailor their teaching approaches to meet the diverse needs of students which can improve learning outcomes (DeMatthews, 2018; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020).

Policymakers increasingly recognize the benefit of strong parent and community engagement in their children's education (Price-Mitchell, 2009). The Welsh Government has formally adopted this strategy. Unlike England where 42.7% of primary schools and 81.9% of secondary schools are academies funded directly by the government (Government/UK, 2024), all state schools in Wales are community schools. They are meant to serve and develop strong links with parents, families, and their local community and collaborate effectively with health, well-being, advice services, and health agencies. Community schools celebrate diversity among children, young people, families, and communities, as well as inclusivity wherein local education authorities, teachers, support staff, head teachers, parents, families, and school leaders collaborate for the benefit of the students (Wales Government, 2023). To conclude, the research literature on the benefits of a strong family–school–community relationship is conclusive. As Mapp et al. (2022) note, "Everyone wins!" This is particularly so in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas.

Research question 1: How do parent school governors in a disadvantaged South Wales community construct their relationship with their school?

Research question 2: What do parent governors in a disadvantaged South Wales community believe are the benefits of a strong parent–community relationship?

Research question 3: How do parent school governors in disadvantaged South Wales communities develop a strong school–parent–community relationship?

Methods

The Sample

A nonprobabilistic, purposive sampling strategy incorporating an element of convenience sampling was used. Nonprobabilistic sampling enables the researcher to select units from a population they are interested in studying (Wu Suen et al., 2014) and is based on the subjective judgment of the researcher (Etikan, 2017).

The participants in this research were identified and selected because they were especially knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest. Additionally, they indicated that they were available and willing to talk about their experiences and opinions. Purposive sampling selects participants with the expectation each will be available to provide unique, rich information (Wu Suen et al., 2014). The members of my sample, by being parent governors in economically disadvantaged schools, had a good understanding and knowledge of the phenomenon. The convenience element of the sampling was a nonprobabilistic technique where subjects more readily accessible to the researcher are likely to be included. The weaknesses of this sampling approach are explored in the Discussion section.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited with the help of the relevant local authority Governor Training and Support Team Leader (GTSTL) who, on my behalf, contacted the 120 parent primary school governors in the local authority's former Communities First areas. The entitlement to FSM in these areas exceeded 40%, compared with the national average of 20% (Jenkins, 2021). They were given details of the research focus and asked to reply to the GTSTL email if they were interested in participating in the research. Seventeen (10 women, 7 men) replied they were interested and were happy for their contact details to be forwarded to me. It was decided 10 participants were appropriate for the scope of the research. These 10 were chosen randomly from the 17 participants who offered to take part in the research.

Table 3. Demographic Data About the Respondents

Un/employment Status	Full-time employment - 8 participants Up to 16 hours per week - 2 participants Not in paid employment - 0 participants
Length of time the participants had been parent school governors in their school	Less than 1 year - 3 participants Between 1-2 years - 4 participants More than 2 years - 3 participants
Number of children in the school	7 participants had two children in the school 3 participants had one child in the school
The average time they had been in post	2 years and 3 months
Employment	7 worked in the public sector 2 worked in the private sector 1 was self-employed
Education	4 were university graduates, 2 of these going to university several years after leaving school
Ethnicity*	All participants were White and were born and grew up in their local area

Notes. Source: The demographic questionnaire (Appendix A). *The 2012 National Census showed by ethnicity 96.7% of the research site identified as White; this is similar to the ethnic composition of the students in the schools represented in the sample (Office for National Statistics, 2023).

Observations

The findings of Table 3 are broadly in line with the findings of (a) Balarin et al. (2008) who found most U.K. governors were in paid employment and around a third were university graduates, and (b) Ranson, Arnott, et al. (2005) who found that U.K. governors were generally White, middle-aged, middle-class, middle-income public/community service workers. The average time the participants had been in post was two years and three months. This is in line with Holland (2018) who found the largest cohort of their study, 38%, had been in the post for one to four years.

Ethics

The research adhered to deontological ethical principles. This recognized the rights of the vulnerable should be established and observed (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). In my dealings with the participants, this meant the avoidance of harm, being fair, telling the truth, and keeping promises (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009). The risks and benefits deriving from participation were honestly described, and the participants were informed that they could withdraw without explanation. The research application to

the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the Open University adhered to guidelines provided by the Open University and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) 2018 and was formally approved.

Interviewing and Coding

Data were collected using qualitative and quantitative tools. A demographic questionnaire gathered factual data on the participants' socioeconomic characteristics utilized for context purposes. This asked questions about the age of the participants, the length of time they had been a parent governor in their school, the number of children they had in the school, their employment status, and ethnicity (see Appendix A).

A semi-structured questionnaire using closed and open-ended questions in the areas to be discussed during the semi-structured questionnaire phase was administered. This was to encourage the participants to think about these areas and jot down notes to prompt their memory (Appendix B).

The semi-structured interview, the main data collection tool, is when the researcher asks informants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions. The structure and content were informed by the literature review on family–school–community relationships. This recognizes the mutuality of the participant–researcher relationship in creating meaning (Heslop et al., 2006). This helped me explore themes that emerged during the discussion. This approach allowed me to rephrase questions if I thought they were misunderstood. It also allowed me to explore areas beyond the pre-prepared interview schedule (Appendix C presents the semi-structured interview guide with questions and prompts).

All participants were asked where they would like to meet to be interviewed and were interviewed individually. Six were interviewed in their home and four at their school. The duration of the interviews ranged from 28–42 minutes and was, with participant permission, audiorecorded.

Data were transcribed within two days while recollections of the event were fresh. The main threats to the quality of transcriptions were recording quality, missing content, and "tidying up" which can distort meaning (King & Horrocks, 2010). Some transcription contained mumbled, half-finished sentences which changed direction mid-stream. There were slang words and phrases peculiar to the geographic research site. The tidying up was done using member checking in which data was returned to participants to check for accuracy.

Data analyses used a thematic framework, a method for identifying and reporting patterns (themes) within descriptive qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved systematically searching for, comparing, and

coding different data segments to answer the research questions. The coding process is summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of the Coding Process

Stage 1	To become familiar with the data, I played the audio several times, noting initial thoughts.
Stage 2	Generation of initial codes by identifying where, how, and what patterns occurred through data reduction. This was done through line-by-line coding, rejecting codes considered weak (Appendix D).
Stage 3	Search for themes. When a detailed list of initial codes had been generated, the data were interrogated to identify themes that related to the research areas. Examination of the initial codes' claims to be considered a theme (e.g., some only appeared a single time and, upon re-examination, were considered weak and rejected). Next, initial codes were combined into potential codes that reflected the meaning of an observed pattern. At this stage, six overarching themes were identified. These were reciprocal partnerships, school leadership, inclusive culture, commitment to success, commitment to the well-being of all stakeholders, and community involvement (Appendix E).
Stage 4	Review themes. Themes were checked to ensure they made sense and code extracts of the participants' transcriptions were identified as potential inclusion in the research paper. This was done under three headings: theme; description/questions asked; participant's views and location in the text (Appendix F).
Stage 5	Define and name categories by generating clear definitions and names for each theme which described which aspects of data were being captured in each and what was interesting about them.
Stage 6	Production of the final report.

Findings

Findings are presented in quantitative and qualitative terms. This is complemented by a verbatim quotation of a participant chosen because it was representative of views expressed by several other participants. (Note: All names are pseudonyms.)

Research Question 1

How do parent school governors in a disadvantaged South Wales community construct their relationship with their school?

The Wales Government acknowledges schools and governing bodies, "do not exist in isolation from their wider community; [they] play an important and pivotal role in the community" (Wales Government, 2018, Chapter 2, pp. 4–5). Several participants spoke of this relationship.

> We are a community school serving our community and the families who live here. The community plays a big part in the school life. Lots of our parents attended the school and now their children do. I know of one case where three generations of the same family attended our school. [Freddie]

The meaning of "community" evoked a range of responses from the participants; all were positive and resonated with definitions given by Olmedo and Wilkins (2016). This included a sense of belonging and social cohesion which helped create a distinct identity. Their community and local school stood at the heart of all participants' lives.

Three participants said the terraced housing contributed to their sense of community. This created opportunities to engage with neighbors, build and strengthen social relations, and develop neighborliness. Freddy's words are representative of these sentiments:

> When you stand on your front doorstep, you can see 40 houses all in a line. You see the kids walk to school. When you walk to the shops you pass people you know and say ''Morning, are you alright?'' Walking past them and not saying ''Hello'' offends them. When you walk to the shops someone may say, ''Will you post a letter for me'' and you do, and that's normal. [Freddy]

Each community has a distinct geographical boundary originally centered around a coal mine. Tony said the geographic location where he lived gave him an identity:

> Where you come from is important. I don't mean being Welsh, but that is too. I live in Cwm, I'm a Cwm boy, and I'm proud of it. My friends went to Cwm Primary and so do our kids. We grew up together, played football for the school, and now our children do. [Tony]

Nancy said being part of her community meant being socially connected with others. She compared the social relationships that characterized her community with her sister, who lived in Cardiff, the capital city of Wales with a population of around 362,300 and located about 20 miles away. She drew attention to the differences in social connection. "She doesn't know her neighbors. I know most of the families who live locally. I went to school with lots of them, and my parents and theirs know each other. We help each other." [Nancy]

The scale of poverty in the community was a concern for all participants. Eight participants spoke of food poverty, families having to use food banks, and the effect on children. Niki said:

> There's a food bank in the high street, an old chapel. In my work, I've given out tickets so families can get food. Living on benefits is hard, especially for children who don't have what their friends do. [Niki]

Freddy spoke about the history of food poverty in the South Wales coal mining valleys. He referred to the soup kitchens providing free meals for the families of unemployed miners in the 1920s: "Our great-grandparents used soup kitchens. How can it be right to have food banks today? Hungry kids and hungry parents, it's a disgrace and makes me angry."

The South Wales valleys are among the poorest in Europe. All participants recognized deep poverty was widespread. Nevertheless, Dai said there was much to be gained from the rich social fabric of valley life:

> Newspapers paint a black picture of the valleys, and there is a lot of unemployment and people on the sick [not working due to long-term illness], but I wouldn't live anywhere else. We help each other, and that's important. [Dai]

Research Question 2

What do parent governors in a disadvantaged South Wales community believe are the benefits of a strong parent–community relationship?

In Wales, close ties with their community were reported as key to a school's success, with governors instrumental in this process (Ranson, Farrell, et al., 2005). A good community–school relationship was important for all participants who recognized this as beneficial. The participants identified several advantages of a good school–parent–community relationship. Dai spoke of test standards and behavior:

> Our school gets good test results, and the behavior is good. That is helped by having the parents on board. When they are involved with school, their children know their parents want them to do well, so they work hard. If a child is behaving badly, it's easy to speak to their mother if they are on the premises and say, "Jimmy's behavior has been poor lately; have a chat with him and find out why, will you?" [Dai]

All participants were concerned about the socioeconomic disadvantage at the school and community levels. Six said they wanted to provide a good educational start to break the intergenerational nature of poverty. Giving

the children in their school a "good start" were sentiments expressed by several participants. Eddie used the term in an economic sense where pupils could do well in school, gain examination success, and then find a well-paid employment: "If we can give them a good start, they can leave school with good qualifications and get a well-paid job." [Eddie]

The Welsh Government and the local authority prioritized school-based support for pupils from families experiencing economic hardships. The individual governing body's role was to ensure this provision was taken up. All participants said they strived to secure provision for pupils from such families. This included free uniforms, grants, and where applicable, additional learner support in the classroom. Niki said:

> Our school has lots of poor children entitled to free school meals. Most parents know that, but many don't know that when the family income is low there are other things their children are entitled to. It's important everyone who is entitled to extra provision, receives it. [Niki]

Four participants spoke of the *benefits* of their school being located in an area of economic disadvantage, which schools in more prosperous areas may not have. This included a caring ethos, a shared sense of belonging, and being prepared to help others. The accounts given by Julie and Niki illustrate this.

Julie, a single parent, depended on her parents who lived locally for child support. In their absence, she explained, there were other sources of help in the form of neighbors and friends. "My parents help [with childcare] a lot, but if there is a problem, one of my friends will pitch in and pick her up and feed her. Then I repay the kindness by doing something for them."

Repaying the kindness was a sentiment expressed by several other participants, as well. Niki spoke of a poignant incident concerning a young family with children in her school. The father died, and his partner was struggling financially. Friends of the bereaved partner used the local community center, without charge, to stage a fundraising afternoon with children's games, face painting, cakes and sandwiches, and a raffle that raised several hundred pounds. Niki described this evolving in organic terms:

> It just happened. Her friends got together and that was that. In a way, it was a good day with a lot of laughter. Sian and her children were there as well as the school teaching staff, and everyone talked about her dead partner. [Niki]

Niki spoke about the event as if it were not unusual but a norm underpinning the social fabric of valley life. The attendance of teaching staff at

the event showed that school–community action can be spontaneous, embracing a range of participants.

Research Question 3

How do parent school governors in disadvantaged South Wales communities develop a strong school–community relationship?

The participants identified several ways in which they developed a strong school–community relationship. Seven participants spoke about parents being invited into the school to work with the pupils, such as gardening or making things for the fete and open days. Two parents did this and enjoyed it so much that they spent full days there and trained as Learning Support Teachers. They gained confidence and secured paid positions in the school.

Many parents with children in the school were in paid employment, and the grandparents and the extended families played a significant childcare role. This provided opportunities to involve grandparents in the school's life and show the teachers' hard work. Lizzy said:

> A lot of grandparents bring their grandchildren to school and pick them up. We encourage them to come to concerts, fetes, and coffee mornings. It's then they see what goes on in the school. They see the children's work on display, and then they see how hard the teachers work. [Lizzy]

Eddie spoke about how his school encouraged community groups to use the premises. This, he said, enabled individuals who would ordinarily not see the inside of the school to do so:

> The school premises are used by the Brownies and the Slimming Club; they come into the school, look around, see a lovely learning environment, and realize that is because of the teachers and children's hard work. Then they spread the word. [Eddie]

In a similar vein, Julie said:

> Our school has links with the Old Age Pensioners Day Center, and the School Choir visits and sings for them every term. When our classes are studying local history, some pensioners visit the school to talk about the old days. [Julie]

The physical geography of the community helped in building a good school–community relationship:

> We are a community school, and most children live less than half a mile from the school. When they walk to school, they see local people and say, "Hello." At the end of the school day, they take their children to the nearby park, and kids and parents mix. [Aimee]

Unanticipated Findings

Four unanticipated findings were found when exploring how the participants developed a strong school–community relationship. First, all participants spoke about parents who voluntarily worked in their schools. This resulted in a few cases of them studying for qualifications as learning support staff and gaining full-time employment in that capacity. Likewise, several volunteers gained sufficient confidence and agency to become governors of their schools.

