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The School Community Journal
121 N. Kickapoo Street
Lincoln, IL 62656 USA
Phone: 217-732-6462
Fax: 217-732-3696
Email: editor@adi.org

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

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(2) essay and discussion,

(3) reports from the field, including descriptions of programs, and

(4) book reviews.

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Editor's Comments

To begin this issue, we are very pleased to share with you a guest editorial by William Jeynes. He has recently published multiple meta-analyses, yet he acknowledges to us that while this work answers many questions, it raises "about as many questions as answers" (p. 14). As a result, he presents for us an inspiring call for further research, one which I hope many of you will answer and then share in future issues of *The School Community Journal*.

Our regular articles begin with two in the realm of supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families. Murray and her colleagues relate the value found in educating parents and service professionals together in a collaborative, train-the-trainer model. Dreuth Zeman, Swanke, and Doktor studied blogs of mothers of children with ASD, hoping that these families' publicly revealed experiences will help strengthen future home–school relationships. Next, Gregg, Rugg, and Souto-Manning's case study examines the use of a family-created portfolio as a tool to aid families of children with special needs in communicating about their child from a strengths perspective.

Smith and her colleagues examine parental involvement within urban charter schools, finding that while activities used are fairly typical, "the *strategies* used to implement these activities and to attract hard-to-reach parents are fairly innovative" (p. 71). The following two articles examine different methods to better prepare teachers for partnerships. First, Warren and her colleagues use mixed methods to gauge university students' attitudes and perceptions before and after a course on family and community involvement designed to help prepare them to teach in urban settings. Next, Baker and Murray describe two different service learning opportunities that helped undergraduate special education majors and graduate students, respectively, to be better prepared to build strong school communities.

Case studies of successful Canadian schools affected by poverty, reported by Ciuffetelli Parker, Grenville, and Flessa, found that these schools shared a commitment to high-quality teaching facilitated by collaboration, mentoring, and community-building; multiple parent and community partnerships; and administrators developing a culture of shared leadership. Diane Johnson relates how a program designed to help young people affected by poverty prepare for and succeed in college was also successful in developing a sense of community among this racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse group of students. Finally, we have two book reviews, which we hope will pique your interest for further reading!

Lori Thomas
May 2011

Parental Involvement Research: Moving to the Next Level

William H. Jeynes

The role of a quantitative parental involvement researcher is a very humbling one. To be an efficacious quantitative social scientist, one must put aside his or her own personal biases and go where the numbers dictate. The reality is that when the numerical results do not come out as one expects, one has a choice. Either the researcher must adjust to the results or insist that the numbers change to the presuppositions of the researcher. To be a person of integrity, the quantitative researcher must humble himself or herself and adjust to the numbers. Some theorists do not totally understand this, and when the results disagree with a particular theorist's perspective, this theorist might state, "I do not like the pattern of your results." But the theorist needs to understand that the response of the quantitative researcher will likely be, "I don't like them either, but I have to present the numbers whether I like the results or not."

Although my job is a humbling one and requires that I periodically rethink my views, the results that have emerged from my meta-analytic research have led me on an interesting journey. Through the various meta-analyses that I have undertaken, I have realized that parental involvement is considerably broader and more complicated than early parental involvement theories have acknowledged. To be forthright, these are not the results that I anticipated or even desired, but the meta-analyses have indicated this fact so explicitly that it is undeniable. And therefore it is clear that the research community needs to adapt to these realities. Based on the meta-analyses that I have undertaken, as well as the examination of nationwide data sets, it is clear that the following trends exist and are worthy of further examination. First, as I shared in a 2010 article in *Teachers College Record*, the subtle aspects of parental involvement (e.g., high expectations, communication, and parental style) are generally

more salient than more overt expressions of this involvement (e.g., checking homework, establishing household rules, and parental participation in school activities). Second, the elements of parental involvement programs that are most effective may or may not be identical to the components of parental involvement that are the most crucial. Third, as one would expect, parental involvement is higher in two-biological-parent families than it is in single-parent families. Given that meta-analyses essentially statistically summarize the existing body of research, what the body of research is indicating to the social science community is that there is a need to proceed to the next level in parental involvement research. It is patent that the research indicates that much more is known about parental involvement than was the case in the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, it is also clear there are myriad more questions to be answered, and this is only possible if researchers and theorists open their minds to proceeding to the next level. Three issues are especially salient in this move toward the next level.

The Subtle Aspects of Parental Involvement Are Generally More Salient Than More Overt Expressions of This Involvement

Based on the results of a series of meta-analyses, it appears that the nature of parental involvement may be considerably different than was previously conceived. For many years, educators, parents, and social scientists have conceptualized engaged parents as those who frequently attend school functions, help their children with their homework, and maintain household rules that dictate when their young engage in schoolwork and leisure (Domina, 2005; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). That is, most individuals typically view parental engagement as a set of deliberate, overt actions (Kelly, 2004). Results from three meta-analyses have challenged the traditional image of parental involvement (Jeynes, 2003a, 2005a, 2007b). A meta-analysis statistically combines all the relevant existing studies on a given subject in order to determine the aggregated results of said research. The findings of these meta-analyses indicate that the most powerful aspects of parental involvement are frequently subtle, such as maintaining high expectations of one's children, communicating with children, and parental style (Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b).

Moreover, an increasing body of research suggests that the key qualities necessary for schools to foster parental involvement may also be subtle (Mapp, Johnson, Strickland, & Meza, 2008; Sheldon, 2005). In other words, whether teachers, principals, and school staff are loving, encouraging, and supportive to parents may be more important than the specific guidelines and tutelage they

offer to parents (Mapp et al., 2008; Sheldon, 2005). Some of the most salient components of parental involvement are as follows.

Parental Expectations

Research indicates more subtle types of parental involvement may have a more puissant influence on student achievement than other involvement expressions, such as checking homework and maintaining household rules (Jeynes, 2005a, 2005b, 2007b). In meta-analyses undertaken by the author, the effect sizes for parental expectations were .58 and .88 standard deviation units for elementary and secondary school students, respectively. In contrast, the effect sizes for parent attendance at school functions and establishing household study rules averaged about .12 of a standard deviation (Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b). The concept of expectations requires a careful elucidation. It is not the notion that a parent pushes expectations upon their children, such as, "You shall live up to these standards" (Jeynes, 2010a, 2010b; Lancaster, 2004). Instead, the type of expectations that possess the greatest impact are those that are subtle but understood by the child (Davis-Kean, 2005; Lancaster, 2004), such as a general agreement between the child and the parents on the value of a college education, parental sacrifice to save for the child's college, and the value of a personal work ethic (Jeynes, 1999, 2002, 2003b; Kaplan, Liu, & Kaplan, 2001).

Communication Between Parents and Children

A second important subtle aspect of parental involvement is communication about school between parents and children (Afifi & Olson, 2005; Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 2005; Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b). An overview of the research indicates this is an important part of parental involvement, although its impact may not be as significant as in the case of expectations (Jeynes, 2005a). Often a spirit of communication either exists between parents and their children, or it does not. Family communication typically takes years to develop, and its absence is one of the most common causes of family tension (Jeynes, 2007a; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). Open communication is usually a prerequisite for a home to have a loving atmosphere. The author's meta-analysis indicated that the effects for communication were statistically significant at .24 and .32 standard deviation units for elementary and secondary students, respectively (Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b).

Parental Style

Research indicates parental style is also a salient but subtle facet of involvement (Casanova, Garcia-Linares, Cruz, & Manuel, 2005; Jeynes, 2010b;

Lancaster, 2004). Research by Baumrind and others indicates that those parental styles with a combination of a strong expression of love and support and a beneficial degree of discipline and structure tend to provide the healthiest environment in which children can grow (Baumrind, 1971; Boehnke, Scott, & Scott, 1996; Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b). Moreover, evidence suggests that a teaching style high in love and support and one that concurrently provides clear behavioral boundaries and enforces those boundaries maximizes learning (Wentzel, 2002). The author's meta-analysis indicated that the effects for parental style were statistically significant and were .35 for elementary school children and .40 for secondary school children (Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b).

Schools Should Also Utilize Subtle Actions to More Completely Involve Parents

Generally, if educators reach out in love consistently; possess high expectations of students; communicate clearly, sensitively, and frequently; and show respect to students and parents, then even if these educators do not expressly practice certain techniques to enhance parental involvement, their efforts will yield significant results. The body of research indicates that some of the key qualities that will attract parents to participate in school programs that encourage involvement are as follows.

A Loving and Supportive Environment

Various studies indicate that the overall trend is that in those programs with a positive impact, the parents feel loved and valued (Mapp et al., 2008; Sheldon, 2005). Human beings have various traits in common, and one of them is to desire to be treated with love and kindness (Jeynes, 2006; Kennedy, 2001; Lamb, 1997). A school can run a parental engagement program with great efficiency, but parents can easily discern whether their participation is welcome and whether their input is warmly received (Jeynes, 2000, 2002, 2003a).

Love and Support in Parental Involvement Programs

Teachers should also begin a parent–teacher conference with a warm comment to build bridges with the child's family. One can make a good argument that in order to build these bridges, the elementary school teacher, in particular, should visit the home of all of her or his students to be cognizant of each child's strengths and weaknesses and to build a partnership with the parents (Jeynes, 2006, 2010a, 2010b). School leaders can also encourage caring parental involvement to take place if they themselves are caring. School staff and instructors, in fact, should be examples to parents of the saliency of healthy

communication in the home. Bauch and Goldring (1995) posit that effective communication is one of five qualities that define a responsive school. Bauch and Goldring further assert that a common reason why students attending faith-based schools outperform their counterparts in public schools is because religious schools generally have more of an open-minded attitude toward parental communication and involvement.