Second, four participants spoke about the value of developing a good school–community relationship through the network of informal social relationships. This included the school staff who lived within the school catchment area meeting the parents informally. Nancy said:

> A lot of local people work in the school. There are teachers, teaching assistants, dinner supervisors, and cleaners, which is good because there's an overlap [between school and community]. I see the school cook when I'm shopping, and she will say, ''Your Sian has a good appetite and good table manners; she's a credit to you." I smile. [Nancy]

Freddy's son's teacher lived near him:

> We're neighbors, we talk a lot. There's this really good relationship between the staff and the parents, especially in the infants [younger pupils]. Get that [relationship] right, and it's there until the child goes to the Comp [secondary school]. It's valuable in all sorts of ways, and behavior is one. [Freddy]

Third, in some cases, the participant–community relationship merged. Some governors living near the school would engage with children and their parents on their way to school. This enabled parents to speak to a governor informally about school matters and contributed to good pupil behavior. In these cases, the participant's governor role and community member role overlapped. For example, Owen lived close to the school he was a governor of. He knew most of the families in the community and had a good relationship with them. He described how his governor and community roles overlapped:

> I live by the school and see children pass. I know most of their parents, and they know it. Sometimes, if they're messing about, I'll say,

> ''I'll tell your father what you're doing," and that's enough. It's nothing to do with being a governor, it's more building links with the school, and it works. [Owen]

Fourth, underpinning social relationships was a sense of caring for the most disadvantaged. The cases of families supporting others were common. It suggested an unwritten convention of moral obligation and reciprocity which stemmed from the close-knit community and social cohesion. Several participants felt the novel ways of supporting families and extending the school–community partnership provided positive attributes to their economically disadvantaged community which are likely to be absent from schools in more affluent areas.

Discussion

This research explored the attitudes and experiences of 10 primary school parent governors whose schools were located in an economically disadvantaged South Wales Valley community. It examined (a) how they construct their relationship with their school, (b) the benefits that accrued to a good school–family relationship, and (c) how a strong school–community relationship was established and maintained.

The participants contextualized the term community in several ways, all positive and in line with definitions given by Wilkins (2010). Physically, this included the distinct geographical boundaries and terraced housing which promoted significant face-to-face contact, extended family relationships, and a collective sense of belonging and helping those in need. There were several ways in which participants developed a strong school–parent–community relationship. Extended family relationships were common in the research site. Grandparents and other family members were involved in caregiving, taking, and picking up children from school. To encourage wider involvement, families were regularly invited into the school for concerts, coffee mornings, and charity functions. Further, community social clubs used the school premises, and school children visited local community organizations to perform for local people.

The research findings support other research into the benefits of a strong school–parent–community relationship. First, it shows how a strong parent–community relationship contributes to domestic well-being, improving domestic conditions that support achievement, improving attendance and behavior, and supporting local services for children and families (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Holloway & Kunesh, 2015; Mapp et al., 2022. Pestaner et al., 2023). There are major benefits when parents are

welcomed into the school environment (Hill, 2015; Moorman Kim & Sheridan, 2015) and when school premises are opened to local groups during off-school hours (Talmage et al., 2018). In this process, open channels of communication with collaboration between the respective parties are important (Gross et al., 2015).

Involvement in their school's life benefits both parties and promotes community involvement (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). Parental involvement with their children's schools enables the staff to gain a better understanding of the culture and social assets of families and helps bridge gaps in power between parents and school staff (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). This promotes parent agency, so they become more involved in school leadership (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011). For families living in poverty, parental engagement can improve attainment (Alexiadou, 2005; Egan, 2012; Lingard & Mills, 2017; Valli et al., 2013).

The findings also demonstrate how parents can devise strategies to address specific school issues that open avenues of collaboration that promote the parent's voice in school leadership and decision-making. While traditional parent–school engagement has often been understood as home-based support (Jones & Palikara, 2023), the participants in this research showed the significant benefits when parents participated in daily school life by working with teachers and other children.

Exploring how the participants developed a strong school–community relationship found unanticipated findings which are discussed above. These make a unique contribution to the state of knowledge about how school governors develop positive school–parent–community relationships.

Implications

The insights gained by this research have implications for schools in general and specifically for Valley, impoverished schools and the communities they serve. While many schools already realize and tap the benefits which accrue to a strong family–school–community relationship, this is not universal. Many school staff (from headteachers to teachers) are not taught about the value of these connections, so they fail to understand their broad and wide-reaching potential. Parent governors are well placed to build on the existing social capital and, through professional development, implement strategies to further strengthen and enhance family–school–community engagement. Dissemination of this information would benefit schools generally, particularly those with similar socioeconomic levels to those in this research.

Second, many parents have strong links with their child's school, including many as volunteers working in the classroom. In this research, a small number of volunteers gained sufficient confidence to study for a Learning Support qualification and secure paid employment. An extension of this would be to offer volunteers the opportunity to train as Learning Support assistants, having not only potential economic benefits for the parent volunteer, and also as this research found, enhancing confidence and agency.

Third, many households who live within the school catchment area do not have children in the school (senior citizens, adults with grown-up children, etc.). One school in the research had established an afterschool walking group for staff, families, and local inhabitants which proved successful and promoted community involvement. Similar programs could only strengthen school–community relationships.

All research participants were concerned about poverty, the high level of pupils' free school meal entitlement, and those who used local food banks. Two schools in the study had a program of recycling school uniforms, sports shoes, and so on, which recognized family needs and destigmatized this process. Establishing similar programs in other schools would have considerable benefits. The above list is not exhaustive, but these suggestions all have the potential to make families, schools, and communities an all-embracing entity that functions in a holistic, inclusive way.

A weakness of the research was the sampling approach which was unlikely to be representative of the population being researched. To strengthen claims of authenticity, the participants were shown copies of the completed research document and asked to confirm they were represented fairly. Further, procedures and processes used throughout the study were made explicit and justified.

Conclusion

This article explored parent perspectives on strong school and community relationships in a South Wales Valley Community. The findings substantiated other research on the benefits of a strong school–parent–community relationship. It also found unique partnership aspects which make a significant contribution to this area of study.

To conclude, the research found the resilience of parents and families in disadvantaged communities is considerable and constitutes a reservoir of potential that can be channeled to effect positive change. This played a major role in how the participants executed their governor role. In this research, school–parent–community relationship was not an abstract entity;

rather, it constituted a powerful, organic force capable of positively shaping and mediating social and educational relationships.

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Appendix A. Structured Demographic Questionnaire

Parent school governor—what's your perspective?

Dear parent governor,

Thank you for taking part in my research. As you know, I am a researcher with the Open University, and I am interested in what parent governors think about being a governor. Before we meet again, perhaps you could look at the questions below and put a circle around the answer which best describes you. Please bring this questionnaire with you to our meeting. In any report, the names of participants will be anonymized.

Thank you,

Name Date

Telephone Email

1. Your age e.g. 21–25, 26–30, 31–35, 36–40, 41–45, 45–50, 51+
2. Number of children you have or are guardians to who attend your school ___.
3. Length of time you have been a parent school governor in your present school. _____Years ____Months

4. Employment (a) In full-time employment, (b) In part-time employment (16 hours or less a week), (c) not in paid employment
5. Ethnicity

    Asian, Asian British, Asian Welsh

    Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African

    Mixed or Multiple

    White

    Another ethnic group

Appendix B. Semi-Structured Questionnaire

Parent governor—what's your perspective?

Dear parent governor,

Thank you for taking part in my research. As you know, I am a researcher at the Open University, researching what parent governors think about being a governor. Before we meet again, perhaps you could look at the questions below and jot down things that occur to you. Please bring this questionnaire with you to our meeting. In any report, the names of participants will be made anonymous.

Thank you,

[Please note greater space was given for the participants to jot down their thoughts in the questionnaire distributed.]

Name _____ Date _____

1. Can you tell me about your school?
2. Being a school governor is an important job. Tell me about what the school governor does. Do you talk to other parents about what the governors do? Tell me about it.
3. You live in XXXX. Is this important for you? What is good and bad about living in XXXX?
4. Does your school have social and economic disadvantages? Can you tell me about them and if it affects your school?
5. What does the word community mean to you? Can you give examples of what a community means to you? Is the school–community relationship important to you? If so, in what ways?
6. Are there benefits when parents and families are involved with their children's school? Can you tell me about them?
7. Has your school sought to build relationships with its community? Can you tell me about it?
8. In what ways has your governing body built or strengthened the school–community relationship?

Appendix C. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

(questions and prompts; main data collection tool)

Participant name_____ Date_____ Duration of interview ___ mins.

Welcome the participants – thank them for their participation – remind them it is likely to last no longer than 40 minutes – remind them their views, experiences, etc. they express will be treated in strict confidence – ask in general terms about the questionnaires they completed before the interview.

1. Tell me about being a parent governor.

Prompts: What does it entail? Communication with other parents. What is the best thing about being a parent governor? Are there disadvantages?

Do you talk to other parents about what the governors do?

2. Can you tell me about your school?

Prompts: Tell me about the area in which you live. Number of pupils. The area it serves. Does your school have social and economic disadvantages? Can you tell me about them, and if it affects your school?

3. Can you tell me about where you live?

Prompts: Its locality. Is this important for you? What is good and bad about living where you do? Unemployment? Sickness?

4. What does the word community mean to you?

Prompts: Can you give examples of what a community means to you? Tell me about the school and community relationship. Is the school–community relationship important to you? If so, in what ways?

5. Are parents and families involved in your school?

Prompts: How do you encourage their involvement?

6. Are there benefits when parents and families are involved with their children's school?

Prompts: Can you tell me about them? Has your school sought to build relationships with its community? Can you tell me about it? In what ways has your governing body built or strengthened the school–community relationship?

7. What are the benefits when parents and families are involved with your school?

Prompts: Attendance – behavior – attainment – good staff–parent relationships?

Thank the participants for their help.

Appendix D. Generation of Initial Codes Under Five Broad Headings

Community Engagement	-Families/caregivers -School concerts -Recycling school uniform -School involvement -School nurse talks to pupils about personal and social development -The Parent Teacher Association -Outside organizations' use of school premises -Visits to senior citizens—school choir -Parents and members of the local community volunteer to work in the school -Parents and members of the local community undertake training within the school -Breakfast Club and afterschool provision
Communication	-Governing bodies with parents and families -How do participants define the school-community relationship -School with other parents -Residents living close to the school -Building trust and collaboration with families, parents, and local organizations -Collaborative decision-making processes -How to judge effective communication -Headteacher and parents -Headteacher and school staff
Impact on Students, Parents, Community Members	-Positive outcomes from parent involvement -Retention of school staff -Attendance -Behavior -Aspirations -Support systems for students and families -Schools provide advice on health, well-being -Parent volunteers are able to secure employment through in-school training
Challenges and Barriers	-Lack of parental involvement -Communicating benefits of school-family-community involvement -Inadequate resources/budget -Significant numbers of pupils with special needs -Holiday hunger -Competing for pupils with other schools -The falling number of pupils affecting the school budget
Parental Involvement	-Engagement in school activities -Influence on school policies -Going on school trips with their children -Involvement with afterschool clubs

Appendix E. Examination of the Initial Codes Considered a Theme Under Six Headings

Reciprocal Partnerships	-Schools and community partners know they benefit from their relationships -Schools gain additional resources and support (financial from Wales Government, social capital from the community) -Parents learn about inclusive educational practices and schools learn about parental aspirations
Strong School Leadership	-Effective leadership within schools is crucial for fostering successful partnerships -Leaders who prioritize community engagement and create an inviting school culture are essential -School governing body formed on stakeholder principles.
Inclusive Culture	-The role and commitment of the Wales Government to providing a distinct legal framework of inclusivity -Parents, families, and extended families are involved in school life -Schools emphasize inclusivity and good education opportunities for all students -Positively influencing community partners' perceptions and practices regarding disability and inclusion -Good provision for pupils with special educational needs -This includes regular interactions and shared goals between schools and community organizations
Commitment to Success	How measured? <u>Pupils</u> -Behavior -Attainment -Teaching staff retention -Welcoming ethos <u>Parents/families</u> -Continued willingness to become involved with the life of the school, helping in the classroom <u>Community</u> -Welcomed in the school -Fetes -Coffee mornings

Commitment to All Stakeholders' Well-Being	-All parties to involvement in school life -Well-being and commitment in building strong school–community relationship of school/parents and family/community achievement
Community Involvement	-Active participation from community members, including volunteering and providing resources, enhances the educational experience and supports student success -Good relationships with families living close to the school -Schools provide formal training opportunities for family members and community members -Local organizations use the school premises -Schools groups visit local organizations – choirs give presentations -Extended family and community members give talks to pupils regarding "the old days" in history lessons -Parents and families invited for school trips alongside their children

Appendix F. Sample of Manual Coding

Theme Description	Description/ Questions Asked	Participants' Views and Location in the Text*
School–comm relationship - socioeconomic disadvantage - community spirit	A feeling of shared values and the promotion of group interests	The participant spoke of people helping each other, especially in difficult times. A sense of belonging. (P17, L7)
Community	What does community mean?	The participant spoke of people helping each other, especially in difficult times. A sense of belonging. (P17, L7)
Parent–school–community inclusivity	How does the school involve families, parents, and local organizations?	The participant spoke of local organizations using the school premises. (P15, L12) Parents volunteer in the school. (P15, L18)

School community involvement, organizations	Do community organizations/groups use the school premises?	The participant knew a great deal about the use of school premises by community groups – Brownies, Slimming Club, and art group (P.12. L11,12)
School reaching out to the community	Do schools visit local organizations?	The participant spoke of visiting senior citizens centers to perform and sing throughout the school year P.4, L8-15)
Free breakfast club	Free school breakfast club financed by the WAG	Participants identified the take up of free breakfasts as an indicator of social deprivation (P19, L15)
Hunger during school holidays	An indicator of poverty in the local community – linked to unemployment	The participant spoke of pupils going hungry during the school holiday because they miss the school breakfast club and free school meals (P17, L. 14)

*(e.g., Page 2, Line 12 expressed as P2, L12)

To Ask Rather than to Tell: Using the Questionnaire of Home Environment Literacy Practices to Enhance Home–School Collaborations

Tracey Kumar

Abstract

Attempts to raise the emergent literacy of "at-risk" children have prompted programs to teach caregivers how to implement school-like reading and writing activities at home. As an alternative to these programs, which often overlooked families' funds of knowledge, critics have encouraged literacy educators (e.g., teachers, literacy specialists) to collaborate with families to co-construct activities that build upon their existing literacy practices. Thus, to help literacy educators identify practices that are already in place, this manuscript presents the 16-item Questionnaire of Home Environment Literacy Practices (Q-HELP). Drawing from an established conceptual framework, the Q-HELP addresses the types of literacy support that caregivers provide and the literacy strands to which those supports are applied. The manuscript offers a detailed description of the background and design of the Q-HELP, presents findings concerning the psychometric soundness of the instrument, and describes three ways that literacy educators can utilize the instrument to enhance their partnerships with caregivers. A copy of the instrument is appended for immediate application.

Key Words: emergent literacy, home literacy environment, parental involvement, home–school partnerships, survey design, collaborations

Introduction

Literacy practices such as shared book reading (Reese et al., 2010; Sylva et al., 2008) and the teaching of letters and sounds (Adams et al., 2021; Stephenson et al., 2008; van der Pluijm et al., 2019) have been shown to foster literacy development. To promote these and other evidence-based practices, literacy researchers have designed countless family literacy programs. As Lynch and Prins (2022) explain, *family literacy program* includes "any service or activity that seeks to provide education for adults and children, to encourage reading in families, or to help parents support their children's education" (p. 4). Many such programs aim to stock families' homes with books and other materials (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2016; Brown et al., 2019; Byington et al., 2008; Nutbrown et al., 2015) and to teach caregivers how to facilitate literacy activities (Brown et al., 2019; Byington et al., 2008; de la Rie et al., 2021; Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005; Stephenson et al., 2008; Note: terms such as parent and caregiver are used to denote any adult who acts as a child's primary caregiver). These efforts rest on the assumption that changes in the home environment will enhance children's literacy and optimize their chances for academic success.

Accordingly, a growing body of research has attested to the benefits of family literacy programs. Across several studies, caregivers who were taught how to facilitate home literacy activities reported greater confidence in their ability to support their children's academic growth (Axford, 2007; Brown et al., 2019; Gerzel-Short, 2018; Tilley-Lubbs, 2011). They were also more likely to employ strategies during shared reading and appeared to be more adept at doing so (Axford, 2007; Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005; Sylva et al., 2008). Caregiver training has also been linked to positive outcomes for children. For example, children whose caregivers were trained in interactive reading scored higher on vocabulary and comprehension (Axford, 2007; Hidayatullah et al., 2023; Mol et al., 2008; Yüzbaşioğlu & Akyol, 2022), while those whose caregivers were taught to accentuate letter–sound relationships exhibited higher levels of reading proficiency (Sénéchal & Young, 2008; Swain et al., 2015). As these findings suggest, programs that support the use of evidence-based practices foster the growth of both meaning-related and code-related skills.

Yet despite these documented benefits, family literacy programs in the United States have faced scrutiny for failing to cultivate equitable partnerships with participants. Many programs have been accused of infusing participants' homes with activities that reflect the cultural and linguistic practices of White, middle-class families. By doing so, programs not only

invalidate caregivers' ways of engaging their children, but also suggest that they are inferior. Thus, Reyes and Torres (2007) assert that "despite having good intentions, these programs are motivated by the idea of 'fixing' non-mainstream families, rather than collaboratively identifying and solving the problems that alienate both the families and their children and obstruct their progress toward full literacy" (p. 75). As these programs usually serve racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse families, the imposition of whitestream practices disregards families' funds of knowledge (Reyes & Torres, 2007).

Heeding these concerns, critics have urged literacy educators (e.g., reading specialists, teachers) to cultivate respectful partnerships with families by working together to co-construct activities that not only build on their current practices and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), but also fit into their daily routines (Cyr et al., 2022; Egure et al., 2023; Kumar, 2016). To do so effectively, literacy educators must collect information regarding families' existing literacy activities, the frequency with which they engage in those activities, and the types of materials that they use. To facilitate the data collection process, this manuscript offers the Questionnaire of Home Environment Literacy Practices (Q-HELP), a 16-item survey that was informed by an established framework. Because the Q-HELP highlights everyday activities and materials, it can be applied to an array of educational settings (e.g., libraries, schools), including those that serve families from diverse backgrounds. Before detailing the design of the Q-HELP, the article summarizes the practices that have been shown to promote literacy development and the ways that caregivers can support their children at home.

Literature Review

Though "readiness" and formal instruction were once considered precursors to literacy, the idea that it emerges gradually is now widely accepted. As the term *emergent literacy* (Clay, 1966) suggests, literacy acquisition "is best conceptualized as a developmental continuum, with its origins in the life of the child, rather than an all-or-none phenomenon that begins when children start school" (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 848). Early theorizations of emergent literacy, including Mason and Stewart's (1990) four-component model and Whitehurst and Lonigan's (1998) outside-in inside-out model, accounted for meaning-related (e.g., vocabulary) and code-related (e.g., alphabetic principle) elements. Incorporating subsequent research, Rohde (2015) articulated the comprehensive emergent literacy model (CELM), which consists of three key components: language (e.g., vocabulary), print awareness (e.g., alphabet, concepts of print), and

phonological awareness (e.g., segmenting, rhyming). The CELM also acknowledges the skills that reside at the intersections of these components (e.g., letter–sound relationships) and the contextual elements that promote or constrain emergent literacy development (e.g., culture).

As emergent literacy is foundational to children's academic success, considerable attention has been given to activities that promote language, print awareness, and phonological awareness. Research has shown that oral language exposure is necessary for children's language development (Hoff, 2003; Krijnen et al., 2020; Reese et al., 2010; van der Pluijm et al., 2019). As such, numerous studies have documented the benefits of informal activities such as singing (Krijnen et al., 2020), storytelling (Hoff, 2003; Krijnen et al., 2020), and talking about everyday experiences (Reese et al., 2010; van der Pluijm, 2019). To illustrate, Krijnen et al. (2020) examined the connections between home-based activities and the language development of over 200 children. Findings revealed a positive association between their vocabulary knowledge and engagement in *informal* language activities; however, the opposite was noted for activities involving the direct teaching of language. As this suggests, "informal talk and play activities" (van der Pluijm et al., 2019, p. 347) may be one of the best ways for caregivers to support children's language development.

Another activity that has been shown to support language development is shared book reading, either with physical books or their electronic counterparts (Shamir & Korat, 2015). As numerous studies have demonstrated, shared book reading that incorporates opportunities for two-way communication is particularly effective at supporting children's vocabulary (Elias et al., 2006; Hidayatullah et al., 2023; Raikes et al., 2006; Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005; Yüzbaşioğlu & Akyol, 2022), print awareness (Altinkaynak, 2019; Hidayatullah et al., 2023; Rababah, 2017), and phonological awareness (Hidayatullah et al., 2023; Niklas & Schneider, 2017; Sylva et al., 2008). Activities involving books also serve as a platform for addressing alphabetic knowledge, which has been linked to higher literacy levels in the early grades (Chansa-Kabali, 2017; Sénéchal & Young, 2008; Swain et al., 2015). As such, studies have shown that alphabet books, whether paper-based or electronic (Willoughby et al., 2015), are useful for teaching letters and sounds (Both-de Vries & Bus, 2014; Willoughby et al., 2015).

Apart from alphabet books, research has shown that alphabetic knowledge can also be cultivated through engagement with environmental print (Neumann, 2014; 2018a), handheld devices (Neumann, 2018b), and other household items (Neumann & Neumann, 2009). For example, Neumann (2018a) studied the effects of an eight-week environmental print program

for children and caregivers in which caregivers supported their children in using "multisensory strategies to identify, trace, and write letters and words embedded in environmental print" (p. 337). Children in the program experienced gains in letter identification, letter writing, and letter–sound relationships. Apart from illuminating the usefulness of environmental print, these findings suggest that letter identification should be accompanied by writing practice. In addition to pencil and paper, children can also use materials such as chalk, sand, or cookie dough (Neumann & Neumann, 2009) as well as electronic tablets (Neumann, 2018b), to practice forming letters and words.

Existing scholarship illuminates the importance of engaging children in informal language activities, two-way communication, shared reading, alphabetic instruction, and writing. Yet perhaps the most critical factor in the success or failure of a particular home literacy practice is the extent to which it is "adapted to activities that occur in the families' daily lives" (van der Pluijm et al., 2019, p. 317). To bridge home and school literacy practices, educators must abandon the top-down approach to parent involvement and embrace a collectivistic approach that prioritizes interdependence and the well-being of the group (Trumbull et al., 2007; Trumbull et al., 2020). Thus, rather than "prescribing" school literacy activities for caregivers to implement at home, educators should work with families to co-construct activities that fit into families' existing routines and practices and also reflect their own funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992).

Parent–teacher conferences, as well as other school- or community-based activities, are excellent opportunities for educators to learn about families' cultural backgrounds and literacy practices (Trumbull et al., 2007; Trumbull et al., 2020). To ensure that interactions are positive and productive, educators should refrain from dominating the conversation and *telling* caregivers how to work with their children at home. Instead, they should allow ample time for caregivers to discuss their concerns; teachers should also take care to validate caregivers' concerns and elicit more information about the concerns that are raised (Bridging Cultures Project, 1988). Additionally, educators should be prepared to ask about caregivers' own educational experiences and the types of activities that they feel comfortable implementing at home.

Insights that emerge from communication between caregivers and educators provide the basis for the co-construction of activities that bridge home and school cultures. The resulting activities may be implemented in the home-literacy environment as well as in the classroom. However, school-based activities such as conferences and open houses are not the

only means by which educators can learn about families' backgrounds and literacy practices. Written communications such as questionnaires and surveys can also be used to gain information from caregivers. The 16-item Q-HELP survey, which is the focus of this manuscript, was developed to help literacy educators collect preliminary information regarding families' routines and practices.

Conceptual Framework

The development of the Q-HELP was informed by the Opportunities Recognition Interaction Modeling (ORIM) framework (Hannon, 1995), which draws from decades of family literacy research. ORIM delineates four ways that caregivers can support their children's literacy development at home (Hannon, 1995). Accordingly, caregivers can provide:

- Opportunities: materials, time, and space for literacy activities;
- Recognition: praise for children's literacy efforts;
- Interaction: co-participation in literacy activities; and
- Modeling: personal displays of reading, writing, and speaking.

Each type of caregiver support may be applied to environmental print, books, oral language, and writing (Hannon, 1995; Morgan et al., 2009). These four literacy strands, together with the four types of caregiver support, produce 16 varieties of home literacy practices. Greater complexity occurs when these four strands also incorporate the "digital, technological, and multimedia practices that are now part of [children's] literacy experiences" (Nutbrown et al., 2015, p. 268).

Because ORIM illuminates a plethora of home literacy practices, it has guided the design of programs such as the Peers Early Education Project (Evangelou et al., 2007) and Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (Graham et al., 2014; Hannon et al., 2006; Husain et al., 2019). In the vast majority of these programs, early childhood educators were trained to serve participating children and caregivers through a series of home visits. During the home visits, educators created a qualitative "map" of each family's existing literacy practices and then used their own expertise to facilitate the (co-)construction of appropriate home-based activities. Studies on teachers' perceptions of ORIM, though few in number, have yielded positive results (Graham et al., 2014; Nutbrown et al., 2015). For example, Nutbrown and colleagues interviewed early childhood teachers regarding their experiences with ORIM. Most teachers indicated that ORIM was not only easy to understand, as it afforded them a clear conception of family literacy, but also useful for helping caregivers cultivate a more well-rounded repertoire of activities.

Apart from teachers, research has also examined ORIM's effects on caregivers (Hannon et al., 2006; Nutbrown et al., 2015) and children (Evangelou et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2014; Hannon et al., 2019). Hannon, Morgan, and Nutbrown (2006) interviewed 85 caregivers about their experiences in an ORIM-based program. Approximately three-fourths of the caregivers reported that the program had inspired changes in their home literacy practices, among which the most salient included an increase in literacy-related opportunities and interactions and a greater emphasis on texts and oral language. These and other changes have been linked to improvements in children's literacy skills (Evangelou et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2014; Hannon et al., 2019). For example, Hannon et al. (2019) compared the literacy gains of children in an ORIM-based program to those of matched controls. Findings indicated that children in the ORIM group made significantly higher increases on letter recognition and other emergent literacy skills, and the greatest increases were experienced by those whose caregivers had the least education. These documented benefits are a testament to the utility and efficacy of the ORIM framework.

Yet as Hannon and Nutbrown (n.d.) explain, "the value of the ORIM framework is that it can be used to describe how particular families support children's literacy…and to plan work with parents." These purposes are fulfilled through home visits in which educators use a graphic organizer to map families' literacy practices and (co-)construct new ones. This process is ideal for building rapport and gaining an understanding of families' daily realities; however, heavy workloads and restrictive visitation policies preclude many educators from following it in its entirety for each student. To address this obstacle, I (researcher) developed a 16-item survey that educators can use to collect data on families' existing practices, which can inform the development of home and classroom activities. To develop the Q-HELP (see Appendix), I drew from the ORIM framework, my 25+ years as a teacher and teacher educator, my own research on family literacy, and my experiences designing and implementing a family literacy program for racially and ethnically diverse caregivers. The remainder of the manuscript describes the development of the Q-HELP, presents findings from a content validity study and a small-scale pilot study of the instrument, and shares several ways the instrument can be used.

Survey Development and Validation: Methods and Results

Survey Design

Survey design is a complex and multifaceted process that requires extensive background knowledge and the application of research-based concepts

such as validity and reliability. As such, one of the features of a well-designed survey is *construct validity*, which denotes how well an instrument represents an "abstract, complex characteristic or idea that typically has numerous ways to measure it" (Nardi, 2006, p. 59). Since constructs can be conceptualized in many different ways, the validation of a particular construct may require years of investigation by numerous scholars (Litwin, 2003). For that reason, I chose to design the Q-HELP around the ORIM framework which was already backed by decades of research. Since its inception in the 20th century, ORIM has been used to guide inquiries concerning four types of caregiver support, each pertaining to four specific strands of literacy (i.e., books, environmental print, oral language, and writing). To date the ORIM framework, which is represented as a 4x4 grid, has been used to document the home literacy practices of thousands of families across several countries (e.g., Nutbrown et al., 2022; Nutbrown et al., 2005). Thus, ORIM is widely accepted as a valid representation of the ways that caregivers can support four aspects of their children's literacy development.

In accordance with the ORIM framework, four survey items, including one for each literacy strand, were drafted for each type of caregiver support. To illustrate, *opportunities* (the "O" in ORIM) was addressed through survey items pertaining to each of the four literacy strands: environmental print, books, oral language, and writing. The same step was completed for each of the remaining types of literacy support, including recognition, interaction, and modeling. Consistent with the 4x4 grid that had been used with families for decades, this process yielded a total of 16 survey items. It also ensured that that each element of ORIM was reflected in a total of four survey items. The final steps of the drafting stage involved the addition of instructions and a Likert scale for denoting the frequency of each item (e.g., 1–2 times per week, 3–4 times per week).

Another quality of an effective survey is *content validity*, which has been conceptualized as "the representativeness [relevancy] and clarity of an item" (Rubio et al., 2003, p. 95). With regard to the Q-HELP, *clarity* was defined as the ease with which an item could be understood and *relevancy* as the extent to which it seemed pertinent to the caregivers of young children. A preliminary evaluation of the instrument's content validity was completed by a content expert with an advanced degree in literacy education and numerous years of experience as a reading teacher and school administrator. The expert was asked to rate the clarity and relevancy of each item on a scale of 1–4 (i.e., low to high), and to provide suggestions for improving individual items as well as other aspects of the survey (e.g., scale, organization). The expert reviewer was also made aware that the survey items were

designed to align with the ORIM framework, with which she was well-acquainted. Thus, the extent to which the items represented ORIM became a focal point of the review. This aspect of the review not only helped to verify the connection between the Q-HELP and ORIM but also helped to minimize reviewer bias. In this regard, the content validity study was, perhaps, the most important aspect of the survey design process.

Though all 16 items received a 3 or 4 for clarity and relevancy, a number of helpful suggestions were provided by the initial reviewer. Accordingly, numerous changes were made to enhance the clarity and relevancy of the Q-HELP survey. To ensure that each item was worded in a manner that was appropriate for respondents with no formal literacy training, technical terms and jargon were supplanted with more colloquial words and phrases (Bourque & Fielder, 2003). For example, the term *modeled*, which has a specific meaning in education, was replaced by the phrase, "let your child see you." Another change was the removal of the phrase, "on his or her level" from items two and six of the survey. For example, item two which originally stated, "praised your child for reading a book on his or her level," was changed to "praised your child for reading a book." This change helped to prevent the items from becoming unnecessarily wordy.