Customer Friendly Educators

This orientation should begin as early in the school year as is possible. A primary way that schools can show they are "customer friendly" is for elementary school teachers to visit the home of each of their students before the school year commences (Bailey, 2001; Garbers et al., 2006). The Pilgrims and Puritans were the first to engage in this practice, and this discipline was frequently maintained in American schools until the early 1960s (Jeynes, 2006). A copious number of school-based parental involvement programs report that home visitations have become a vital component of their outreach to mothers and fathers (Bailey, 2001; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

The Need for Parental Involvement Theories and Research to Go to the Next Level: Teaching Subtle Aspects of Involvement

One of the most intriguing realities of parental involvement research is that the theories of parental involvement that emerged in the 1980s, especially, and also during the 1990s, preceded the most sophisticated research that was done on the topic. Part of this trend actually benefited parental engagement research, because the theories were needed in order to create more interest in parental involvement research. Consequently, most researchers in this discipline are thankful for the emergence of these theories. Nevertheless, one shortcoming of this series of events is that the theories were developed before quantitative research could provide an adequate foundation on which more advanced theories could be developed. This type of chronology often emerges in the social sciences. For example, Freud propounded his theories well before they could be subject to quantitative assessment (Neu, 1991). This development was positive in the sense that it stirred up a high degree of interest in psychology and, in particular, psychoanalysis (Crews, 1995). The disadvantage, however, is that when social scientists used quantitative analysis to test Freud's theories, the vast majority of Freud's theories were either disproved or substantially undermined (Crews, 1995; Neu, 1991). Quantitative analysis was also part of the process.

The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the past decade have reached a significant enough level so that we, as the academic community, need to examine the possibility of questioning current parental involvement theories as insufficient to explain some of the results that are emerging. In addition, there are an abundant number of new questions that are arising as a result of recent research that need to be addressed in order to take parental involvement research to the next level. There is a need for those in the research community to put aside their own desire for predictable order (in the case of statisticians) and the protection of their own theories in order to facilitate the quest for truth.

In the case of meta-analytic research, I think it is vital to acknowledge that the findings of the meta-analyses may answer many questions, but they introduce about as many questions as answers. For example, the meta-analytic findings reveal that the subtle aspects of parental involvement are even more robust than more overt expressions of this involvement (Jeynes, 2005b, 2007b). On the one hand, literally thousands of parents have told me how much these findings have changed them, when I share these truths at public gatherings. But I also know that school leaders, in particular, want to know more. As helpful as they believe these finding are, they want to also know the extent to which qualities such as high expectations and communication can be taught, so that they are also incorporated into parental involvement programs. I would love to be able to say that these subtle aspects of parental involvement, which are so salient in voluntary expressions of this engagement, are also by definition the most efficacious aspects of school-based family involvement programs. But the reality is that we really do not know. In addition, we really will not know the answer to this question until more American involvement programs incorporate these subtle aspects of parental involvement. Once schools incorporate subtle aspects of parental involvement into their programs, a key question can be addressed. That question is simply: "Are the subtle aspects of parental involvement as easy to teach as the more overt expressions of involvement?"

It is an exciting time to be a parental involvement researcher. The research has reached such a place that over time a new parental involvement theory or two is inevitable. In addition, new questions on family engagement are being asked that even 10 years ago few would have ever imagined. It is important to embrace these developments rather than resist them.

Understanding the Relationship Between Family Structure and Parental Involvement

Many separate studies examine the relationship between family structure and school outcomes and between parental involvement and these outcomes.

However, little research examines the influence of family structure on parental involvement (Jeynes, 2002, 2003b, 2005c). There are a variety of reasons for this fact, but perhaps the most puissant of these is that of political correctness. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) acknowledge that this desire to be sensitive to single-parent families (i.e., a facet of political correctness) is responsible for this reluctance to talk about the issue of single-parenthood. But they assert that in reality, it is insensitive *not* to discuss these issues. However, the most sensitive action social scientists can take with regard to single-parent families is to put what is "ethically correct" ahead of what is politically correct. These families need love and the outreach of schools, and to purposely eschew the discussion of the unique challenges faced by these families is do a disservice to them, as is failure to adopt a policy of support that will enable these children and their parents to succeed.

The reality is that, generally speaking, it is much easier for two parents to demonstrate a high level of involvement than it is for a single parent (Jeynes 2002, 2003a, 2005a). This statement in no way denies that there are myriad single parents who are doing their best to be engaged in their children's schooling. What is does mean is that when "four arms" and "four legs" that love that child are available, it makes it easier for children to have a sense of parental involvement. To avoid talking about this reality may be politically correct, but as McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) note, it is insensitive and not loving, that is, it is "ethically incorrect." Because when we fail to talk about these issues, it means that we do not propound and apply any useful solutions, and when this happens we do not help the ones who most need our love, compassion, and sensitivity.

Although there exists a general understanding among social scientists that there is a relationship between parental family structure and family engagement, partially due to individuals' reluctance to talk about this fact, very little about this relationship is known beyond this very general understanding. For example, researchers know little about the relationship between certain specific family structures and parental engagement; such as, little is known about the level of engagement most frequently associated with step-parenting (Jeynes, 2005a, 2010b). Moreover, the academic community knows little about what qualities normally associated with living in a two-parent family are those most conducive to enhancing parental involvement. Is it the fact that there is more time available for rest and restoration? Is it that biological parents are more likely to have a propensity for being active parents than those caretakers that are not biologically related to the child? Does just the presence of another individual provide additional interpersonal resources that facilitate family involvement? To what degree do couples simply staying unified in marriage

reflect the type of family-based priorities that are also most likely to yield expressions of parental involvement? To the extent that social scientists fathom the answers to these questions, clearly involvement will be enhanced. Not only will theorists possess a better concept of how to best enhance two-parent involvement, but they will have a sense of how to best compensate for some of the disadvantages normally associated with single parenthood.

Conclusion

It is beyond dispute that the findings that are emerging from parental involvement research are vastly different and more sophisticated than was the case even ten years ago. The social science community needs to make appropriate adjustments to these developments. First, we need to acknowledge what these developments mean for the definitions of parental involvement that are commonly used. There is little question that the engagement of parents in the schooling of their children is broader and more complex than most researchers previously believed. The recommendations that academics make to parents, educators, and policymakers need to change accordingly. Second, parental involvement programs should incorporate more of the subtle components in order to maximize the efficacy of these initiatives. Third, researchers should test to see whether the subtle aspects of parental involvement, which appear to be so potent in voluntary expressions of involvement, are also the most salient in school-based programs, which often compel families to become involved. Fourth, social scientists should design more effective ways of teaching mothers and fathers to express these more subtle forms of involvement. Fifth, both researchers and theorists need to procure a better understanding of the relationship between parental family structure and the educational participation of the father and the mother. Increasing one's knowledge of the relationship between the two will not only potentially enhance the effectiveness of two-parent families, but could give social scientists insight into how to best help single parents as well.

The last ten years have clearly yielded some major changes in the field of parental involvement, and this next decade is likely to produce more change. If the research community can demonstrate adequate flexibility, this will mean that exciting times are ahead. Indeed, it is a joy to be an active participant in this field and engaged in helping parents, schools, and children.

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William Jeynes is a senior fellow at the Witherspoon Institute in Princeton, NJ and a professor of education at California State University, Long Beach. He was the architect of the Korean economic and education stimulus package that helped it emerge from the 1997-1998 Asian economic crisis and often speaks for and works with U.S. and East Asian government officials. He has conducted a number of meta-analyses on parental involvement and other education and family issues that have gained a great deal of attention in the academic and government communities. He has over 100 academic publications, including 10 books. He may be contacted at whjharvard@post.harvard.edu

Knowledge is Power: Empowering the Autism Community Through Parent–Professional Training

Mary M. Murray, Karen Ackerman-Spain, Ellen U. Williams, and Anderia T. Ryley

Abstract

Partnerships for Autism through Collaborative Community Choice and Empowerment (Project PACE) was developed to empower parents and professionals (e.g., general or special education teachers, therapists, social workers, school counselors, psychologists) through training and education. Project PACE was designed to provide participants with basic facts about individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and strategies for working with these individuals utilizing collaborative partnerships. Once trained, participants themselves became trainers who presented the program to community agencies, schools, and parent support groups. This article describes the project planning phase, the implementation phase, and the evaluation phase (i.e., lessons learned). Results of this study suggest that Project PACE provides a cost-effective training model that allows parents and professionals to collaboratively develop, maintain, and improve services for individuals with ASD.

Key Words: autism spectrum disorders, ASD, partnerships, collaboration, training, parents, professionals, train the trainer, Project PACE, empowerment

Introduction

From the moment a child is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), parents and professionals face the reality that two types of services

exist—services that are needed and services that are available. Based on the assumption that everyone (i.e., parents, teachers, professionals, etc.) wants the most favorable outcome for a child with ASD (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006), the optimum search for "what is best" involves a collaborative partnership among parents, professionals, and, oftentimes, the child. If the partnership does not include the child from the beginning, he or she should be included as growth and maturity allow. In other words, as the child with ASD matures, this partnership should become a triad, with the individual with ASD playing a progressively increasing role.