Examples were also incorporated to enhance the clarity of each survey item. For example, the phrase "cereal boxes, packages, or mail" was added to the item pertaining to opportunities with environmental print, and "notes, grocery lists, [and] application forms" was added to that concerning the modeling of written language. Additionally, the four items related to books were revised to include "books, e-books, and magazines." As research has attested to the efficacy of e-books (Both-de Vries & Bus, 2014; Willoughby et al., 2015), which have become increasingly common in homes and schools in recent years, this was a particularly important addition to the four book-related survey items. Tablets, which are effective for facilitating writing practice (Neumann, 2018b), were also incorporated into the survey items. Thus, examples were chosen to ensure that they not only represented the ORIM framework, but also included both traditional and digital materials. However, since it would be impossible to incorporate an exhaustive list of examples into each survey item, I have also provided a table (see Table 1) that summarizes the types of materials associated with each literacy strand.

Table 1. Materials for Engaging the Four Literacy Strands

Strand	Definition	Examples
Books	Texts that are connected to create a beginning, middle, and end	Physical books, magazines, e-books
Environmental Print	Household objects that display letters and/or words	Posters, signs, televisions, computer screens, packages, mail
Oral Language	Verbal communication of thoughts, ideas, and experiences	Songs, nursery rhymes, poems, sounds, storytelling, parent–child discussions
Writing	Forming letters, words, and/or sentences	Playdough, chalk, crayons, pencils, markers, shaving cream, electronic tablets (stylus)

Finally, to make certain the survey was accessible to those with lower levels of education and/or reading ability, the readability of the revised Q-HELP was examined using five well-known indices (see Table 2). As the results indicated that the grade-level equivalence ranged from 6.6 to 9.5 (M = 8.2), the survey seemed suitable for most English-proficient caregivers, regardless of their level of formal education.

Table 2. Readability of the Q-HELP

	Readability Indices				
	Flesch-Kincaid	Flesch Reading Ease	Fry	Gunning Fog	SMOG Index
Grade Level	7.1	8.5 (8–9)	9.1	8.1	6.6
Relevant Criteria	Words per sentence and syllables per word	Number of words, sentences, and syllables in a given text	Number of syllables, words, and sentences per 100 words	Words per sentence and percentage of complex words	Frequency of words with multiple syllables

Content Validity Study

After revising the Q-HELP, a more comprehensive content validity study was carried out. To that end, a five-member panel, representative of both content experts and lay experts, was assembled to evaluate the clarity and relevancy of the instrument. The panel included two university professors with extensive experience in family literacy, both of whom were made aware that the items were meant to align with the ORIM framework. The

panel also included three caregivers (i.e., lay experts) whose children were enrolled in a university tutoring program that was designed to ameliorate reading difficulties. "Using potential research subjects as experts ensures that the population for whom the measure is being developed is represented [and] addresses issues such as phrasing and unclear terms" (Rubio et al., 2003, p. 96). Each expert who agreed to evaluate the instrument received a cover letter explaining the purpose of the Q-HELP and the process for evaluating it (Rubio et al., 2003). As with the preliminary evaluation, the experts were asked to rate each item's clarity and relevancy and to provide suggestions for improving the instrument. The experts were also informed that the evaluation would not be anonymous and that they may be contacted regarding any pertinent follow-up questions.

All five experts who had agreed to evaluate the Q-HELP did so in a timely and thorough manner. The ratings provided by the five-member panel were used to measure, quantitatively, the clarity and relevancy of each item (Item-level Content Validity Index, or I-CVI). To calculate the I-CVI of each item, the number of experts who rated the item at 3 or 4 was divided by the total number of experts (Polit et al., 2007). According to published standards, content validity studies involving five or fewer experts require an I-CVI of 1.00 on all survey items (Polit et al., 2007). Consistent with that standard, the experts' ratings of clarity and relevancy yielded an I-CVI of 1.00 for all 16 items (see Table 3) and no further suggestions for improvement were provided. Thus, the content of the revised Q-HELP was considered to be sufficiently valid (Rubio et al., 2003). Such favorable results were attributed to the systematicity of the design process, quality of the preliminary evaluation, and revisions made prior to assembling the expert panel.

Pilot Test

In addition to the content validity study described above, a small-scale pilot test was carried out. Pilot testing, which involves administering a survey to a small yet representative sample, is critical because it exposes unforeseen problems with the instrument. Thus, Nardi (2006) explains that "the best way of assessing whether the [survey] flows, the instructions are adequate, the wording of the items and format are clear, and the survey takes a reasonable amount of time to complete is to pilot test it" (p. 95). The problems that emerge from the pilot test serve to illuminate the types of changes that must be made before a survey is administered on a wider scale. The pilot test also serves as an opportunity to observe how respondents react to the content of the survey (Bourque & Fielder, 2003).

Table 3. Content Validity Study: Ratings and I-CVI Results

	Survey Items	Clarity/Relevancy Ratings (1–4)					I-CVI Value	
#	Item Verbiage	Expert 1	Expert 2	Expert 3	Expert 4	Expert 5	Clarity I-CVI	Relevancy I-CVI
1.	Given your child books, e-books, or magazines to read?	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	1.0	1.0
2.	Praised your child for reading a book, e-book, or magazine?	4/4	4/4	4/4	3/4	3/4	1.0	1.0
3.	Read books, e-books, or magazines with your child?	4/4	3/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	1.0	1.0
4.	Let your child see you reading books, e-books, or magazines?	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	3/4	1.0	1.0
5.	Provided materials, such as pencils, chalk, or a tablet, to practice writing?	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	1.0	1.0
6.	Praised your child for writing (words, sentences, etc.)?	4/4	4/4	4/4	3/4	3/4	1.0	1.0
7.	Practiced writing (words, sentences, etc.) with your child?	4/4	4/4	4/4	3/4	4/4	1.0	1.0
8.	Let your child watch you write (notes, grocery lists, application forms, etc.)?	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	1.0	1.0
9.	Given your child household items, such as cereal boxes, mail, or packages, to practice reading?	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	3/4	1.0	1.0
10.	Praised your child for recognizing letters or words on household items?	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	1.0	1.0
11.	Worked with your child to pinpoint letters or words on household items?	4/4	3/3	4/3	4/4	4/4	1.0	1.0
12.	Let your child see you reading print on household items?	4/4	4/4	4/3	4/4	4/4	1.0	1.0
13.	Given your child opportunities to practice oral language (singing, storytelling, sayings, etc.)?	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	1.0	1.0
14.	Praised your child for their use of oral language (storytelling, singing, sayings, etc.)?	4/4	4/4	4/4	3/4	4/4	1.0	1.0
15.	Practiced oral language activities with your child (storytelling, singing, sayings, etc.)?	4/4	3/4	4/3	3/4	4/4	1.0	1.0
16.	Let your child listen to you tell stories or engage in other oral language activities?	4/4	4/4	4/4	3/4	4/4	1.0	1.0

To pilot the Q-HELP, potential respondents were recruited from businesses, schools, and residential areas. To ensure that the pilot sample represented the target population (Fowler, 2014), the recruitment process sought to enlist the participation of caregivers with children between three and six years of age. This age range was selected because it aligned with scholarship on the use of the ORIM framework (see Table 4). The vast majority of ORIM-based interventions have included children between three and five years old; however, six- and seven-year-old children were also included in some interventions. Additionally, the age range of three to six was chosen because it constitutes a period of tremendous growth in children's literacy skills and corresponds to the preschool and Kindergarten years.

Table 4. Select ORIM-Based Interventions

Author	Children's Age Range	Participants
Evangelou et al. (2005)	0–6	600 families
Evangelou et al. (2007)	3–5	64 children
Graham et al. (2014)	2–5	497 families
Hannon et al. (2019)	3–7	176 children
Nutbrown et al. (2015)	0–5	20 practitioners

Potential respondents were informed of the purpose of the Q-HELP and asked if they would be willing to spare 5–10 minutes to complete the survey and to provide suggestions for improving it. Respondents were told that their responses would be used to identify the survey's weaknesses so that it could be improved for future implementation. The following prompt was used to elicit open-ended feedback from the respondents: "What changes could I make that would improve the survey?" The respondents were told that their suggestions for improvement could be written directly on the form or stated verbally upon completion of the survey. Feedback that the respondents provided verbally was transcribed so that it could be analyzed later. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed, as respondents were also asked to identify another caregiver of a 3- to 6-year-old child who might be willing to complete the survey and provide suggestions for improving it.

The survey was completed by 26 caregivers representing a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds (see Table 5). The majority of the respondents identified as women (n = 22; 85%). However, the overrepresentation of women did not pose a threat to the pilot study, given that women have

often played a more active role in children's literacy development and have constituted the majority of participants in family literacy programs. Thus, with regard to gender, the sample of the pilot study was acceptable given that it met the criterion for representativeness.

Table 5. Demographic Characteristics of the Pilot Sample

	Gender			Race & Ethnicity					Total
	Men	Women	Oth-er	Asian	Black/ AA	Latino/a	White	2+ Races	All
n	4	22	0	0	2	8	14	2	26
%	15%	85%	0%	0%	8%	30%	54%	8%	100%

Respondents' comments were analyzed to identify the types of changes that should be made to the instrument. The majority of the respondents indicated that it was not only easy to comprehend but also required very little time to complete. Though seemingly trivial, such comments are important since caregivers are unlikely to complete surveys that are challenging or labor-intensive, due to the many demands on their time. However, only four of the 26 respondents provided written feedback. One of the four feedback comments attested to the value of the literacy activities addressed through the survey items. In that comment, the respondent indicated that doing home literacy activities had made an incredible impact on her children's literacy skills. Two respondents offered comments that were explanatory in nature: one noted that she did Item 6 only in the context of homework help, while the other indicated that her children could do Item 9 on their own. In the final comment, the respondent asked whether the provision of writing materials involved "access or to literally say here are your writing materials." Based on that feedback, one minor revision was made to boost the clarity of Item 5.

Simply demonstrating that a survey is valid is not sufficient, as "validity means little if the measure used is not reliable" (Nardi, 2006, p. 60). Hence, data from the pilot test were also used to examine the reliability of the Q-HELP. One important aspect of reliability is *internal consistency*, which reflects the extent to which all of the items on a survey address a single phenomenon (Nardi, 2006). Because a Likert scale was used for the frequency of each item, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was the most appropriate way to measure the instrument's internal consistency (Gliem & Gliem, 2003).

Given that the Q-HELP was designed to align with a longstanding, well-researched, and cohesive construct, I hypothesized that the pilot test would yield a high level of internal consistency.

Although an alpha coefficient equal to or greater than .7 would have been acceptable (George & Mallery, 2004), the internal consistency of the Q-HELP was considerably higher ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 3.65$), thus suggesting a strong degree of homogeneity among the 16 survey items. This indicates that all of the items on the Q-HELP address the same phenomenon, that is, ways that caregivers can support their children's literacy development. This finding, together with the results from the content validity study, indicate that the Q-HELP is a valid and reliable measure of caregivers' support for their children's literacy development. Although home visits are incredibly valuable for building rapport and partnering with families, the Q-HELP can be used to inquire about caregivers' existing practices. Thus, it is particularly useful when constraints on time and money make it difficult to conduct home visits to collect this information.

Discussion

Findings regarding the psychometric soundness of the Q-HELP suggest that it is an effective tool for inquiring about families' existing home literacy practices. Following an established conceptual framework (i.e., ORIM), the instrument addresses the types of literacy support that caregivers provide as well as the literacy strands that they incorporate. Given that families' home literacy practices are of interest to literacy educators in a variety of settings and contexts, the Q-HELP can be applied in many different ways. Below, I describe two ways that literacy educators can use the Q-HELP to enhance children's literacy development and build more collaborative partnerships with caregivers.

Integrating Home and School Literacy Practices

Although many educators expect caregivers to support their children's literacy development by facilitating school-like reading and writing activities at home, research has shown that such activities are more effective when they are made to align with families' existing practices (van der Pluijm et al., 2019). Using the Q-HELP to ascertain what caregivers are already doing to support their children's literacy development allows teachers to identify relevant school-based concepts and skills. Imagine that a subset of children in a given class are already participating in shared book reading several times per week. Based on that information, the teacher might assign

home-based activities that can be completed during their shared reading sessions. Such activities might address book-based concepts and skills such as naming the parts of the book (e.g., front cover, spine), identifying the characters and setting of a story, or recounting the beginning, middle, and end of the story. The same decision-making process would be used to select home-based activities for children whose caregivers engaged them in other types of home literacy support (see Table 6). For example, if caregivers indicated that they routinely engaged their children in storytelling, the teacher might ask caregivers to have their children retell stories that were read throughout the school week. To support caregivers in this endeavor, the teacher could post the title and a synopsis of each book for a given week (e.g., "What we're reading this week"). Integrating school-based concepts and skills with families' existing literacy practices shows respect for caregivers' endeavors and promotes parental involvement without disrupting families' existing routines. Creating synergy between school literacy goals and home literacy practices helps to build partnerships with families (Elias et al., 2006; Kumar, 2016; Nutbrown et al., 2015).

Table 6. Examples: Integrating Home and School Literacy Practices

Home Literacy Activities	Integration of School-Related Concepts and Skills
Engaging children in shared book reading	Naming the parts of the book (e.g., cover, spine), identifying the characters and setting of a story, and recounting the events that occurred at the beginning, middle, and end of a story
Asking children to identify letters and/or words on cereal boxes and/or other items	Finding each letter of the alphabet, identifying words that begin with a specific letter, identifying instances of a repeatedly used word, sounding out words with a particular pattern (e.g., words comprised of two consonants separated by a vowel, such as mom or bat)
Listening to oral language such as songs and traditional stories	Identifying pairs of rhyming words, defining key vocabulary words, listing other words from the same "category," discussing a relevant personal experience, reciting lines with repeating sounds or lines that are tongue-twister-like

Incorporating Aspects of Home Literacy in the Classroom

Apart from integrating home and school literacies, data from the Q-HELP can also be used to inform the integration of classroom activities that build upon and extend families' existing literacy practices. For example, if several caregivers indicated that they engaged their children in shared

reading activities on a regular basis, the teacher might request the titles of recently read books so that they could be incorporated into the classroom environment. For caregivers who reported regular engagement in oral language activities such as singing and storytelling, the teacher could ask them to share their favorite stories and songs for use during classroom-based language and literacy instruction. As such, the teacher could use stories, songs, and books to reinforce the learning that took place at home, while also extending it by addressing a wider array of literacy competencies (see Table 7). For example, a story, song, or book from home could be used to teach vocabulary (Elias et al., 2006; Hidayatullah et al., 2023; Raikes et al., 2006; Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005; Yüzbaşioğlu & Akyol, 2022), alphabetic knowledge (Both-de Vries & Bus, 2014; Willoughby et al., 2015), and print concepts (Altinkaynak, 2019; Hidayatullah et al., 2023; Rababah, 2017) in a classroom setting. As with the integration of home and school literacies, incorporating elements from home into the classroom demonstrates that families' contributions are valued and signals a desire to partner with families and celebrate their existing funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992).

Table 7. Examples: Bringing Home Literacy Elements Into the Classroom

Home Literacy Activities	Home Elements for Classroom Use	School Activities to Build on Home Literacy Activities
Engaging children in shared book reading	Books from shared reading activities with caregivers	Teaching key vocabulary from the story; discussing, drawing, and/or writing about the characters, setting and plot of the story
Asking children to identify letters and/or words on cereal boxes and other items	Environmental print artifacts that were found at home	Tracing letters in environmental print, practicing writing letters and words in environmental print (Neumann, 2014; 2018a), identifying words that begin with the same letter as a word found in environmental print
Listening to oral language such as songs and stories	Songs and traditional stories that children and caregivers enjoy at home	Connecting sounds in oral language to the letters that represent them, identifying rhyming words

Conclusion

Given the importance of emergent literacy development, it is important to maximize children's opportunities to engage in activities that promote

oral language, print awareness, and phonological awareness. Yet all too often, caregivers are asked to incorporate school-like reading and writing activities that differ from their existing home literacy practices. To engage caregivers and their children in ways that are respectful and relevant, literacy educators can begin by identifying the practices that are already occurring in the home environment. To that end, this manuscript presents the Q-HELP, a brief and psychometrically sound survey that addresses the types of support that caregivers provide and the strands of literacy that they address. Using the results from the survey, educators can build home-school connections by assigning relevant home-based activities and by incorporating aspects of the home literacy environment in the classroom. By honoring and respecting families' literacy practices, educators can improve their partnerships with families.

Yet despite the utility and efficacy of the Q-HELP, there are certain limitations that must be noted. Perhaps the most critical issue is the absence of translated versions of the instrument. Given that the linguistic diversity of the U.S. student population is increasing with each passing year, the provision of caregiver materials in languages other than English is more important than ever. While translation apps are incredibly useful, translating the survey from English to another language is not sufficient; a translated version of an existing survey should be reviewed by at least two fluent speakers, revised based on their feedback, and then piloted with respondents who are fluent in the target language (Litwin, 2003). Therefore, future research on the Q-HELP should seek not only to develop translated versions of the instrument but also to ensure that those versions of the instrument are psychometrically sound. Such a process might consist of a content validity study involving content and lay experts who are native speakers as well as a pilot test to measure the internal consistency and alternate-forms reliability of the instrument. This research direction will allow literacy educators to partner with caregivers whose home languages differ from their own.

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Appendix. Revised Questionnaire of Home Environment Literacy Practices

Considering your behavior over the last few weeks, indicate how often you have...						
	Please select one answer	None	Once or twice a week	Three or four times per week	Five to six times per week	Daily
1.	Given your child books, e-books, or magazines to read?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
2.	Praised your child for reading a book, e-book, or magazine?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
3.	Read books, e-books, or magazines with your child?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
4.	Let your child see you reading books, e-books, or magazines?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
5.	Given your child materials, such as pencils, paper, chalk, or electronic tablet to practice writing (e.g., letters, words, sentences)?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
6.	Praised your child for writing (e.g., letters, words, sentences)?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
7.	Practiced writing with your child (e.g., letters, words, sentences)?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
8.	Let your child watch you write (e.g., notes, grocery lists, application forms, etc.)?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
9.	Given your child household items, such as cereal boxes, packages, or mail, to practice reading?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7

10.	Praised your child for recognizing words or letters on household items?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
11.	Worked with your child to pinpoint letters or words on household items?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
12.	Let your child see you reading print on household items?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
13.	Given your child opportunities to practice oral language (e.g., storytelling, singing, sayings, etc.)?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
14.	Praised your child for their use of oral language (e.g., singing, storytelling, sayings, etc.)?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
15.	Practiced oral language with your child (e.g., storytelling, singing, sayings, etc.)?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7
16.	Let your child listen to you tell stories or engage in other oral language activities?	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	7

Please indicate the following:
Your Gender _____
Your Race/Ethnicity _____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your participation is greatly appreciated!

"They Open and Close Their Backpacks at School": Barriers Between Home and School for Afghan Refugee Families in Pakistan

Assadullah Sadiq and Jim Anderson

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to identify and examine the barriers between Afghan refugee families and a school in Pakistan and how they could have been diminished by leveraging families' funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Pakistan was a country of temporary asylum (or first safe country) for these parents/guardians as they awaited migration to a country of permanent resettlement (e.g., Canada or the United States). We highlight three major themes related to the barriers between Afghan refugee families and the school that hindered home–school continuity, then discuss ways continuity could have been fostered. Pertinent to this discussion is that teachers were for the most part unaware of the activities children and their families engaged in outside of school and generally held deficit views of the Afghan refugee families. We propose ways that funds of knowledge could have been utilized not only to support the children's development and learning, but also to connect meaningfully with the Afghan refugee families.

Key Words: family engagement, home to school connection, Afghan refugees, refugees' language and literacy, first language maintenance, Pakistan, funds of knowledge, barriers, teachers, parents, guardians, families

Introduction

This article identifies and examines barriers between Afghan refugee homes and a school in Pakistan. Pakistan is a country of first asylum, that is, a "country in which they [refugees] lived after fleeing from their country of origin [e.g., Afghanistan] but before arriving in a resettlement country" (Dryden-Peterson, 2016, p. 133; also sometimes referred to as a first safe country) as they await migration to a country of permanent residence (e.g., Australia, Canada, the U.S.). We draw on the results of a five-month study in which the first author, a former Afghan refugee who also lived temporarily in Pakistan before emigrating to the U.S., documented the language and literacy practices of four children at school and in their homes and communities using various ethnographic tools. We first present the conceptual framework that guided the study, after which we examine the related literature. Next, we describe the method used, followed by a presentation of the key findings pertaining to home–school relationships. We then discuss the implications of our findings, suggesting ways to enhance relationships between schools and families of refugee backgrounds such as those involved in this study, and conclude by acknowledging the limitations of the present study and suggesting possibilities for future research.

Of course, recognizing the contributions of home–school connections in children's development and learning is not new. For instance, meaningful home–school connections are associated with appropriate behavior and better academic performance and attendance (Henderson et al., 2007; Mapp et al., 2022). According to the Harvard Family Research Project (Caspe et al., 2006), these connections diminish the educational gap for students from minority and/or lower-socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, students do not enter classrooms as "empty slates" to be filled with information from teachers. Rather, students' learning is influenced by their families and community contexts, background knowledge, culture, religion, and more (Koss & Daniel, 2017). Recognizing the importance of positive home–school relationships, we attempt to highlight the vital role of meaningful home–school relationships for Afghan refugee families in Pakistan, a country of first asylum. This is particularly important as the experiences of refugee children in countries of first asylum continue to affect them and their education after they arrive in their permanent resettlement countries (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Conceptual Framework

We draw on Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2005) bioecological model of human development to guide our work. Bronfenbrenner postulated that different, nested systems—namely, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—influence development and learning. Although children do not directly participate in the exosystem, what happens there affects their development. For example, parents who work long hours at physically demanding tasks would have less time and energy to support their children's development and learning than would parents who work shorter hours and in less demanding conditions. Likewise, the macrosystem—that is, the policies, beliefs about children and their development and learning, and resources allocated to support children in a society—also affect children. While cognizant that these systems overlap, in this article, we foreground the microsystems because they entail the immediate contexts in children's lives, specifically, their home, community, and school. The mesosystem—the interconnections within and between systems—is also of relevance to this article as we examine home–school relationships. Because the focus of the study was on home–school relationships and the barriers between home and school, we focused on these two systems while acknowledging the influence of the others. Furthermore, educators can positively affect these two systems more immediately.

Also informing our work is the concept of multiliteracies articulated by The New London Group (1996). Recognizing the importance of "multiple communication channels" (p. 60), in addition to reading and writing, the authors stressed the need to account for linguistic and cultural diversity in a globalized world. Although researchers and educators have tended to focus on school literacy, a multiliteracies perspective recognizes that literacy serves different purposes and takes different forms depending on the context. As well, researchers have documented the cognitive, educational, linguistic, psychological, and social benefits of maintaining one's first or home language as one acquires/learns a second language (e.g., Bialystok et al., 2022; Cummins, 2015; 2022; Dastgoshadeh & Jalilzadeh, 2018; Wong Fillmore, 2000). Educators and researchers (e.g., Cummins, 2022; Darvin & Zhang, 2023; Garcia et al., 2016) identified the benefits that students accrue from "translanguaging" (Conteh, 2015), which refers to using their first language alongside the language of instruction to understand and communicate concepts and ideas. In our work, we draw especially on the different out-of-school literacies that children and families participated in, as well as the role of children's first or home language in their development and learning.

Related Literature

The participants in this study were refugees or "people outside their country of origin because of feared persecution, conflict, violence, or other circumstances" (UNHCR, 2016, para. 2). An immigrant, on the other hand, is "a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence" (International Organization for Migration, n.d., para. 26). The UNHCR cautions against conflating these terms.

Most refugees (86%) arrive in a permanent resettlement country such as the U.S. from a first asylum country, which usually is a developing country such as Pakistan. According to the UNHCR (2017), "The impact of refugee outflows [is] most acutely felt in the countries neighbouring the conflict zones, with nine out of ten refugees hosted in developing countries" (p. 7). Many refugees spend considerable time in countries of first asylum, sometimes decades, as was the case with the participants in this study. However, there has been little focus on understanding the educational experiences of refugees in first asylum countries. Dryden-Peterson (2016) remarked that the lack of attention to this area constitutes a "black box," indicating that this is an area that has remained for the most part unexplored, and investigating this gap has implications for supporting refugee children and families upon resettlement in permanent resettlement countries. The experiences of students and families in countries of first asylum continue to affect them in permanent resettlement countries (Tandon, 2016). Thus, in order to meet the needs of refugee children and families, including their educational needs, educators need to understand families' experiences in first asylum countries. Although the literature on refugees' educational experiences in first asylum countries is limited, the studies discussed below provide some insights.

Refugee Students' Experiences in Countries of First Asylum

Studies in first asylum countries indicate that while refugees are able to attain some schooling, they also experience several barriers. Bellino and Dryden-Peterson (2019) focused on Somali refugees' experiences in Kenya and found that students were aware that their teachers in their refugee camp were not as qualified as the teachers outside the camp; for instance, most of the refugee teachers had only completed high school, and the majority had "completed little more than a five-day training" to become teachers (p. 229). In addition, the refugee students believed that

their teachers did not take their jobs seriously compared to teachers in non-camps schools. Erwin et al. (2020) also noted that the education available to refugees was inferior and that it was common to find many refugee students being taught by untrained teachers in first asylum countries. Mareng (2010) reported on his and other refugee students' experiences in a Kenyan refugee camp, observing that some students had to walk long distances in extreme weather to reach their school; other students were concerned about having enough to eat. Furthermore, when some refugee students attended government schools with local students from the host country, they experienced verbal abuse from both the local students and teachers (Bellino & Dryden-Peterson, 2019). Uptin et al. (2013) and Tandon (2016) reported on the experiences of refugees who resettled in Australia and the U.S., respectively. In Uptin et al.'s (2013) study, the 12 youths described the classrooms in their first asylum countries as having few resources and unqualified teachers. Nevertheless, some of the youth also described certain practices that they enjoyed, such as storytelling.

Enduring Impact of Refugees' Experiences in Countries of First Asylum

Studies indicate that refugees' first asylum experiences continue to affect them in their permanent resettlement countries. Tandon (2016) reported how the negative experiences of five Burmese refugee parents' experiences in their first asylum countries of Thailand and Malaysia continued to affect the family after they relocated to the U.S., their country of permanent resettlement. Some of the parents were suspicious of their children's schooling, in part due to the violence and negative experiences in their first asylum countries. In addition, the parents did not have formal schooling and felt ignored by teachers in the U.S. Tandon noted that while the parents' fears were understandable, they nonetheless impeded their children's academic progress because of the children's limited contact with people outside of their families. For example, the students did not interact much with English speakers outside of school and were not receiving tutoring support. Consequently, their English language development was negatively impacted. Nykiel-Herbert (2010) reported that teachers who taught Iraqi refugee children assumed that students had been taught the requisite background knowledge in the country of first asylum, but this was not the case; for example, some children "had traveled halfway around the world, yet had no concept of the Earth as a planet, had never heard about the continents… they had never seen a map or a globe" (p. 5).

Language Barriers in Countries of First Asylum

Refugee students and families also experience barriers when it comes to the language(s) of the host country. Aydin and Kaya (2019) reported that Syrian refugee students in Turkey indicated that while they felt welcomed in school, learning Turkish—the language of instruction—was a major obstacle for them. Dryden-Peterson (2003), likewise, showed that language barriers prevented Congolese refugees in Uganda from making progress, as they were placed with younger students in order to learn English and/or they repeated grades because they could not understand the language of instruction.

To summarize, the literature indicates that refugees struggle to access quality education and face several challenges, including language barriers, verbal abuse, and financial constraints in first asylum countries. Refugees' difficulties in first asylum countries may also be invisible to teachers due to cultural differences, language barriers, and stereotypes (Bigelow, 2010; McBrien, 2011). It is imperative that educators in countries of permanent settlement understand refugees' experiences in first asylum countries to ensure that refugee children's academic, psychosocial, and social needs are met (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Refugees' Understandings of Curriculum/Pedagogy in Permanent Resettlement Countries

Studies with refugee children and families in permanent resettlement countries indicate that sometimes, refugee families do not understand the curriculum and pedagogy in their new country. For instance, in their study involving four refugee mothers from Ethiopia, Liberia, Sudan, and Somalia, all of whom had immigrated to the U.S., Tadesse et al. (2009) found a contrast between teachers' and parents' perspectives of young children's learning. The mothers preferred a more structured learning environment for their children at school, while teachers encouraged learning through play. Some of the mothers also expressed the belief that their children were assessed incorrectly due to cultural differences. For example, one mother told her child to avoid eye contact with teachers as a sign of respect, but this behavior was misinterpreted as a sign that the child could have been abused at home. Based on their work with immigrant and refugee families in Canada, Anderson et al. (2017) suggested that educators strive to be aware of the myriad ways that families support their children's learning, while being cognizant that learning is culturally situated.

Refugee Children's Roles in Brokering

Several studies (e.g., García-Sánchez & Orellana, 2022; Perry, 2014; Worrell, 2021) have documented the essential role refugee children play in supporting their families through language and literacy brokering. Perry (2014) reported on how six-year-old Remaz, a Sudanese refugee, played an important role in brokering language and literacy for her family. For instance, she helped her parents in completing their English (their second language) homework and with understanding and signing a permission form. Despite her active role at home, Remaz's literacy brokering was diminished by the classroom's practice emphasizing students working independently. In her study, Millikin-Lynch (2009) also found that the siblings in a Somali refugee family aided each other's learning. For instance, the older sibling provided help with homework and used environmental print such as posters for learning. As Trumbull et al. (2000) point out, some cultures value a collectivist orientation where collaboration and cooperation are valued and promoted. In such contexts, children are expected to work together in completing homework, for example. Other cultures promote an individualistic ideology, and in Western societies such as the U.S., the focus is on children completing school-related tasks independently. It is important for educators who work with children of immigrant and refugee backgrounds to recognize, respect, and work productively with these orientations.

Together, these studies with refugee children and families in first asylum and permanent resettlement countries highlight the various barriers and challenges that refugees experience. As noted earlier, most studies of refugees' educational experiences have focused on refugees in their permanent resettlement countries and not in their first asylum countries. This study adds to the knowledge of refugee children's and families' schooling experiences in countries of first asylum by involving refugees from Afghanistan, a group with whom there has been very little research to date.

Method

Before describing the method, we provide a brief description of our social positions. The first author is a Muslim, speaks Pashto, and is a former Afghan refugee who has worked with Afghan refugees in the U.S. (e.g., Sadiq, 2020) and Pakistan (Sadiq, 2022), a first asylum country. He has taught in elementary schools in the U.S. that serve many refugees. The second author has worked extensively with families in marginalized communities over several decades (e.g., Anderson et al., 2008; Anderson & Anderson,

2021). In 2010, he co-developed a family literacy program that promoted children's and families' first-language maintenance and their funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990); it continues to evolve to meet the needs of families of immigrant and refugee backgrounds.