The importance of parent–professional partnerships has been supported by numerous legislative mandates (e.g., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the No Child Left Behind Act) and by numerous professional education organizations (e.g., the Council for Exceptional Children, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the Autism Society of America, and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education). While communities and schools widely acknowledge the value of parent–professional partnerships, establishing such collaborative partnerships is difficult (Epstein, 2005; Forlin & Hopewell, 2006). This article presents a parent–professional partnership program that could serve as a model within the autism community looking for an answer to the following questions: "What is best for a child with ASD?" and "Where do we find help in providing it?" The model program presented in this article, Partnerships for Autism through Collaborative Community Choice and Empowerment (Project PACE), was funded through a small grant from an agency providing disability services. Designed as a one-year program, Project PACE was to provide participants with basic facts about individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and strategies for working with these individuals utilizing collaborative partnerships. Once trained, participants themselves became trainers who presented the program to community agencies, schools, and parent support groups. Thus, the primary focus of Project PACE was to promote family and professional empowerment through parent–professional collaboration.

Need for Parent–Professional Partnerships

Central to the formation and success of parent–professional partnerships within any community is the collaborative professional training offered to parents and professionals (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). However, few professional or parent education programs provide adequate preparation for effective parent–professional partnerships (Epstein, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Education programs

typically do not provide professionals with training in direct interaction with parents (Hedges & Gibbs, 2005). Likewise, education programs for parents typically do not emphasize interaction with professionals, nor do they provide content that focuses on parent support and resources. The unfortunate outcome is that neither type of program addresses effective parent–professional partnerships (Renty & Roeyers, 2006). As a result, neither parents nor professionals typically experience collaborative interactions with each other until they are faced with a situation that requires them to do so. Further, when parents and professionals are not adequately trained, they tend to engage in more traditional, hierarchical relationships rather than collaborative practices in which parity is a central component in contributing to educational decisions. Without effective, interactive training and hands-on experience collaborating with each other, parents and professionals may experience ineffective partnerships or significant conflict. At best, such ineffective partnerships can be strained, and at worst, they can be detrimental to the child with ASD.

In response to this dilemma, many parents and professionals may be unsure about how to establish partnerships, or they may lack the necessary skill or confidence in their ability to do so successfully (Epstein, 2005; Forlin & Hopewell, 2006; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Witmer, 2005). Thus, focused preparation that includes multiple opportunities for parents and professionals to interact together is essential in equipping both groups with the knowledge, abilities, and confidence necessary to effectively partner together (Murray, Curran, & Zellers, 2008).

Research has demonstrated that parents of children with ASD do not feel valued as equal partners with educational professionals. For example, Fish (2006) found that families of children with ASD often feel uninformed about educational assessment and the development of Individualized Education Programs. Fish further noted that parents have difficulty accessing inclusive settings as well as autism-specific services and supports for their children. Similarly, Renty and Roeyers (2006) found that families of children with ASD feel they cannot find information relevant to education, social services, and leisure services, and when they do in fact locate such services, they frequently have difficulty accessing them.

In response to these findings, Project PACE was initiated to build capacity around ASD knowledge, resources, and services through parent–professional partnerships and networking in an urban county in northwest Ohio. The goal of the project was twofold: (1) to close identified gaps in ASD education and training for both parents and professionals, and (2) to coordinate and coalesce community knowledge, resources, and services for ASD that otherwise have been fragmented.

Benefits of Parent–Professional Partnerships

When parents and professionals partner with one another to meet the needs of individuals with ASD, it can have a positive impact on the quality of their cognitive, social, and emotional development (Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007). Specifically, Whitbread et al. (2007) found that successful parent–professional partnerships can produce better outcomes for individuals.

Another benefit provided by Project PACE was having a safe environment where parents and professionals learned together about services and resources for individuals with ASD as well as how to collaborate with one another. PACE participants were required to collaborate in teams to develop and present training modules to the community.

Characteristics of Effective Parent–Professional Partnerships

The fundamental components of parent–professional empowerment are as follows: (a) access and control over needed resources, (b) decision-making and problem-solving abilities, and (c) the ability to interact effectively with others in order to procure resources (Dunst, 2002). Based on these components of parent–professional empowerment, the following objectives were formulated:

1. To provide assistance to families who need help obtaining ASD resources;
2. To provide advocacy assistance and training to enhance the quality of life for individuals in the community with ASD;
3. To train families to become informational resources about ASD;
4. To empower families to be equal collaborative partners with ASD service providers/professionals;
5. To empower professionals to become equal collaborative partners with families of individuals with ASD; and
6. To assist families and professionals in supporting individuals with ASD in obtaining full access to the community and its services.

Stoner, Beck, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, and Crowley (2005) studied parents' perceptions of their interaction with educational professionals. These parents reported that teachers with positive dispositions increased their trust. Further, the study identified three main characteristics of successful parent–professional partnerships as (a) communicating openly and listening effectively, (b) understanding each other's perspectives, and (c) implementing effective intervention and service delivery practices. Parent participants in this study also appreciated teachers who had research-based information about ASD. All too often interventions for ASD have not been research-based prior to implementation.

Specific components that positively influence the effectiveness of parent–professional partnerships include: respecting families' cultural backgrounds and dynamics; developing trust in the relationship; communicating effectively; establishing and maintaining parity; and sharing decision-making responsibilities among partners (McGrath, 2005). Additional components also include an elevated level of commitment by both parents and professionals, as well as clearly defined roles and responsibilities that are established at the beginning of the partnership to help nurture the partnership and decrease conflict. Professionals should implement family-centered practices and promote family choice when working with families (Murray et al., 2008). Finally, school administrators can assist parents and professionals in building partnerships that benefit the whole family, for example, by providing workshops and professional development opportunities on collaboration (Cramer & Nevin, 2006).

In response to these research findings, the directors of Project PACE created a non-hierarchical learning community. This community identified clear roles and responsibilities that led to open and effective communication, trust, and shared decision-making between parents and professionals.

Models

A model considered for this project was the train-the-trainer model. This model focuses on inviting teachers to workshops, training them in specific skills or programs, and encouraging them to train colleagues at their home schools in the same skills they learned during the workshop (Ephross & Vassil, 2005). Train-the-trainer models can be effectively incorporated into the learning community model by serving as the foundation (e.g., acquired knowledge and skills) that supports learning (Borthick, Jones, & Wakai, 2003). Specifically, the knowledge and skills acquired during train-the-trainer workshops enhance the teaching and learning capacity of the members of a professional community. This enhanced, defined capacity, in turn, supports other learning events that emerge during the more comprehensive professional development employed by the learning community model (Ephross & Vassil, 2005).

Perhaps the most promising training model is the parent–professional model, which provides parents and professionals the opportunity to train together, each sharing their areas of expertise. In this model, each participant brings unique skills and expertise to the training and education process. This model is based on the premise that empowerment occurs when families and professionals share their resources equally in order to meet the needs of children with autism and their families (Turnbull et al., 2006).

The training model employed in Project PACE combined the best components of the train-the-trainer model and the parent–professional model. Parents of children with autism and professionals working with individuals with ASD across the life span were trained together. The trained cadres of parents and professionals, in turn, trained additional groups in the community. This model has been in process for three years, reaching thousands of individuals in the community.

Logistics of Project PACE: A Model Program for Parent–Professional Partnership

In order to replicate the PACE program, it is essential to understand the logistics involved in developing such a program, in particular (a) participant selection and demographics, (b) curriculum development, (c) training implementation and training site selection, (d) culminating activities, and (e) financial considerations. Each component will be described in greater detail in the following sections.

Participant Selection and Demographics

To launch the program, 27 participants were selected for collaborative training (12 parents and 15 professionals; 25 females and 2 males). The following selection criteria were established for parent participants: (1) residency in the county where the grant was awarded, and (2) status as a parent or guardian of a child or adult with ASD. One selection criterion was established for professional participants: they were required to be providing services to individuals with ASD in the county where the grant was awarded. In addition to these eligibility criteria, participants were selected based on referrals from grant administrators, community agencies, and school administrators. Ethnic composition included four parents and three professionals from diverse cultures. The socioeconomic backgrounds of parents were varied, and their educational accomplishments ranged from high school completion to earned master's degrees.

The group of 15 professionals included individuals who worked in the professional fields of education, speech language pathology, social work, occupational therapy, mental health, and adult services. Their educational accomplishments ranged from earned master's degrees to earned doctorate degrees. At the start of the program, all professional participants were working with individuals on the autism spectrum who ranged in age from preschool through adulthood. Three of the professional participants self-identified as having disabilities.

Participants were assigned to one of three cadres (early childhood, school-aged, or adolescent/adult). Parents were assigned to a cadre based on the age of their child. Professionals were placed in cadres based on the age of the individual(s) whom they had been serving.

Curriculum Development

The curriculum included the following topics: Orientation, Family Empowerment, Service Options and Self-Determination, Community Options, Collaboration, and Informed Choices. Table 1 provides an outline of the curriculum used throughout four training sessions for parents and professionals.