As noted, after receiving IRB approval, the first author recruited the participants. The sampling was purposive, focusing on Afghan refugee families with children between ages 4 and 11, who spoke Pashto, and had limited schooling (e.g., elementary to high school). The local school in Pakistan distributed recruitment letters in Pashto to all qualifying families, and after a week, 13 families returned the letters indicating their willingness to participate. The first author met with all 13 families to learn more about them. Four of the students came to school in a van, and knowing that the first author would not be able to follow these students from school to home for observation, these students were excluded. In addition, three students mentioned their male guardian would not be easily available due to work demands, and these families were thus also excluded. Of the six families, the co-principals suggested not including two families, as one child had special needs and the other family was leaving the school soon.

Therefore, four children ages 7 to 11—two males and two females, each from a different family—participated. The adult participants signed letters of consent, and the children gave their assent. The families spoke Pashto at home. One of the male children's parents/guardians had limited schooling and had completed fourth grade, while another guardian had completed high school. One of the female children's parents had attended school until the third or fourth grade (he could not remember precisely), while another did not have any formal schooling experience (see Table 1). The mothers of these children did not have formal schooling experience, and, following cultural mores, did not participate in the study. Data collection included semistructured interviews, participant observation, and a reflective journal.

The first author interviewed and audio recorded each of the children's teachers (e.g., math, science, Urdu, and English teachers) twice, once at the beginning of the study and once at the end. Interviews were conducted in English with four teachers and in Urdu with three teachers, with the co-principals serving as translator. Each interview took place at school and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The first interview focused on the teachers' background and their experiences with Afghan refugee students (see Appendix). The teachers were asked about any barriers Afghan students faced. The second interview focused on the dynamics of the specific classes taught by the teachers, their views of literacy, and what aspect of the Afghan culture (if any) was referenced in the school. They were also asked

about their beliefs about first languages and whether they supported children using their first language at school.

Employing field notes, the first author conducted observations in the children's homes, school, and community for 18 weeks "to experience activities directly, to get a feel of what events are like, to record…perceptions" (Spradley, 1980, p. 51). Each child was observed once a week for about two hours at home and two hours at school. During home visits, the first author observed the focal children in all aspects of their home life. For instance, if the child went outside to play or to run errands to the shop, the first author accompanied them. At the children's homes, the first author observed and engaged in "listening to people and watching them in natural setting" (Spradley, 1980, p. 32). The observations included a focus on the languages used by the focal children at home and the languages spoken to them by parents/guardians or other adults. Observations also focused on the use of resources or materials during language and literacy activities or events. Similarly, at school, the focal children were observed throughout their school day, including when they were in math, Urdu, or English classes, as well as during recess.

In order to examine his own subjectivities, assumptions, and beliefs (Ortlipp, 2008), the first author maintained a reflective journal. It served as a place for him to document his experiences and gain an understanding of what he observed, such as how the parents supported their children's learning.

Table 1. Information on Participants (all names are pseudonyms)

Name and Gender of Focal Child	Focal Child's Age and Grade Level	Name of Parent/ Guardian, Educational Level Obtained	Focal Child's Teacher(s)
Arman Khushal (male)	7 years old, kindergarten	Arian Khushal Completed 4th grade	Mrs. Aisha
Harun Sabr (male)	9 years old, 1st grade	Habeebullah Sabr Completed 12th grade	Mrs. Zara, Mrs. Hajar, Mrs. Madinah, Mrs. Sarah
Seemena Angar (female)	10 years old, 2nd grade	Dawud Angar No formal schooling	Mrs. Hajar, Mrs. Tuba, Mrs. Madinah, Mrs. Sarah
Safa Noor (female)	11 years old, 3rd grade	Sajjad Noor Completed 3rd or 4th grade	Mrs. Tuba, Mrs. Madinah, Mrs. Fowzia, Mrs. Sarah

The first author regularly communicated with colleagues experienced in qualitative data analysis and shared "memos from the field" that included essential information gathered from the participants as well as concerns and questions that arose. Data analysis began with "first cycle coding" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 73); during this stage, researchers "initially summarize segments of data" (p. 86) with the goal of being "as expansive as [they] want in identifying any segment of data that might be useful" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 204). Field notes and interview transcripts with teachers and parents/guardians were reviewed to see if they aligned (or not) with the theme of family engagement. For instance, one of the teachers, Mrs. Hajar, stated, "I never, I never [engage with families], because I don't have interaction with the Afghan families. I just see the students here" (interview, May 25). This comment was labeled "does not have interaction with Afghan families – 'just see' students in school," Mrs. Hajar. After the first cycle coding, "second cycle" or pattern coding took place. The data and initial codes were reviewed and examined for recurring "behaviors, actions, norms, routines, and relationships" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 88). This stage involved grouping data into categories and subcategories. Under each subcategory, there were subcodes that were identified in first cycle coding. For example, the excerpt from Mrs. Hajar was placed under "Teachers do not know Afghan families," and under this code, it was listed under the subcode "Teachers have not interacted/interacted rarely with Afghan families." After this stage of analysis, three key themes or categories relevant to family engagement, including those related to barriers to family engagement, were identified. Upon completion of the fieldwork, interview transcripts were provided to the teachers, and they were asked to make any changes they wished to the transcripts. Teachers approved the transcripts and did not make any changes. Parents/guardians requested oral summaries rather than written transcripts, and they were provided a summary of each of the interviews in Pashto. None requested changes.

The first author translated the words of each participant as accurately as possible. For example, in the interviews conducted in English, the first author maintained the teachers' grammatical structures but added clarifying phrases when needed. Furthermore, a Pakistani postgraduate student who was fluent in Urdu, Pashto, and English helped translate the data from Pashto and Urdu into English. Meeting with the postgraduate student took place over a month on a weekly basis, with each meeting lasting two to three hours. Interviews with the parents, teachers, and the children were checked for accuracy.

Findings

In this section, we describe the three major themes, focusing on the teachers and their relationships with and views and perceptions of the Afghan refugee families. We begin by focusing on the first theme, deficit assumptions about Afghan families, and then move on to the second theme, teachers' assumptions and restricted view of literacy. We conclude with the third theme centering on how teachers tended to undervalue the students' first language and discuss how teachers and parents have differing views on first language maintenance. After discussing the findings, we conclude by acknowledging limitations of the study and suggesting implications.

Deficit Assumptions About Afghan Families

Most of the teachers at the Afghan School (pseudonym) held deficit views of the Afghan refugee parents/guardians and of their support for their children's education. For example, at the start of the school year, as the first author was becoming acquainted with the school, one of the co-principals' shared information about the school and the children it served. In this conversation, the co-principal mentioned that the Afghan children "open and close their backpacks at school" (fieldnotes, January 17), elaborating that the children do little related to learning or of educational value outside of the school, and thus the school was basically where all learning occurred.

Throughout the duration of the fieldwork, the teachers indicated that they saw these families as unsupportive of their children's learning. For instance, when the first author interviewed Arman's kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Aisha, and asked about specific challenges pertaining to Afghan refugee families, Mrs. Aisha answered by referring to Arman, even though the question was not meant to be in reference to a specific student. She replied, "there is no strictness at home for studies, and he is not, he doesn't take studies seriously" (interview, February 6). She continued, "He is very different from others. I don't know that there is no one [sic] at home to help him in studies," and mentioned that most of the time his homework was incomplete. Each time the first author asked Mrs. Aisha about Afghan families, she referred to Arman, even though the question was not about any specific student. For instance, when asked if she had met any Afghan parents, she again answered in relation to Arman, stating, "I only know one Afghan student in my class and that is Arman, and I have not met his mother yet, mom or dad" (interview, February 6). Similarly, on another day, Mrs. Aisha asked students to write some basic information about themselves in

English, such as their name, their school's name, and their grade (kindergarten). The first author noted, "She helps another student, then she comes to Arman." As she was supporting him, she commented, "Next year again maybe he repeat,'' and when asked if she meant that he may be held back a grade, she nodded and said, "because he doesn't know the basics…his family can't help him, they don't know about education" (fieldnotes, April 13).

Despite Mrs. Aisha's perception of Arman's family as not being supportive of his education, the first author observed that his family was very much concerned about his academic success and deeply cared for education. Arman's father, Arian, mentioned that he did not want his children to have a similar fate as his and wanted them to be educated. He stated, "My goal is to have them remember something, so that they are not like us" (interview, April 24). By this, he meant that he wanted his children to continue their schooling and not leave before completion, as he had had to do to support his family. He also mentioned that he had a daily routine at home where his children worked on their homework, but at the same time mentioned that because he had no schooling, he could not help them as much as he wanted. Instead, he indicated, "We let them think about it, you know." Arian also believed that he should provide minimal support for his children in order for them to benefit optimally from their homework. For example, the first author asked if he supported his children with their homework, and Arian responded, "No, if I help them, what is the benefit?" Although he set aside time for the children to complete homework and encouraged them, he believed that they needed to complete it independently, and when they struggled, they needed to think about it and not give up. This marked difference between the parent's and the teacher's beliefs about supporting the child's learning at home is consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Tadesse et al., 2009).

Harun's first grade teachers also held deficit views of his family. Most of them believed that his family had little regard for education and did not support his learning. As the first author observed, "Mrs. Hajar [Harun's English teacher] looks at Harun's notebook and says, 'you did not do your homework, look I have written it for you.' Harun does not say anything" (fieldnotes, February 27). When the class concluded, Mrs. Hajar commented, "he is not receiving enough attention at home." She believed, "he may be here [in Pakistan] to help his uncles, rather than study." She thought that Harun's uncles placed more emphasis on his duties at home, such as caring for the livestock, rather than focusing on his learning. When she mentioned that "Harun has improved," she added that he could make further progress with more support from home. During the interview, Mrs.

Hajar, in describing the Afghan refugee parents, noted that "parents don't know actually, don't know about education…they just send their children to school, but I don't think that they have some high expectation in their minds that their children would become great people, they would become great learners" (interview, May 25). She appeared to be saying that the Afghan families expected positive outcomes from their children's schooling without investing time and providing support, and at the same time seemed to assume that they did not have high expectations or aspirations for their children's learning.

Similarly, Harun's Urdu teacher mentioned that Afghan students like Harun struggled with reading and writing in Urdu and English, despite her efforts. When asked why, Mrs. Zara mentioned, "[they] don't have the basic concepts," meaning that they did not have foundational background knowledge. Referencing Harun as an example, she noted that their home environment was not conducive to learning: "Yes, environment at home, there is no, any guardian…they live in [with] relatives but they, I think, don't concentrate there" (interview, January 22). In other words, she believed that even though Harun lived with his uncles, they did not attend to his education. Mrs. Hajar elaborated, "Afghans are not aware, they don't have awareness to study," meaning that they do not know about studying or the importance of education.

The observations at Harun's home and his familiarity with his uncles indicated a different story than the one Harun's teachers shared. Although Harun lived with his uncles and their wives and children, his main caretaker was Habeebullah, his youngest uncle. Harun's family had returned to Afghanistan because they could not make ends meet in Pakistan as refugees. They left Harun with his uncles so he could continue to attend school, as the school in their province in Afghanistan was far away and the family did not feel comfortable sending him there because of the ongoing violence in the area. Habeebullah strongly believed in education and that schooling helped one become morally good. He noted, "Before, he [Harun] was in the village and was very naughty" (interview, May 13). He continued, "Before, [Harun] didn't understand the difference between an older and younger [person] and the respect owed to one, and now he understands it." Habeebullah believed that schooling had helped to lessen Harun's misbehavior and that Harun now knew about the importance of respecting those who are older than he is. To emphasize this point, Habeebullah noted, "So, this is like he has become a human now." Habeebullah also noted that education allows one to access services (fieldnotes, March 5) in ways that someone without an education could not.

Even in the case of Seemena, a second grader who was academically successful in school and whose assignments were often shared with the class as exemplary work, her teachers nevertheless held negative beliefs regarding Afghan families. For example, early in the field work, Mrs. Sarah (a social studies teacher) asked if Seemena was one of the focal children that the first author was working with, and when he confirmed that this was the case, she asked, "Is she Afghan?" (fieldnotes, February 1), and the first author again confirmed that she was. The teacher was surprised. The first author noted, "Mrs. Sarah mentioned that she never knew that Seemena was Afghan and mentioned that she is one of her top student[s]" (fieldnotes, February 1) and mentioned that Seemena was doing well, stating "she is very good student." Because Seemena was quite successful in school, Mrs. Sarah assumed that she was not Afghan. We next turn to how teachers viewed the literacy lives of the Afghan refugee families.

Teachers' Assumptions and Restricted Views of Literacy

Similar to their views of the Afghan families as not supporting their children's education, in general, the teachers at the Afghan School believed that the families did not value literacy and that their homes were bereft of literacy. They tended to implicitly define literacy as reading and writing and appeared not to consider more contemporary multiliteracies perspectives (The New London Group, 1996). Teachers often used the phrase "illiterate" to refer to the families. For instance, when asked in an interview about what she found particularly challenging about her role as a teacher, Mrs. Madinah (Seemena's second grade Urdu and Islamic Studies teacher) responded, "it is difficult to teach those kids because they belong to illiterate families" (interview, May 7). On another occasion, Mrs. Tuba, (Safa's third grade English teacher) called on Safa to write sentences for the words "happy, sad, angry, excited," and Safa wrote, "I am happy to come to School" and "I am sad when I don't pray." Mrs. Tuba asked her to change the word "school" to lowercase, and Safa did. When the class ended, Mrs. Tuba, told the first author, "Sir you see, Safa is strong student, even [though] her family is illiterate, she works hard" (fieldnotes, March 13).

Teachers saw the teaching of literacy as the school's duty; they did not, on the whole, expect families to contribute to children's literacy learning, especially because they knew that many of them could not read or write. For example, Mrs. Zara (Harun's Urdu teacher) stated that to "give them literacy is the purpose of the school" (interview, May 9). She believed that it was the parents' duty to help the children learn appropriate behavior, not academic learning. Mrs. Hajar felt that some parents were not includ-

ed in schooling in Pakistan and described this through the metaphor of a triangle that includes teachers, students, and parents. She stated, "yes, parents [can potentially] have a very great role in it, but unfortunately, in our country, especially, like the Afghan students or other Pathan students, even Pakistani poor people, actually they are themselves illiterate." She continued, "They are themselves, most of them are uneducated, and they don't know anything about education" (interview, May 25). In her view, because the families were illiterate and did not know about education, teachers had the double duty of "doing here the parents' task as well."

Children's Out-of-School Literacy Practices

While teachers described the families as illiterate, all four children engaged in a plethora of literacy practices at home and in the community, particularly if we view these practices from a contemporary multiliteracies perspective (e.g., Zapata et al., 2024). These literacy practices included Naseehath (moral) storytelling, literacy brokering, and faith literacy. We categorize Naseehath storytelling as a literacy practice because storytelling promotes children's literacy development (Kanaya & Santiago, 2019; Luo & Tamis-LeMonda, 2017) and is a valuable cognitive, linguistic, and social practice (Strekalova-Hughes & Wang, 2019). It also reflected the parents' understanding of literacy. Seemena's father used the Naseehath storytelling to emphasize the importance of education. He stated, "The Naseehath is that she is now in this school, we want absolutely nothing from her in terms of chores or other type of work from her at home" (interview, April 17). Within Seemena's home, she was the only one who could read and write. Dawud and his sons greatly valued Seemena's literacy and ensured that she could devote as much attention as possible to her schoolwork. For example, one day while she was playing, Dawud asked, "Daughter, did you do writing?" (fieldnotes, May 22), and she responded that she had completed it. In Harun's home, the Naseehath was used to tell stories focusing on religion, such as teaching about Allah, the prophets, and other topics (e.g., respecting the elders). Harun's guardian believed that literacy helps one become a human being: "literacy enables good manners in one, from animal to human" (interview, May 13).