Table 1. Project PACE Curriculum: Topics for Training Sessions

Session 1 Topics	Session 2 Topics	Session 3 Topics	Session 4 Topics
Orientation Overview of Project PACE	Family empowerment through professional/parent partnerships	Service options and self-determination through professional/parent partnerships	Community options, collaboration, and informed choices using professional/parent partnerships
Benefits of professional/parent partnerships	Political advocacy for ASD	Early childhood services for ASD	Individualized Family Service Plans for ASD
Assignments to cadres:	Legal background for ASD	School-age services for ASD	Individualized educational programs for ASD
1. early childhood 2. school age 3. adolescent/adult	Family support and advocacy for ASD	Adolescent and adult services for ASD	Individualized transition plans for ASD
Selection of training dates and times	Self-determination and ASD		

Training Implementation/Sites

Project participants received training on the ASD curriculum over four sessions, each session lasting three hours. The training sessions used the following format:

1. Information sharing about ASD topics from ASD community experts (1½ hours)

2. Questions and answers from participants to experts (½ hour)
3. Breakout discussion groups in age-level cadres (early childhood, school-age, adolescent/adult) to discuss and apply information about ASD (½ hour)
4. Reporting out to large group (½ hour)

All training sessions were held at public facilities located within the city from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Sites were accessible to all participants and provided at no cost.

Culminating Activities

Using the train-the-trainer model, facilitators asked the participants to complete training on ASD topics and then demonstrate their knowledge by serving as ASD trainers/consultants in the community. Three workshops were scheduled in which cadres of PACE participants served as trainers. The first training facilitated by the early childhood cadre was titled: *Autism Spectrum Disorders: The Early Years*. The school-aged cadre titled their presentation: *Autism Spectrum Disorders: Partnering with the Schools.* The adolescent/adult cadre chose to present on *Transition to Work and Vocations for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. All workshops were scheduled for three hours in length. Cadre members together with facilitators as coaches assisted with the development of a PowerPoint lecture presentation for each of the three workshops. Each PowerPoint was developed with knowledge-based information that had been previously provided to the cadre as well as two or three family stories for application. These training sessions provided: an overview of autism including definition and etiology, diagnosis and assessment, characteristics, and prevalence; medical, educational, and community services; and resources for the specified age level. Facilitators were available to coach cadre members during the sessions if needed or just be available for support.

Flyers were disseminated, press releases were written, and action alerts were sent via email to ASD advocacy and professional organizations to announce the training sessions. Each of the training sessions took place at a local university that donated a large lecture hall at no cost. Approximately 300 people attended these three-hour workshops. Certificates of attendance were provided, and evaluation information was gathered. On a 5-point Likert scale (5 high and 1 low), the overall composite evaluation score for the three workshops was 4.86. Based on these evaluations of the workshops, the cadres were successful in providing information that the community valued.

Project PACE trainers have continued to provide educational inservices, workshops, and panel discussions on all aspects of Autism Spectrum Disorders at other community events, including professional ASD conferences at the

local, regional, and national levels. Project PACE coordinators invited trainees on numerous occasions to co-present with them, as well as encouraged them to present to their local school districts and community agencies. Materials and consultation with coordinators were offered to all trainees during and following the project completion. Follow-up information on training sessions provided by Project PACE participants was gathered through phone surveys in 2009 administered by project directors to Project PACE participants. Project PACE participants were asked to indicate how many formal (scheduled) and informal (unscheduled or impromptu) training sessions they had conducted since their participation in Project PACE. They were requested to provide the number of attendees at each of their training sessions. In addition, they were asked whether they experienced any other interesting or important outcomes as a result of their Project PACE training.

Since the conclusion of the project, participants reported a potential impact on more than 4,435 attendees through 209 formal and 336 informal training sessions (see Table 2). Based on information obtained through the telephone interviews, the trainees reported that additional outcomes of their involvement in Project PACE trainings included the following: one professional participant opened an inclusive childcare center; one parent participant accepted a position as a director of a large parent support organization; eight parents and twelve professional participants furthered their education through attendance at ASD workshops; and two participants completed graduate-level degree programs (one participant completed a master's degree and another a doctorate), both with an emphasis in ASD. Another professional participant reported that she had co-authored a book about how to cope with and adjust to the behaviors of individuals with ASD.

Table 2. Training Provided by Parents and Professionals between 2006 and 2009

Empowerment Activity	No. of Formal Training Sessions	No. of Informal Training Sessions	Total No. of Training Sessions
Training by 10 parents	68	326	394
Training by 13 professionals	141	10	151
Total	209	336	545

Although Project PACE was a one-year funded project, the outcomes of this project have extended beyond the one-year period. Project PACE trainees

continue to be leaders in the Autism Spectrum Disorders community, serving on boards, developing services and resources, and providing training on ASD.

Financial Considerations

Project PACE was financed through a local competitive grant ($15,000) that funded parent empowerment projects in Northwest Ohio. The grant was written by Intervention Services faculty at a four-year university and a public school teacher with extensive experiences in educating children with ASD. Costs incurred for implementation for Project PACE included the following:

- Costs for Project Manager: A project manager was hired ($2,800 per year) to advertise training sessions, secure training sites, maintain records of attendance, and assist with material preparation and refreshments.
- Costs for Speakers and Consultants: The consultants who developed the training curriculum were the authors of the Project PACE grant. Their services were considered in-kind grant contributions (estimated at $4,220 per year). Speakers were offered a nominal ($100) honorarium with $1,000 per year budgeted. However, most speakers declined and offered their services *pro bono*.
- Trainees' Stipends: Each trainee was offered a nominal stipend ($50 per session) to help defray the cost of transportation and childcare during the four training sessions as well as at the community presentations ($6,600 was budgeted for trainee stipends).
- Materials and Refreshments: Materials were developed and prepared by grant coordinators, the project manager, and invited speakers. Light refreshments (coffee, soft drinks, cookies, and pretzels) were provided at each of the training sessions ($3,100 was budgeted for materials and refreshments).
- Indirect Costs: Because this grant was written through a university, an indirect cost of $1,350 was assessed by the university. While $15,000 was the awarded amount for this grant, it should be noted that the exact amount allocated for direct expenditures was $13,500.

Findings: Lessons Learned

In the process of implementing Project PACE, project administrators, parents, professionals, and community members learned the following lessons that should be considered when attempting to replicate this project:

1. Families of children with ASD of different age levels bring differing experiential backgrounds to the table. Many parents of young children with ASD who participated in the project were in the throes of dealing with the diagno-

sis and still looking for cures and treatments. These parents were able to share current information and resources that reflected the latest trends in ASD services. Parents of school-aged children were able to bridge the gap in supporting the parents of young children and the parents of older children. It was determined through self-report that these parents were the most knowledgeable about resources available throughout the lifespan. In addition, they were the most politically active and most involved in advocacy and service organizations in the community. As such, they encouraged the parents of young children to become more actively engaged in the autism community and encouraged the parents of older children to become reconnected to the autism community.

Parents of older individuals with ASD had resolved many of the issues related to the ASD diagnosis and were no longer looking for a cure. These parents were able to share historical background as well as realistic hope for the future. These findings are supported in the literature (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011). Parents of individuals with ASD are the single most effective support system to other parents of individuals with ASD. The differing experiences and skill sets that parents develop are mutually beneficial to all involved in the support and empowerment process (Marcus, Kunce, & Schopler, 2005).

2. Participant sustainability in the project could be enhanced through addressing individual needs. The total number of participants completing the project was 23 out of 27 (10 parents and 13 professionals). Four participants were unable to complete the project: two parents and two professionals. The two parents and one of the two professionals who did not complete the project, all single parents, stated that they could not continue in the program due to time and schedule demands. The second professional who did not complete the project experienced the sudden death of her spouse and could not continue in the program. In replicating this type of program, developers should identify individual participant needs that might prove to be barriers preventing full participation through interviews or intake surveys.

3. Families differ in experiential background based on the severity of the child's autism. Parents of children with severe ASD often experienced difficulty relating to parents of children with milder forms of ASD. The needs of these families and the services required were often at the far ends of the continuum. For example, while parents of a child with mild ASD might be seeking educational services in inclusive settings, parents of children with severe ASD might be seeking any program that would provide services for their child.

One parent, a mother of a child with severe ASD, was unable to complete the training. Project coordinators speculated that there was a high probability that her withdrawal was due to the severe limitations of her son's ASD, which

might not have been adequately addressed in the training since the focus was primarily on the needs of children with higher levels of functioning. Her withdrawal also might have been due to the fact that she was the only parent of a child with severe ASD who participated in the project. Parents of individuals with ASD tend to gravitate toward other parents who have children with similar functioning levels and experiences (Turnbull et al., 2006).

4. Age of the child influences parents' competence and participation levels. Families of children under the age of six appeared more apprehensive about participating in the project. Parents of very young children with ASD are often in the process of navigating and negotiating the social and economic systems of resources and building confidence in parenting a child with special needs. Preschool parents seemed less confident in their ability to provide information and training in PACE group assignments and training workshops. Indeed, some parents of younger children withdrew from the project shortly after it began. Parents of school-aged and older children, on the other hand, appeared more confident in their ability to participate in the PACE activities since they had many years to access services and supports for their child and family (Murray et al., 2008).

5. Family stories are powerful tools in portraying the lives of families who are impacted by ASD. While the information and knowledge relative to ASD services might be considered the bricks of the program, the family stories became the mortar. In the process of discussing service needs and resources, many families shared their stories, thereby providing relevance and application to the information. The family stories became such a vital part of the learning process that they were included in the culminating Project PACE community workshop presentation. Family stories alone can be a powerful learning tool for educators and parents of children with special needs. By bringing theory into practice through real-life experiences, family stories can serve as powerful tools to change dispositions of individuals in the community (Murray & Mandell, 2004).

6. Families and professionals can view the problem-solving process from each other's perspectives. The primary lesson parents and professionals learned from each other in the problem-solving process was not to allow intimidation of one another to become the guiding force in interactions. Prior to these trainings, many families had been in awe of the professionals and the knowledge they appeared to have concerning ASD, thereby often devaluing their own expertise on the topic of ASD. Conversely, professionals viewed parents as having much greater experience in dealing with children with ASD, thereby tending to undervalue their own knowledge and expertise. Parents and professionals have much to learn from each other. Respect and trust are the foundation of

the problem-solving process (Turnbull et al., 2006). Once trust was developed in the teams, it became a powerful tool for developing collaborative partnerships and effective problem-solving processes.

7. Professional development credit could be used to increase attendance at training workshops. Since most professionals are required to accrue professional development credit, offering continuing education units (CEUs) might provide increased incentive for professional participation in Project PACE. CEU credit could be generated for teachers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech language pathologists, school psychologists, school counselors, and other professionals. Professional development activities are most successful when the participants "buy in" to these activities from the beginning (Ephross & Vassil, 2005). One incentive to encourage this buy-in would be to offer professional development credits.

8. Site selection and marketing for community workshops should promote attendance for participants with low SES. The community workshops were held on a medical university campus outside of the metropolitan area. The workshops could have had a higher participation rate among individuals from low SES backgrounds if the workshops had been conducted in low SES communities. Services for individuals with limited resources need to be brought to these individuals since they may not always have the means to travel to locations that are relatively far away (Veltri, 2008). Marketing efforts could include advertisements in journals and newspapers that target individuals within the inner city and families with low SES backgrounds. In some cases, such as in the Hispanic community, advertising through community churches could be advantageous.

9. Marketing information needs to provide clarity regarding workshop content and logistics. In order to attract the targeted clientele, advertising must be concise and understandable; that is, it must reach the community that is to be served (Friend & Cook, 2007). Workshop advertisements and flyers should clearly reflect the following: what content is being covered, (e.g., ASD information and strategies along with age levels addressed); where the workshop is being held (include map or narrative directions); when the workshop is being offered (time, date); and who is conducting the workshop (include names and affiliations of presenters/sponsors).

10. Training cadres could be assigned according to age level or across the lifespan. While the training cadres could have included representation from participants involved with children of varying ages across the lifespan, the grant coordinators determined that it would be more efficient to train the cadres based on homogenous age groupings (i.e., early childhood, school-aged, and adolescent/adult). Speakers' materials and services were easier to compile based on age levels.

The benefits of cross-age training cadres might provide a better understanding of needs, strategies, and services across the life span. Families and professionals learn from one another by sharing their life experiences. More experienced families have a broader understanding of ASD issues and the resource systems in place, an understanding that can greatly benefit families who are new to the diagnosis and the system. Likewise, families with a recent diagnosis can assist more experienced families in learning about current services and in reconnecting to the system and supports (Marcus et al., 2005).

11. Individuals with ASD must be included in cadres. While family stories became an important part of the workshop presentations, individuals with ASD also should be included in these presentations. In particular, adolescents and adults with ASD could have been included in the development and implementation of the community presentations. Parents and professionals can acquire great insights on needs and treatment for individuals with ASD from successful persons with ASD, such as Temple Grandin (2005) and Stephen Shore (2003).

12. Parents and professionals need structure and technological support to assist in the development of presentations. Project coordinators developed the original outline for the content of the community workshops, which served as the basis for cadre participants to develop specific parts of the presentations. However, many of the cadre participants had never presented or developed a PowerPoint presentation before and, therefore, required instruction and support. When support and structure are provided, the team process is most successful (Ephross & Vassil, 2005). Participants tend to give up and drop out of a project if requirements seem overwhelming.

13. Forms are needed for participants to disclose any disabilities so that they can be provided necessary accommodations. It is important that individuals with special needs have their needs met in order to fully participate in their community (Wang, Bradley, & Gignac, 2004). Three cadre participants in Project PACE self-disclosed during the project that they experienced disabilities. Project coordinators need to provide a mechanism for cadre participants to disclose disabling conditions prior to the start of the project. For example, through the use of preregistration forms, these three participants would have had the opportunity to self-disclose and request accommodations and/or modifications.

14. Funding for program sustainability should be addressed through community organizations and school systems. The grant monies received were in the amount of $15,000. When discussing further implementation of this grant, project administrators could solicit community organizations and school systems that serve individuals with ASD for financial support. With resources

becoming more limited every year, it is imperative that schools and community agencies partner and share resources to better serve their clientele (Liao, Chang, & Lee, 2008).

15. Parents and professionals both learned that *knowledge is power*. Throughout Project PACE, the co-directors encouraged growth, collaboration, and understanding through acquired knowledge. Knowledge leads to confidence, competence, and empowerment (Murray et al., 2008). Knowledge about ASD, collaboration, and strategies were provided to cadre participants. Parents and professionals both repeatedly affirmed throughout the project that *knowledge is power*.

In addition to the 15 previous lessons learned by Project Coordinators, Project PACE trainees reported (via videotaped and transcribed interviews) the following additional lessons learned and information gained as a result of their involvement in Project PACE:

> I had very little of knowledge of Autism before being part of Project PACE. I have a better understanding of how I can better help and serve families in terms of what programs are available for ASD. (social worker)

> Project PACE was a really good way to collect resources on Autism for parents and professionals. Parents had opportunities to interact with a variety of professionals: the speech therapists, the occupational therapist, regular and special teachers. (occupational therapist)

> Through Project PACE, I think everybody walked away having learned something to improve the quality of life for kids with Autism. (parent of school-aged child)

> Project PACE has taught me the educational rights of children with Autism. I can share this with other parents. (parent of school-aged child)

> I learned a lot of new strategies to utilize with my students in the classroom. (junior high special education teacher)

> Basically, knowledge is power and us getting this information to the people that might not know all of it gives them the knowledge, gives them power to help their own children and help their families learn more about autism. (early childhood general education teacher)

> I think this is a great program. I think it's a great idea. There's a lot of people that don't know…and knowledge is power. (parent of an adult)

The recurring themes on lessons learned by both project coordinators and by Project PACE trainees were two fold. First, parents and professionals have much to learn from each other, and second, *knowledge is power*.

Summary

The major goal of Project PACE was to promote family and professional empowerment through parent–professional collaboration. Parents and professionals were provided opportunities for empowerment through knowledge and access to an array of services and resources; the opportunity to participate in decision-making and problem-solving process training; and the opportunity to gain skills to effectively partner with others in order to meet the needs of individuals with ASD. Although the training need in this particular community was in the area of ASD, the structure, design, and implementation of this project is also appropriate for other identified school/community needs, such as other disability categories, literacy, or mental health.

When parents and professionals partner on behalf of individuals with ASD, the results are often dramatic (Murray et al., 2008). Empowering both parents and professionals with knowledge regarding service options, collaboration, and the perspectives of both families and professionals leads to better outcomes for the families, their loved one with ASD, and the professionals who serve them. When school personnel and community members (parents and professionals) work together to meet identified community needs, the community flourishes.

Project PACE combined the train-the-trainer and the parent–professional training models. With the increased prevalence of ASD, Project PACE provides a cost-effective training model to improve services for individuals with ASD and to enhance the roles of parents and professionals in sharing knowledge about ASD.

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Mary M. Murray is an associate professor in the School of Intervention Services at Bowling Green State University. She has extensive experience in training programs for professionals and parents of children with special needs. She has over 25 years of experience working in the community in a variety of positions. She is a board member of the Autism Society of Ohio and is a member of the State Advisory Panel of Exceptional Children. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Mary M. Murray, Bowling Green State University, 443 Education, Bowling Green, OH, 43403, or email mmurray@bgsu.edu

Karen Ackerman-Spain is a licensed psychologist in private practice. She has extensive experience working with families of children with special needs. She has taught children with behavioral disorders and preservice teachers at a university in the special education and early childhood education departments.

Ellen Williams is a professor emeritus in the School of Intervention Services at Bowling Green State University. She has over 30 years of experience working with training programs, families, and individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders. She has served on numerous boards and task forces at the state, regional, and local levels such as the Autism Society of Ohio, Advocacy and Protective Services for Ohio, Arc, Autism Society of Northwest Ohio, and the Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence Disabilities.

Anderia Ryley has over 30 years of teaching experience with children with autism and other special needs. Currently she is an autism consultant for a variety of community agencies (county boards of developmental disabilities, hospital programs, and public schools). She serves on the Autism Society of Ohio's Board and the Northwest Ohio Autism Advisory Council's steering committee.

Strengths Classification of Social Relationships Among Cybermothers Raising Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Laura Dreuth Zeman, Jayme Swanke, and Judy Doktor

Abstract

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families are different. Parents often surf the Internet in search of supportive solutions to the unique challenges they face. One source of insight for parents raising children with ASD comes from blog writers and the parents who surf the net to read their blogs, or cyberparents. The study here intends to add insight into how cybermothers raising children with ASD experience their social networks. Such perceptions may potentially help educators foster positive partnerships with similar parents. The researchers undertook this phenomenological study with the assumption that cybermothers who blog expressed their authentic voices and would best represent their lived experiences. Eighteen months of data collected from 24 blogs was coded within a strengths framework that classified relationships into inhibiting and assisting categories and sorted it by themes that emerged within each strength category. Inhibiting relationship themes included role strain and isolation. Assisting themes were examined within the context of supportive relationships.