Both of the female children engaged in literacy brokering at home. Safa's father could not read or write and relied on Safa and her siblings to translate Urdu and English print for him. Safa also taught her father Duas, or religious supplications. He valued learning from Safa, stating, "At night when [I] am going to sleep, I say, 'Child, can you please read me the Dua for sleeping?'" (interview, May 13). Safa would read the supplication in

Arabic and then read the meaning in Urdu before orally translating it into Pashto for her father, a process that demonstrates considerable literacy and multilingual skill. Furthermore, she also translated news headlines from the television for her father from English and Urdu to Pashto. Seemena similarly engaged in literacy brokering at home, as no one could read or write in her family. Her father valued her support immensely and mentioned that she was the one who "leads us" (fieldnotes, May 10), meaning that without her support, the family would be in a very difficult situation with regards to accessing print materials.

Faith played a major role in the children's literacy at home and in the community. As described earlier, Safa, the third grader, taught her father and the neighbors' children Duas, or religious supplications. In addition, she read and reread chapters of the Quran to improve her recitation. For example, the first author observed her rereading and practicing the Quran while focusing on some of the words and letters that had similar sounds (fieldnotes, January 23). Similarly, Seemena, the second grader, used a Salah (prayer) book in order to practice prayers. Praying five times daily is a requirement in Islam, and while Seemena was not yet required to do this because of her age, she was practicing regularly at home of her own volition. The book provided instruction on both the ablution and the actual prayer. When completing the ablution, Seemena used pictures in the book to ensure that she followed the steps correctly (fieldnotes, February 1), and when engaging in the prayer, she used the printed instructions. Arman, a kindergartener, regularly used a Separah, a Quran primer book, in preparation for Quranic class. The Separah focuses on discrete skills related to the letters, sounds, and words one must know to prepare for reading the Quran.

While the females practiced the Quran in the community context, the males were reading the Separah, the Quran primer. Harun attended a Quranic class with other boys daily at the mosque. The first author observed Harun at the mosque, and when he struggled with a word, he asked his peers for help. One day, the first author noted that he "turns to the boy [who] helps him read the words" (fieldnotes, April 26). Arman also attended a Quranic class with a female teacher at her home, and he told the first author that the teacher punished students who had not practiced their lessons and rewarded students with stickers if they did well (fieldnotes, March 7). In addition, Arman looked for any papers (that is, printed materials) on the street to see if they had the name of Allah, or God. If a paper contained the name of Allah, he would take it home to save in a folder. As he told the first author, "It's a sin to throw away a paper with the name of Allah" (fieldnotes, February 13), otherwise God's name will be sullied.

Although the teachers saw the Afghan families as illiterate, they did not get to know the families or inquire and learn about the activities and events that the children engaged in at home and in the community. For example, when the first author asked Harun's teacher if she had gotten to know the Afghan families, Mrs. Hajar responded, "I never, I never [engage with families], because I don't have interaction with the Afghan families. I just see the students here" (interview, May 25). Similarly, on another occasion, after the class concluded, the first author asked Mrs. Sarah whether the parents ever came to the class or whether the teachers interacted with Afghan families.

> Mrs. Sarah mentioned that parents are not granted permission to be in classrooms and noted that while she has run into Afghan families outside of school or as they are picking up their children, there hasn't been any formal interactions with them yet. She also mentioned language differences and lack of time as two barriers to more interactions. (fieldnotes, April 10)

Undervaluing Children's First Language

As noted previously, and consistent with multiliteracies perspectives, there are sound cognitive, educational, linguistic, psychological, and social reasons to encourage children to maintain their first language as they acquire or learn an additional language. However, in addition to the tendency to view the Afghan families as illiterate, uneducated, and unsupportive of their children's education, most of the teachers at the Afghan School did not support the children's use of their first language at school. Among the teachers, only Mrs. Hajar, the English teacher, spoke Pashto—she was also Pashtun[1], the same ethnicity as the Afghan refugee students. The rest of the teachers all spoke Urdu. For example, Mrs. Madinah stated that English and Urdu, the school's languages of instruction, were "enough" (interview, May 7) and that "their home is the best place where they can learn their mother tongue." Mrs. Sarah also believed that the families' first language was "less important" because the families lived in Pakistan, and, similar to Mrs. Madinah, noted that, "mother tongue they learn from their parents" (interview, May 10).

Mrs. Tuba (Seemena's Urdu teacher and Safa's art teacher) ensured that students answered in Urdu and would not accept an answer when it was in the student's home language as they code switched, an appropriate learning strategy for second language learners (Bullock & Toribio, 2009). For example, one day while the students were working on maps, Mrs. Tuba asked Safa to come to the front of the room and explain her map and its features. Safa did so and the teacher asked her to sit. She then called on

another student, who explained some of the words in Urdu, but also used Pashto. I noted, "Mrs. Tuba interrupted and asked her to sit and practice what she wanted to say in Urdu, prior to presenting again. She asked a Punjabi student to help her" (fieldnotes, February 12). This was a new Afghan student in the class, and her command of Urdu was still at a beginner level. During the interview, Mrs. Tuba emphasized the role of the school's languages of instructions, stating, "They cannot say it in their own language…if it is English [class], they have to speak English most of the time; if it is Urdu [class], they should speak in Urdu" (interview, February 21). Although translanguaging (or codeswitching) is a productive strategy that people use as they learn an additional language and develop knowledge, Mrs. Tuba and the other teachers generally discouraged it.

One day, the English teacher, Mrs. Hajar, made a list of categories and asked the students to provide the missing details. She wrote, "My name ____," "My age: ___," "My date of birth: ___," and "My father's name: ____" (fieldnotes, February 20). Then, she filled out the list using her own information as an example. Harun copied down the list along with the answers Mrs. Hajar had provided. The first author noted, "Mrs. Hajar mentions in Urdu that [Harun] has copied from the board, but the information on the board does not apply to him, it is examples" (fieldnotes, February 20). Harun asked Heba, a Pashto-speaking Afghan student, for assistance; "She tells him, 'Name, write your name here,' 'Write how old you are here,' 'How old are you?'" As Heba talked to Harun in Pashto, Mrs. Hajar came up to them and scolded them loudly, saying, "Be quiet, just be quiet" (fieldnotes, February 20). Mrs. Hajar believed that Afghan students needed to focus on English, and when asked why, she answered, "because English is the language of science and technology" (interview, January 26). Similarly, on January 15, Mrs. Zara asked the students to read a few sentences from their social studies textbooks, which were written in English, and then to translate them to Urdu. The first author observed, "Knowing that he will be asked to read the next sentences, Harun turns to Adil and asks what the meaning of the next sentence is." Adil tells him, in Pashto, "In village there are not too many stores or cars, villages have much nature" (fieldnotes, January 15). In this case, because Adil sat next to him and the conversation went unnoticed by the teacher, Harun was able to understand the sentences once Adil translated them into Pashto. Harun's use of Pashto in class for learning was successful only if the teachers did not notice, as the earlier example illustrated. When the teachers noticed Harun talking in Pashto with another student while the class was in session—even if the conversation concerned translating or understanding the content of the lesson or instructions—the teachers were quick to ask that Harun focus on the lesson.

Interestingly, over the course of the study, Mrs. Aisha and Mrs. Hajar's views changed regarding use of the first language at school. In the beginning Mrs. Aisha mentioned, "Students are asked not to speak their mother tongue in the school and to speak in Urdu" (interview, February 6). However, in her second interview she stated that the school should help Afghan children if it had the resources to support their first language, noting, "because in that language they will learn more" (interview, May 3). Initially, Mrs. Hajar, the school's English teacher and the only teacher who spoke Pashto, noted that Afghan students should devote their attention to learning English, reasoning, "English is the language of science and technology" (interview, January 26). However, as the interview went on, she recalled her own experience of learning her first language at school in Pakistan's province of Peshawar, where Pashto was a compulsory subject at that time, and she began to see the value of it, somewhat. For example, when she talked about her own experience learning Pashto at school, the first author asked, "Do you think, similarly, that would be good for these students?" She answered, "Of course, they should, they should." As noted above, however, most of the teachers restricted the students' use of Pashto at school. To summarize through the voice of Mrs. Madinah, "We say [to] them that don't use your own language in school, because school languages are English and Urdu, and you learn these languages at the school" (interview, May 7).

Parents, on the other hand, highly valued their first language. All of the parents/guardians spoke Pashto at home, despite having been away from Afghanistan for decades. For example, Habeebullah, Harun's uncle, stated, "We have been here for 30 years, and thank God in our house we did not speak Urdu. It is Pashto, Pashto, Pashto" (interview, May 13). Sajjad, Safa's father, similarly indicated that Pashto was an essential aspect of being a Pashtun and that one cannot be a Pashtun without speaking Pashto. He affirmed that for as long as he was alive, he would speak Pashto. Arian, Arman's father, similarly noted that Pashto is a prominent language and remarked, "Pashto is not only used here…Pashto is also used in Karachi and actually all over the world" (interview, April 24).

While the parents/guardians spoke Pashto exclusively at home, they believed it was not enough to ensure that the children maintained their first language. While some of the teachers mentioned that Afghan children already knew Pashto, referring to oral Pashto, parents wanted their children to learn to read and write in that language. None of the parents/guardians or their children could read or write in Pashto. Dawud, Seemena's father, wanted Seemena to learn to read and write in Pashto to not lose their connection to their Pashtun roots. He stated, "It will be good for them to read and write

their language; they will know their way and their language" (interview, April 17). Sajjad, Arian, and Habeebullah also wanted their children to read and write in Pashto in case they were forced to go back to Afghanistan. Pakistan has been known to force Afghan refugees against their will to return to Afghanistan after living for decades in Pakistan and not gaining citizenship. Thus, parents believed their children needed to know Pashto in case they were forced to go back to Afghanistan. As Habeebullah noted, "I say if you are to go tomorrow [to Afghanistan], you should know Pashto fully, be able to write it and understand it all" (interview, May 13).

Discussion and Conclusion

Forceful displacement of people continues apace, and according to the latest available statistics, there were 36.4 million refugees, 75% of whom were hosted by low- and middle-income nations (UNHCR, 2023). The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023) notes that "The least developed countries provide asylum to 20 percent of the total" (p. 2). These are often countries neighboring the countries of conflict, such as Pakistan and Iran, which are located next to Afghanistan and have hosted Afghan refugees for decades. In addition, 52% of the world's refugees originate from three countries: Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine. Despite the fact that first asylum countries host the majority of refugees, research focusing on refugees' educational experiences in countries of first asylum is lacking (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Sadiq, 2022). This study helps to bridge this gap by focusing on Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Moreover, studies focusing on the educational or literacy practices of Afghan refugees are quite limited. This study helps narrow this gap as well.

Of course, some caution is called for in interpreting the results of this qualitative study. Nevertheless, the findings align with previous research that shows that schools and teachers, for the most part, tend not to engage meaningfully with refugee families (e.g., Aydin & Kaya, 2019; Behouti & Stromberg, 2024; Bellino & Dryden-Peterson, 2019; He et al., 2017). As can be seen through the glimpses into these four children's school and home contexts, the children's and families' lived experiences serve as counternarratives to the teachers' deficit assumptions. The teachers viewed the families as not caring or knowing about education, believed that the parents did not support their children's education, and assumed the home environment was not conducive to children's learning. However, the parents and guardians believed education to be imperative, and they associated positive qualities with education, such as helping one become a better person, providing

opportunities, and equipping one with essential skills and knowledge. They also encouraged and supported their children as best they knew how.

If the school had mechanisms for teachers to get to know families, teachers would have better understood the families and children and thus recognized the need to adjust some of their assumptions. Although some members of the families could not read and write, that did not mean that they did not engage in literacy activities and events in their daily lives nor that they did not value literacy. As shown, the children engaged with faith-related texts at home and in the community. This included reading the Duas (supplication) book, referencing the Salah (prayer) book to understand and practice the daily prayers, as well as reading the Separah (Quran primer) and Quran. In addition, the female children regularly brokered literacy for their families by accessing print in various modes, including bills and invitation cards, and by translating television headlines. Furthermore, the families engaged in oral storytelling through the Naseehath, which emphasized the importance of education and becoming a better Muslim. In sum, the children and families engaged in a variety of rich multiliteracy practices (Zapata et al., 2024) that the teachers were unaware of, and consequently, these teachers viewed the families as illiterate.

Additionally, there was a clear divide between the parents and the school staff in terms of support for the students' use of their first language. The teachers, for the most part, restricted and did not appear to value the children's use of their first language at school. Instead, they emphasized that the children only use the school's languages of instruction, Urdu and English. The parents, on the other hand, spoke Pashto exclusively at home. They wanted the school to support their children in learning to read and write Pashto and had legitimate reasons, such as the fear of being forced to return to Afghanistan, for wanting their children to learn to read and write in Pashto. Because there was so little communication between the homes and the school, the teachers were not aware of, or did not understand, the parents' concerns and did not recognize that the Afghan children were caught between two worlds: one, the home, where Pashto was valued; and the other, the school, where the teachers dismissed Pashto. While the Afghan School was not well resourced and thus would not have been able to provide instruction in Pashto, the teachers could have meaningfully included, welcomed, and validated the Afghan children's use of their first language and could have used it to support their learning of a second (Urdu) and third (English) language.

Viewing the results through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (1979, 2005), it is evident that there was also blockage (Downes,

2014) between the microsystem worlds of the school and of the families. This blockage, which at least in part seemed attributable to the teachers' beliefs about and perceptions of the children and their families, helped maintain the divide between the Afghan refugee families and the Pakistani teachers. From the teachers' perspective, the Afghan families were lacking, illiterate, and uneducated; as such, these families were at a disadvantage and their voices were unheard and unvalued at school. Bronfenbrenner's model illustrates the role of three influential spaces in one's life—home, school, and community; however, the model does not delve into power and how power is used, as well as whose voices are heard or unheard. In other words, while Bronfenbrenner's model allows us to think about the ways that home, school, and the community influence a child's life, we must also think critically about the power wielded within these spaces and how such power may silence certain ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups. In the case presented here, communications and information did not flow interchangeably between families and schools, and these essentially were two siloes.

Implications

For the most part, the teachers observed and interviewed for this study did not value the children's first language and did not have a favorable view of its use in school. Instead, they maintained that the Afghan children needed to exclusively use the school's two languages, Urdu and English. Furthermore, the teachers did not seem to realize that the children's first language could have supported their learning through code switching or translanguaging. Teachers, such as those in this study who work with children whose home languages differ from the dominant language in the community and/or the language of instruction at school, would benefit from professional development through which they can learn about the importance of first language maintenance and the value of code switching or translanguaging in children. Indeed, preservice teacher education programs need to include components that help prospective teachers prepare to work with children and families whose home language differs from the language of instruction. It is also essential that educators understand that students do not have to give up their mother tongue to acquire a second language, and that, in fact, a child's first language can be used to support learning a second language (Cummins, 2013). Policymakers need to understand that children's first language connects them to their culture, homeland, and values (Wong Fillmore, 2000). Policymakers also need to embed in their policies how a first language can serve as a rich resource for second language learning.