Key Words: mothers, autism spectrum disorders, ASD, strengths, social, relationships, networks, networking, blogging, online, supports, cyberparents, parents, families, blogs, Internet, roles, isolation, special needs, education, children with disabilities, disability, teachers

Introduction

Raising a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can have a tremendous impact on parents. The purpose of the present study is to develop an understanding of how cybermothers who blog, a group of mothers who blogged about their experiences raising children with ASD, perceived their social networks. This insight could explain, in part, their influence in shaping practices and meanings among other parents who surf the Internet seeking alternative information about children with ASD. Further, we assumed that such an understanding would be useful to educators who work with similar families because it might provide insight that could help foster supportive home–school partnerships.

Parenting children with ASD requires adapting to a variety of challenging behaviors and communication patterns. Children with ASD typically display the following characteristics: impaired social interaction, impaired communication, repetitive or stereotyped behavior, abnormal sensory perception, and impaired cognition (Clarke & van Amerom, 2007). Typically, three recognized diagnoses constitute ASD: Autism, Asperger Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (CDC, 2006). Generally, children with Asperger Syndrome have a much higher level of intellectual functioning than those in the other two categories, but their social skills are not commensurate with their academic abilities and their chronological age.

Perhaps the increase in the diagnosis of ASDs over the last decade can explain in part the increase in public attention to these disorders. ASDs are now ranked second, behind intellectual disabilities, as the most common childhood developmental disorders (CDC, 2006). In 2006, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimated that 1 in 150 (0.6%) children, or 46.5 million youth between birth and college, in the United States have an ASD (CDC, 2006). It logically follows that this increase in incidents accompanies an increase in the cost of care. The potential educational costs associated with educating children with ASDs are estimated at roughly $15,000 a year while additional therapies may cost families on average $22,000 annually thus bringing the potential cost of care to an estimated $660,000 over the first 18 years (Chasson, Harris, & Neely, 2007). It is plausible that families, school districts, and universities in the United States combined may annually pay around $1.7 trillion to care for youth with ASD.

Cyberparents

Children with ASD and their families are often misunderstood (Cole, 2007). Therefore, it is likely that mothers may seek support or information

from sources that mirror their own interpretations of their experiences. With access to the Internet, it is likely that parents seeking supportive solutions to these unique challenges may reach out to members of virtual networks. This phenomenon is possible as more families have in-home access to the Internet. Currently, it is estimated that as many as 80% of U.S. families have access to the Internet from their homes, while approximately 90% of public libraries in the U.S. provide free Internet access (American Public Library Association, 2009). While in-home Internet access is becoming customary, it is important to note that Caucasian professionals are most likely to have Internet access at home, leaving low-income, minority, young, single-parent-headed households among the families most likely living in homes without Internet access (Madge & O'Connor, 2006).

The research on the use of virtual social networking among parents is emerging. Clare Madge and Henrietta O'Connor (2006) studied blogs of new parents. They found that cyberparents used the Internet to form social networks, build coping skills, and access usable information that supplemented professional and commercial resources. They suggested that virtual communities play an important role for some parents in shaping their practices and meanings. The authors caution that a form of segregation is emerging, called cyberexclusion, as parents who lack access to the Internet are excluded from alternative information and the social networks that shape meaning.

Research on the use of the Internet among parents raising children diagnosed with ASD is also emerging. For instance, Jaci Huws and her colleagues (2001) found that parents of children with ASD seek virtual support to help adjust to complicated roles and to supplement medical information. Amos Fleischmann (2004) studied online parent narratives to understand how cyberparents communicated their adjustment to their children's ASD diagnoses. He found that cyberparents typically discuss shifts in roles from parenting to care managing following the initial diagnosis and tend to present themselves as advocates rather than victims. He also found that cyberparents used the Internet for social networking with other parents of children with ASD and to share information. Studies of cyberparents are important because they can help explain how parents use their relationships with schools and others to foster resilience.

Strengths Framework

The strengths framework seeks to understand people within their relationships and seeks to understand how social relationships facilitate resilience (Rapp & Goscha, 2006). Therefore, it is an excellent framework for understanding social relationships such as those examined within the context of this article. Fostering resilience, or understanding how people cope and thrive, is a

central goal of strengths approaches. This framework assumes that people experience both inhibiting and assisting relationships. Inhibiting relationships restrict access to opportunities and resources. For example, people in inhibiting relationships may appear stigmatized and isolated. As a result, they may lack confidence or experience reoccurring conflict and rejection. For instance, mothers of children with ASD who perceive educators as condescending might avoid outside help and encourage others to reject care opportunities. In contrast, assisting relationships tend to validate and encourage relationships outside the social network. Therefore, mothers of children with ASD who perceive relationships with educators as assisting may be more likely to inspire other parents to engage in constructive home–school partnerships.

Prior studies that applied the strengths framework to parents primarily examined cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic networks (Hill & Bush, 2001; Sy & Schulenberg, 2005). For instance, Laurence Steinberg and his colleagues (1991) examined parenting style across ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Similar to prior studies that sought to understand how parents draw support from cultural networks, the study here intends to add insight into how cybermothers who blog while raising children with ASD experience their social networks. Such perceptions may potentially affect the broader discourse about facilitating resilience among parents raising children with ASD.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study was designed with the goal of gaining insight into how cybermothers who raise children with ASD experience their social relationships. From the perspective of a parent, what aspects of their social relationships are inhibiting, and what relationships do they perceive as assisting? The findings describe how these parents present their relationships in public blogs, which can potentially influence how other parents who surf the Internet seeking alternative sources of support may interpret their own relationships. Information created from the parents' point of view will help educators relate to similar parents and may help them form parent–school partnerships that foster resilience.

Method

Sample

The process of identifying and selecting blogs for inclusion in the data set was purposeful and rested on the phenomenological goal of capturing, as comprehensively as possible, the authentic voice of the set of parents who

intentionally share their experiences on public blogs. The study met criteria for human subjects research involving existing data. Internet searches for blogs written by parents raising children with ASD were conducted. After identifying the initial set of blogs, we applied a criteria for selection in the study. First, the blogs had to contain eighteen months of existing data, with a minimum of one entry per month. We used eighteen months of data to capture expressions of ongoing struggles and successes, providing deep meaning to the mothers' stories. We wanted to capture experiences that overlapped school years to assure that meanings were independent of specific teacher–parent relationships. Second, we limited the blogs to those written by authors who focused on their own personal experience to focus the analysis on their world from their own point of view. Although there were two blogs authored by cyberfathers, they were excluded to keep the sample homogeneous. In the end, 24 out of the 100 public blogs authored by cybermothers raising children with ASD fit the full criteria for inclusion in the sample.

Data

The analysis file was created by selecting the reflective statements that examined personal experiences that related to parenting children with ASD. Data strings consisted of statements that explained the experience within the context of relationships. Thomas Groenewald (2004) referred to this as "delineating units of meaning" (p. 17). That process also involved eliminating statements classified as intellectual property, political or social commentary, news articles, advertisements for events on autism, updates on the child without reflection, pictures or graphics, and updates about other members of the family unrelated to the theme of the study.

Data Analysis

Content analysis coded data strings into strengths categories to deepen the understanding of the lived experiences of this group of parents. The analysis used the strengths framework as a template to sort the data into categories of inhibiting and assisting relationships. The data strings were further clustered into units of meaning to form themes within each strengths category. These emerging themes were role strain and isolation within the category of inhibiting social relationships. Each theme reflected characteristics of relationships that influence the perception of the relationship as inhibiting, according to Rapp and Gosha (2006). The data statements within assisting social relationships were grouped according to the type of relationship, that is, family or friends. These groupings reflected the discourse presented in the blogs, and the research team attempted to remain consistent with the general meaning of the bloggers' portrayal of their social networks.

Code verification consisted of assuring agreement among three researchers. This process reduced the bias that influences data interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This verification process involved comparing the results of independent analysis and reconciling any differences in interpretation. In the case of different interpretations, either the researchers negotiated a common interpretation, or they agreed to remove the statement from the findings. Therefore, the final classifications represent the three-researcher agreement on themes, coding, and interpretation.

As with all qualitative analysis, the experiences of the research team influence data interpretation. The research team consisted of two university faculty members and a graduate assistant. One faculty member is a professor of social work and women studies with a clinical background in family therapy and mental illness. The other faculty member teaches in teacher education, has a background in special education advocacy, and had prior experience administering school and district special education programs. The graduate assistant studied psychiatric and addiction rehabilitation. They worked together to shape this understanding of the data while attempting to present the mothers' voices locked in their unique context.

Themes were included in the findings if they appeared in at least 6 different blogs, or at least 25% of the blogs in the sample. This threshold was set to assure that the findings emphasized salient themes across the blogs. This process is referred to as "extracting general themes" rather than reporting unique experiences (Groenewald, 2004, p. 17).

Three common themes labeled role-strain, isolation, and supporters emerged. The definition of role strain applied in analysis was adapted from family theorist Hamilton McCubbin (1983) who identified attributes of role strain as making decisions alone, disciplining children, combining mother and father roles, handling family finances, and engaging in legal or educational advocacy. The definition of isolation is based on the work of researcher Brian Boyd (2002) who found that parents of children with autism experience high levels of stress when they respond to a lack of support from others by withdrawing. Therefore, isolation was identified when bloggers discussed withdrawing due to their perceptions of lack of support. Supportive relationships existed with partners, extended families, friends, and members of formal and informal social groups, similar to Boyd's prior findings. We extended Boyd's work to include three new categories of assisting social relationships. These are the relationship between the mother and her child with ASD, her relationship with her child with typical development, and the virtual relationships she formed with other cybermothers who blog and with her readership.

Verbatim quotes were used to demonstrate major findings. However, in some cases, comments that were sexually explicit, offensive, or used hate speech were replaced with brackets […] to comply with writing style guidelines.

Findings

The 24 blogs represented the writing of cybermothers who were between the ages of 32 and 45. Primarily, they were raising children diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorders. Three of the children had been diagnosed with Autism. Their children were primarily in prekindergarten or grade school and between the ages of 5 and 9 years old. During the study period, half of the mothers were employed, either working professionally outside or inside the home. On average, their children attended between four and five therapy programs in addition to supplemental school-based services. While specific variables on race, education, and social class were not coded, based on the review of the information presented on the blogs including photographs and personal histories, it is assumed that these bloggers mirrored the cyberparents discussed by Madge and O'Connor (2006) to the extent that they appeared to be primarily Caucasian, college educated, and middle class.

Much of the discourse regarding professionals focused on home–school relationships. Parents also formed secondary professional relationships with behavioral therapists or extracurricular instructors. Throughout the data, parents identified significant relationships with their children, partners, friends, extended families, and fellow bloggers. Relationships with educators were classified as both inhibiting and assisting. Inhibiting relationships with educators existed within the context of disputes over levels of educational support, concerns about the educators' understanding of ASD, and negative interactions between the educator and the parent or child. Within supportive relationships with educators, parents reported that educators worked to help the child feel comfortable and to help the mother by incorporating her understanding of her child's needs into the learning environment.

Inhibiting Social Relationships

Often, the themes of role strain and isolation emerged as these women expressed circumstances that they perceived as out of their control. Typically, these were within the context of home–school relationships.

Role Strain

Role strain emerged in the data when cybermothers who blog were combining parenting with additional roles, such as therapist or advocate. This role

strain resulted as mothers functioned as case managers to balance expanded advocacy roles managing legal, educational, health, and insurance concerns affecting their child's care. One cybermother wrote, "I'm feeling so overwhelmed because I have so much to do, and I just don't know how I am going to get it all done in time. It sure would be nice if I had some help!"

Role strain themes often emerged within the context of home–school relationships. Many mothers portrayed themselves as frustrated advocates who fought for services that were not available in the district. This gap appeared to feed role strain as mothers voiced feeling "compelled" to monitor the schools their children attended. One mother expressed frustration and advocacy when she wrote that she needed to monitor the school to assure that, "we are [*not*] veering off into different philosophical perspectives, I am ready to intervene at the appropriate time to make sure that we don't continue down these divergent paths." That mother feared that if the school changed its intervention, such an alteration might thwart her child's growth.

Another mother demonstrated the role strain theme according to specified roles. She wrote, "I'm ok. Really. Just very […] busy. I need a personal […] assistant. And a secretary. And a butler. And a maid. And a nanny. And a chauffer. And a maybe a clone or two." She questioned whether she "could get through the rest of her life fighting to keep up" with her child's changing symptoms and corresponding changing educational needs. She appeared to pressure herself to achieve results to improve her child's condition rather than conduct realistic self-appraisals or forge effective partnerships with educators.

Isolation

Mothers portrayed themselves as not only lonely, but as isolated from others who might understand their experience. One mother identified her isolation by simply stating, "I'm basically a hermit. I keep to myself." Another mother expressed this theme when she wrote, "I am without support and the closeness that I need so much." Though many of the working mothers interacted with others through their jobs, their complex responsibilities coupled with work appeared to take time away from engaging in meaningful friendships.

One blog entry reflected how these cybermothers connected with isolation the unique needs attributed to raising a child with ASD. She wrote,

> I have little to no support up here because the friends that I do have do not help me watch [CHILD] on a regular basis, only in emergency situations. Therefore, I am without support and the closeness that I need so much. I am sure that I will adjust with time and learn to be alone again like I have been for so many years. The friends that I do have don't have children so we don't get together to do play dates. I have searched for

groups of moms who have children [CHILD]'s age and are autistic but have had no luck because there are no groups that have been formed.

In this context, the mother made unsuccessful attempts to connect informally with other mothers and reflected on her longing for a formal peer support group organized for parents raising children with ASD.

Assisting Social Relationships

The theme of support emerged in the context of mothers' relationships with their children, both the children with ASD and their other children considered typically developing. Supporters also included partners, extended family, friends, other parents with similar experiences of raising children diagnosed with ASD, and educators. Interestingly, the social world they created through blogging emerged as an additional support theme in the analysis.

Child with Autism

These cybermothers who blog often fondly reflected on interactions with their children. One mother's reflection mirrored the theme. In this passage, she reflected that she missed her son after spending a day shopping without him. "That's when I made the realization….A turbulent, challenge-filled day *with* [CHILD] is infinitely better than a placid, uneventful day *without* him."

Children with Typical Development

The data reflected similar themes of support received from children with typical development who mothers wrote about as a source of comfort and support. One mother's reflection on the nature of her relationship with her children at a play lot in a local park reflected this theme. She wrote,

So we were out enjoying the sunshine and perfect-temperature fall day, and I was swinging [OTHER CHILD] in the toddler swings… It was so simple, and taught me so much, of simply being.

Partners

Cybermothers who blog described how their partners responded to problems or provided nurturance and intimacy. One mother whose child struggled as he adjusted to a transitional kindergarten program reflected on how she managed to balance her role strain while confronting educators as an advocate for her child. She said of her anger and frustration, "My support system gets most of it, while my husband, my rock, gets the most of anyone. The highest highs and pretty low lows."

Extended Family

Throughout the blogs, the theme of extended family as supporters emerged, especially in the context of emotional support or holiday celebrations. One

cybermother wrote, "what's most important at this point in time is that we are close to our family and have the support that is so desperately needed." Some parents received regular support through visits or phone calls. Another mother expressed the comfort she attributed to her parents respect for her choices when she wrote,

> And can I just give a shout-out here to my parents, who have never given me […] about my parenting, who have always trusted that I will make the best decisions I know how, who have faith in me and in [SPOUSE]? It feels so comforting to be so supported.

Friends

Friends are features of enabling niches when they embrace persons where they are and do not treat them as outcasts or stigmatize them (Rapp & Goscha, 2006). This theme of friends as validators, sounding boards, and as observers with constructive support emerged in the analysis.

One mother's reflection highlighted the importance these mothers placed on friendship. She wrote,

> They were right there beside me when [CHILD] was diagnosed. They stood beside me as I fell into my hole so deep, and with their presence and their loving words, helped me as I pulled myself back out of it. They love [CHILD] dearly because they have known him his whole life, and I love their kids just as much…I am so glad, so grateful, that we ended up navigating through this motherhood journey together.

Parents of Children Diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Another support theme that emerged in the analysis was the theme of receiving support from other parents of children diagnosed with ASD. In this data set, these relationships served complex needs of affirmation, advocacy, and education. One mother wrote, "Each one of us hold golden nuggets that somehow benefit the next one." By identifying the network as "exclusive but growing sisterhood any of us would love not to be a part of" this mother underscored the shared experience that she labeled as "helplessness and frustration" that, while often unspoken, binds these cybermothers who blog.

Educators

Relationships with educators were classified as supportive when parents understood their choices to be aimed at accommodating their child's unique needs. This often meant helping the child feel special, creating unique learning opportunities, pointing out their child's successes, intervening in potentially unsettling peer interactions, and, in many cases, remediating tantrums. In many cases, the positive relationships with educators extended to the building

and service personnel. One of the cybermothers described her understanding of a bus driver as a person who is "so sweet…she reports he is always talking to her as she is driving along." This relationship created an environment where the child felt comfortable and allowed the bus driver to understand the child.

Blogging

The theme of blogging as a source of social support emerged during the analysis as many of the mothers discussed the role blogging played in their daily lives. In the following case, the author thanked her readers for their support:

I'm humbled and overwhelmed by the outpouring of support and the depth of understanding that followed my last post. Thank you all. I'm sorry that you understand so well; but I really am thankful that we've all found each other.

The blogs also offered the authors a space to vent without having to face the direct personal reactions of family, friends, or educators. At times, the mothers thanked people who responded to their blog for their comments and support. One mother called her narratives "blog-o-therapy" and conceptualized her blog as a therapeutic space where she organized her thoughts, expressed herself, and "just breathed."

Discussion

The themes from this analysis indicate that these cybermothers who blog demonstrated complex social worlds that included interpersonal relationships, emotional experiences, and virtual interactions. First, these complex women present images of both strength and vulnerability. They had support, and yet at times they felt isolation and despair. These themes create a picture of cybermothers who may create uniquely blended social worlds to satisfy their need to connect with others for acceptance and encouragement. In part, they reached out to parents in similar situations to resolve perceptions of despair and isolation. As a result, they could reposition their use of supporters to cope with stresses as new challenges emerged or as the structure of their social worlds shifted. At times, they relied on their "blog-o-therapy" to vent, share intimate details, and to make sense of their lives. They also drew affirmation and insight from fellow bloggers and their own readers who served to normalize their physical and emotional realities.