The issues identified in this study are systemic and thus require a systems-level response (Behouti & Stromberg, 2024). Given the lack of communication observed between the children's homes and the school, both the teachers and the children and families in this study would have benefited from initiatives to promote better understanding and closer collaboration. Epstein (2019) and many others have shown the benefits that accrue when schools work collaboratively with families. Such initiatives should reflect the needs of the community, and they will vary from context to context. For example, in one economically and socially disadvantaged village where there was a lack of parental involvement in the school, the second author was part of an initiative whereby a local priest who wielded tremendous influence was instrumental in establishing, promoting, and sustaining a preschool program designed to promote early learning, support parents, and enhance home–school communication and collaboration (Anderson et al., 2008).

In addition, teachers in both first and permanent resettlement countries need to understand that even if refugee families have not learned certain skills, such as reading and writing, it does not imply that those families are uneducated, illiterate, or do not value their children's education. As seen in this study, the parents/guardians greatly valued their children's education and made sacrifices to educate their children. For example, Harun's parents left him in Pakistan so he could attend school while they went back to Afghanistan and were living in a province where schools were limited and violence was a common threat. Similarly, Seemena's father insisted that she not engage in chores or household work at home and instead focus on her learning. It is important for educators not to jump to conclusions about families and realize that families are diverse, have unique experiences, and deserve to be heard and understood in order to form meaningful connections with them. It is also important to understand that lack of experience in reading and writing does not indicate that one is illiterate. Almost half of the world's languages do not have a written form (Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, 2007), and while reading and writing may not be the dominant form of literacy that individuals of these language backgrounds rely on, they most likely still engage in other literacy practices such as storytelling. In addition, while their language may not have a written form, they may still use printed text, such as the Somali Bantu community whose language is not written yet they commonly read the Quran in Arabic and engage in Quran memorization. Lastly, some families, like the ones described in the current study, may not have had a chance to learn to read and write due to decades of war and conflict, as is the case with Afghanistan.

All of this to say that as educators, we must be cognizant of these families' circumstances and understand that "there are many different literacies that shift with contexts, texts, and the identities of people using literacy" (Rowsell & Walsh, 2011, p. 55). Again, both ongoing professional development and preservice teacher education programs need to prepare teachers to work with such children and families.

Limitations

While this study makes important contributions in illuminating the educational experiences and barriers faced by one of the largest and longest displaced populations in a country of first asylum, it nonetheless has some limitations. First, the four families and focal children and their teachers may not be representative of Afghan refugee families in general. Additionally, due to cultural mores, the female parents'/guardians' perspectives are missing. Future research may benefit from including a larger number of Afghan families, children, and teachers. Furthermore, future researchers should consider having both male and female researchers working collaboratively so that mothers'/female caregivers' voices are included.

Endnotes

[1]While Mrs. Hajar shared the same language, ethnicity, and religion as the Afghan refugee students, she was a citizen of Pakistan. Pashtuns are also one of the major ethnic groups in Pakistan.

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Appendix: Interview Questions for Teachers

First Interview:

1. Thank you so much for allowing me to conduct these interviews with you and to learn more about your classroom and the school. Just to reiterate what was written in the consent form that you signed, I will be conducting two interviews with you. One will take place today, and the next one will be toward the completion of my study, somewhere in November or early December. In this interview, I would like to get to know you better, as well as to know a bit about the school's curriculum, your students, and the language(s) used at school. Could you please tell us a bit about yourself?
2. Could you please talk a little about your education? Did you take classes that were specifically geared for teachers? Could you talk about some of those classes?
3. How long have you been teaching? How long at the Afghan School?
4. What do you enjoy about your job as a teacher? What do you find challenging?
5. How would you describe your job as a teacher at the Afghan School compared to where you taught previously (if previous teaching experience)? What are the differences? What are the similarities?
6. Could you please describe the students that the school serves (as a whole)? Could you please describe their strengths? Their challenges? How is the school helping students overcome those challenges, or is the school not able to overcome some of the challenges (if they are beyond the scope of schools)?
7. What would you say are the biggest challenges for the Afghan student population, academically? Why do you think these challenges exist specifically (or do they) for Afghan students?
8. Imagine you were an Afghan, and as a parent, what would you hope that your child would gain from coming to the Afghan School in regards to education—language and literacy? Why do you think this would be important?
9. Could you please talk about communicating with Afghan families about their child's progress? How was that experience? Do you see any barriers in communicating with Afghan families? What would you say are some of those barriers? Can they be overcome? How?
10. Are there any challenges that need to be addressed in the beginning of the school year for Afghan students? How does the school address those challenges, and do those challenges become less evident as the school year progresses? Can you give any examples when this has happened?
11. What subjects do the students take at school? How many classes per day?
12. Could you please tell me about the activities/classes that you have observed where the children are really engaged? What was happening? What kind of activities have you observed where students are less engaged or not engaged?

13. Could you please tell me a bit about the school's curriculum? Is the curriculum created in a way that has prescribed outcomes and skills that are determined by the government of the province/state/country? What kind of resources accompany the curriculum, for example, books, teaching guides, kits, etc.? Are you able to deviate from the curriculum or use it as you want, or is it recommended that you stick with the curriculum?
14. Could you please talk a little about the language(s) of instruction at school? Do the Afghan students know this language? Do their parents know it? If not, how do you communicate with the students to make sure they understand? Are there interpreters at school?
15. What is the rule in the school regarding the students' home language? Is there a class for the students to learn and speak in Pashto? How about for their parents? If yes, could you please talk a bit about the class. Who runs it (provides support)? Who teaches it? About how many parents attend it? If no, why not?
16. Are there any language or languages that you think are important for the Afghan students to be proficient in? Why do you think these languages are important for them?
17. What kind of preparation (from the school or other sources) have you received to specifically work with refugee students? What kind of resources would assist you in working with refugee students?

Second Interview:

1. Thank you for your time and willingness to take part in the study again. Today will be our last interview. Today, I would like to learn more about the language and literacy practices and activities that students engage in at school. I will also leave some time for you to ask me questions or concerns that you may have as well. Could you please talk a bit about the literacy class in Urdu and the literacy in English that students take daily? For example, what are some of the skills/strategies one would learn in an Urdu literacy class? What about in an English literacy class?
2. How do you think the students find the Urdu literacy and English literacy classes? Are they engaged in these classes? What do you do to try to keep them engaged in these classes?
3. How do you define literacy? What do you think are the most important goals of literacy? What kind of literacy are you hoping your Afghan student develop? Why do you think this kind of literacy would be important to them?
4. Are there topics, knowledge, or other resources related to Afghanistan or the Afghan culture that is used in either the Urdu or English literacy classes? If yes, could you please give me an instance when this happened? What was the activity about? Were the students engaged? Who else was involved in that activity? What preparation went into that activity?

5. Are there things from the Afghan families' homes (funds of knowledge), or skills that the Afghan families have, that are used in the literacy classes (English and Urdu)?
6. Do any of the Afghan parents come to the school to talk to the students or engage the students in any talks, activity, or something else relating to their literacy classes? If yes, in what language do the parent(s) speak to the students? What kind of engagement is it (what do they talk to the students about, etc.)?
7. Could you please talk about how reading and writing is taught in the school? What kind of reading does the school encourage for the students? How do you assess for understanding in reading? How about writing, how is writing taught in the school?
8. Since the school languages of instruction are Urdu and English, I'm wondering about the students' home language. Do you think it is important that the school find a way to help the students acquire and develop their first language, or do you think it is less important since the families live in Pakistan for now? What are your thoughts on this?

Practice Brief

Mentoring Principals as Leaders of Community Schools

Carlos M. Azcoitia

Principals of Community Schools encounter unique opportunities in this role. An effective mentor provides meaningful conversations to sustain the new leader and build capacity to develop the new mindsets and skills necessary for growth. Effective school leaders build strong, reciprocal, and sustainable partnerships to support student growth and strengthen families and communities. Developing authentic alliances among teachers, parents, and community stakeholders builds a climate of trust and positive relationships to strengthen communities and democratic schools (Illinois Principals Association, n.d.)

Educational outcomes are influenced by social and academic contexts as well as school and non-school factors. The greatest influence on students is the family, and a great influence on the family is the community (Purinton & Azcoitia, 2016). The combination of a quality learning experience in the classroom with the integration of families and community are critical factors for student success.

In the book *Creating Engagement Between Schools and Their Communities*, contributing author Martin Blank stresses that Community School leaders cross traditional role boundaries and build cross-cultural fluency while balancing managerial concerns, politics, and external accountability pressures and fostering shared accountability (Purinton & Azcoitia, 2016). Additionally, contributing author Karen Carlson posits that community organizing strategies enhance the quality of life in neighborhoods, empower parents to take an active role in the education of their children, and build a sense of belonging, equitable practices, and a focus on social justice education (Purinton & Azcoitia, 2016).

What Is a Community School?

A Community School is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources (Coalition of Community Schools, n.d.). It has an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, and youth and community development. This integrated focus leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities (Lubell, 2011). Community Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone—all day, every day, including evenings and weekends. A Community School is results-focused:

- Children are ready to enter school and attend school consistently.
- Students are actively involved in learning and their community.
- Families are involved with their children's education.
- Students succeed academically.
- Students are healthy physically, socially, and emotionally.
- Schools are engaged with families and communities.
- The communities are desirable places to live.

A Community School is collaboratively focused where schools and communities connect, collaborate, and create:

- Children and families have an array of supports from the community partners right at their school.
- Communities and schools leverage their shared physical and human assets to help students succeed.
- Community Schools host a myriad of opportunities and supports that give students and parents the tools they need to learn and grow.

A Community School pursues strategic alignment. Essential to the infrastructure are the following:

- a school site leadership team—often comprised of educators, parents, community partners, and others, who are responsible for creating and implementing a shared vision, identifying desired results, and helping to align and integrate the work of partners; and
- a community school coordinator—who works hand-in-hand with a supportive principal and who is a member of the school leadership team.

Evidence-Based Community Schools

Community Schools work. They can improve student attendance and engagement and increase academic achievement for all students as well as strengthen family and community partnerships (Johnston et al., 2020). Community Schools in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, New Mexico had higher attendance rates over district schools without this strategy. Driven by expanded learning time, strong family partnerships, and collaborative leadership, Community Schools engaged families and offered academic and social support leading to improved attendance (Oakes & Espinoza, 2020).

Community Schools expand and enrich learning opportunities for all students. The West Kern Consortiums initiative in rural California achieved significant academic growth despite pandemic challenges. They successfully implemented programs, maintained services and support through the pandemic period, and showed academic improvements from 2020 to 2022 as reported in this blog from the Learning Policy Institute (Maier, 2024). Oakland Unified School District Community Schools Initiative built strong agency partnerships, enhanced services, provided collaboration, trained specialized personnel, and provided staff development and family engagement resources. These district level supports enabled the integration of whole child educational practices in multiple schools, leading to a 13% increase in their graduation rate (Klevan et al., 2023). Research shows that students in Community Schools achieve higher academic performance, increased graduation rates, and improved attendance (Blank et al., 2023).

Practical Strategies for Effective Mentoring in Community Schools

To achieve equitable outcomes, we must have shared language, tools, and accountability for supporting our students and communities. For Chicago Public Schools, the Equity Framework and accompanying Resource Equity Tool (Chicago Public Schools, 2024) grounds us in the values and structures essential to doing the transformative, personal, relational, and community work necessary to create more equitable learning experiences and outcomes. With the framework as our common language, we have a starting point to create meaningful change in our school communities via leadership mentors.

Effective mentoring and mentee relationships require that both individuals be willing to listen and learn. Mentoring expands administrators' capacities with actionable practices and strategies that shape leadership

(Gallagher & Connor, 2024). After each mentoring session there should be an implementation plan with next steps. Below is a list of recommendations that will empower mentor and mentee relationships in Community Schools (Cusack & Bustamante, 2024):

- Mentoring should influence mentees' growth as adaptive leaders ready to overcome adversity, be persistent, and take smart risks.
- Mentoring should explore solutions for the most pressing challenges in the school community including equity, teacher and staff recruitment, burnout, retention, and safety for students and staff.
- Mentoring should support educational leaders to find their resilience, improve performance and engagement, as well as connect to best practices in Community Schools.
- Mentoring should plan initiatives to address learning gaps with parental and community support.
- Mentoring should develop strengths and assets of school communities.
- Mentoring should develop relational accountability in school communities.
- Mentoring should address meaningful engagement with parents and community members that goes beyond window dressing.
- Mentoring should address effective community partnerships.
- Mentoring can support the social and emotional development of leaders by reflecting on motivation, self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, and empathy.

Effective mentoring practices express positivity, operate with honesty, and inspire individuals to be excellent communicators. It allows mentees to develop their communication skills: asking the right questions, speaking openly and honestly about challenges, while also developing solutions and maintaining a positive mindset focused on growth. Mentees should walk out of each mentoring session with clear next steps to implement what was discussed.

Leadership Concepts to Support Thriving Communities and Student Growth

Mentoring starts with a vision based on honesty and equity. Then mentees and mentors can work together to address opportunity gaps and discover and implement best practices to address the particular needs

of the community. The work to apply best practices will inevitably push growing leaders to find their inner resilience, drive, and perseverance. Mentors can help those emerging leaders align their work with best practices and build their capacity for empathy, equity, and results (Goleman, 2016). Ultimately, great mentoring takes a holistic view of schools embedded in communities. Great mentoring of school and district leaders must include a strong focus on building relational accountability with everyone involved—staff, students, and families. Great mentoring can help emerging leaders take an asset-based view of their school communities and build meaningful engagement with parents and community partners to develop strong partnerships for student success. Great mentoring can also help emerging leaders build relationships with strong community-based organizations for the benefit of all involved. Community Schools attend to the engagement of students regarding their academic growth, so all members of the school community need to understand how best to help students become effective learners (Purinton & Azcoitia, 2016). Students' sense of belonging, motivation, and self-efficacy will be shaped by the experiences in their school, interactions in the school community, and beliefs about what they can accomplish (Purinton & Azcoitia, 2016). Students' ability and effort will be guided by a growth mindset based on learning opportunities and messages from the school community. Community Schools create contexts to support academic success and develop the attitudes necessary. They can sustain impacts in student learning across different contexts as students move from K–12 to postsecondary. In *Creating Engagement Between Schools and Their Community*, contributing author Mary A. Ronan emphasizes that school culture and environment play a key role in students' performance (Purinton & Azcoitia, 2016). Community Schools can transform schools from aiming only at testable academic skills into the full development of learners.

Conclusion

The major strength of a Community School has to do with collective impact which begins with the quality of the classroom and extends itself to the community. Community Schools change the way community challenges are defined and how resources and assets are integrated to support students (Khalifa, 2012). The complementary skills of community partnerships enhance the critical work of educators in community schools. The integration of school, family, and community foster the development of student leaders and build social capital in communities. Families and community members become planners and decision makers which brings equity to diverse communities.

Community Schools can create bonds of reciprocal accountability and grow social capital. They can also expand boundaries beyond the school walls to strengthen neighborhoods. If we want students, families, and school communities to be valued fully and to experience the opportunities that they need to excel, then we need to develop leadership capacity to address our equity goals. An effective, quality-based mentoring program needs to be in place.

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