These themes also represented conflicting emotional aspects of the social lives of these cybermothers who blog. All mothers discussed their love for their child, family, and friends along with frustrations and experiences of isolation. For instance, themes of role strain often emerged in the context of mothers

who perceived they were challenging people who they perceived as resisting their efforts to help their children. Role strain occurred as they took responsibility for coordinating their child's educational and therapeutic interventions. They often expressed a shared belief that they were the only people who understood the totality of their child's needs. Consequently, they did not trust the coordination and scheduling of these activities to anyone else. This multifaceted expectation that coupled desires for improvement and lack of trust in others explains their role as parent case managers (i.e., mothers who believe their role is to supervise their child's remediation).

These findings build on the understanding of blogging cyberparents raising children with ASD and their social networks developed by prior scholars (Clarke & van Amerom, 2007; Fleischmann, 2004; Huws et al., 2001). The other researchers found that parents used Internet sites to seek information about ASD and treatment as well as to locate advocacy information. The analysis here indicated that cybermothers fostered ongoing supportive relationships with other cybermothers and with their own readership. These findings also build on Boyd's (2002) understanding of support persons that influence the lives of parents raising children with ASD by identifying additional supportive relationships. Specifically, these cybermothers considered their relationship with their children as sources of social support.

Recommendations for Educators

These insights about cybermothers can provide stimulus for educators to use a strengths perspective to understand parents raising children with ASD. Educators may benefit by understanding these parents as complex individuals who can provide insight and may need support. Professionals may view parents as capable of directing care and being the primary voice in determining service plans. Some parent–school partnerships could be enhanced if educators incorporate parents' needs, such as respite care, into school services or connect parents to community resources. Educators may also find that empowering parents through parent-centered planning from a strength model of ability may meet parents' expectations.

Communities can examine local capacity to meet the educational challenges for children with ASD. The mothers in this study expected high levels of local school capacity and freely praised teachers and school districts that met these expectations. Obviously, a parent with the individual capacity to understand specialized programs and due process rights has an advantage over parents who do not possess this capacity. Some would argue that this advantage is inherently unfair, as parents with limited resources generally have less time to devote to garnering this individual capacity. This study found that

cybermothers who blog help build the capacity of other parents by educating them about advocacy and resources. Schools can advance their capacity by incorporating flexibility into their special education resources to accommodate a range of interventions requested by parents.

Local communities can also build capacity to support parents raising children with ASD by creating virtual networks for parents within their school districts. These networks could be useful to facilitate successful advocacy and improve home–school relations. It is possible that parent resource centers can incorporate virtual networks. Likewise, parent centers located within school settings could incorporate peer support into their models. These peer support networks could help parents identify problems, find referral sources, and evaluate interventions.

Limitations

The main study limitation is grounded in the origins of the data. First, we rested the accuracy of our analysis on the assumption that the cybermothers who blog represented their authentic voice and that the data strings were a personally constructed windows into the authors' worlds. Also, these blogs represent the expression of a subgroup of parents with access and proficiency in technology sufficient to establish and maintain public blogs. We further acknowledge that these blogs did not exist in isolation. Rather, over the one and a half year period we examined blogs, we observed the formation of an informal ring of communication. In fact, there were several instances where specific comments included in the study were referenced across this informal virtual network.

Finally, as this study only examined the writings of mothers of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders, it is not possible for the researchers to generalize to other parents. Therefore, while these findings are specific to this set of mothers, it is not clear that these findings are unique to this group. Future studies could enhance the understanding of cyberworld expressions of parents raising children with a variety of disabilities and special learning needs.

Conclusion

Although parents raising children with ASD are different and may sometimes be misunderstood, this study found a group of these parents to be dynamic and complex with deep commitments to their children and with high levels of frustration related to advocating and isolation. The parents in this study shared passionate feelings toward their children and their supporters, partners, friends, family, educators, and fellow bloggers. They expressed great

appreciation for educators who sought to understand their children within the context of their families and within their unique experience of their ASD symptoms. In the cyberworld these mothers created, they saw themselves and each other as experts on ASD and as vital resources for persons seeking information on ways to foster success for their children.

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Laura Dreuth Zeman is a professor of social work and women studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. She is a clinical social worker specializing in mental illness, addiction, and family care. Her research seeks to enhance consumer self-determination across care settings. She established the Resource Center for Research on Parenting in 2005; the center seeks to advance the understanding of the experiences and needs of parents as they manage the delicate balance between raising children and interacting with service providers. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Laura Dreuth Zeman, Mail Code 4329, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901, or email dreuth@siu.edu

Judy Doktor is an associate professor and department chair of the Special Education Department at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, California. She has been actively engaged both professionally and personally as a parent advocate and trainer for over 30 years. Through her career as a teacher, school administrator, and a director she has pioneered programs for special learners that enhance their learning opportunities and focus on inclusion. Her research interests involve implementing new educational programs for special needs students, advocacy, inclusive practives, and how policy implementation affects whole school reform.

Jayme Swanke is a certified alcohol and drug counselor and completed her doctoral studies in rehabilitation at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. She has specialized her clinical practice in the community-based treatment of persons with mental illness and substance dependency disorders.

Fostering Family-Centered Practices Through a Family-Created Portfolio

Katy Gregg, Mary Rugg, and Mariana Souto-Manning

Abstract

When a child has disabilities, families and professionals must communicate their concerns and goals for the child. Often these concerns are expressed as weaknesses within a deficits-based framework. The use of a strengths-based, family-created portfolio is a communication strategy for reconceptualizing a child from the family's perspective in terms of individuality, strengths, and motivations. This article takes a narrative approach to present one family's experience with a portfolio system in order to personalize the discussion and interpret the possible utilization of this family-generated portfolio as an aid for families communicating the needs of their child to educators. A family-created portfolio is a practice that gives families more control over their involvement by providing them with an opportunity to express their child's individuality beyond who the child is perceived as at school.

Key Words: family-centered practices, strengths-based, portfolios, children, disabilities, needs, transition, Kindergarten, special education, qualitative inquiry, family, families, early childhood, IEP, communication, home, school

Introduction

"I am so happy that you could be here tonight!" I (lead author) greeted Ms. Reese at the door, not realizing that I would also be greeting her daughter, her son, her mother, her grandmother, her brother, and her two sisters.

"Wow! You brought your whole family; that is wonderful." I was surprised to see them all.

"Well, Ana told me to bring the family, and this is my family," explained Ms. Reese.

"We had to all see this portfolio," said one of Ms. Reese's sisters.

"Yeah, I helped finish it you know. Look here, I did this page." Ms. Reese's other sister opens Shandrika's portfolio and shows me a brightly colored page of all of Shandrika's favorite things…"Song: I LIKE ALL MUSIC AND I LOVE TO DANCE; Games: JUMPING, GETTING TICKLE." Further down the page next to the prompt "Favorite Pets or Animals" was a cut out photograph of a stuffed dog and a blue plastic monkey sitting on Shandrika's bed with the words "Mommy will only do batteries" written beside it. (Note: all names used throughout are pseudonyms.)

When young children are receiving special education services, professionals and family members are required by law to meet to discuss the needs of the child. Often expressed through the child's weaknesses and inabilities, these discussions may fail to acknowledge the child's strengths and assets. This affects how early childhood educators perceive the child (Volk & Long, 2005). This article will discuss literature around communication between families with young children with disabilities and schools and an example of a possible remedy to deficit-based language.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that primary caregivers are invited to the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings for their child, but beyond that, family participation is defined by informal interactions between school and family (Petr, 2003). IEPs are the formal documented source of communication between families and teachers. During IEP conferences, children's scholastic information should be shared with the family members in attendance, but those family members should also have the opportunity to share information about their child at home and in other community settings (Adelsward & Nilholm, 1998). Although all IEP team members should feel welcome to participate in the decision-making process, often other factors (i.e., the culture of the school, values of team members) dictate who shares what information, when they share, and their level of influence on the final IEP document (Dabkowski, 2004).

Trivette and Dunst (2005) define family-based practices for early interventionists and early childhood special educators as those practices that "provide or mediate the provision of resources and supports necessary for families to have the time, energy, knowledge, and skills to provide their children with learning opportunities and experiences that promote child competence and

development" (p. 107). Family-centered practices such as those discussed by Trivette and Dunst (2005) and Wilson and Dunst (2005) have become the paradigm most utilized in guidelines for early childhood programs and services, although full application of these practices has not necessarily caught up with the evidence-based research (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Campbell & Halbert, 2002). The paradigm shifts from child-centered to family-centered and from deficit-based to strengths-based viewpoints in special education (Petr, 2003) attempt to create a more positive and active experience for families who have a child with a disability.

Within an educational setting, such as an IEP transitional meeting, a family member may not feel comfortable speaking up due to cultural norms (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). For example, a family member may believe it is not his or her place to tell a teacher how to teach, or conversely, a family member knowledgeable in advocacy may come to the meeting with assumptions of inclusion when the school has not yet offered inclusive curriculums. These "social contracts—the expectations of rights and obligations" (Goodnow, 1995, p. 270) can dictate a family member's level of participation in a meeting. After constructing a meaning for their rights and obligations within the education system, family members use their past experiences and the current situation to make decisions about the most appropriate action to take to introduce themselves and their child.

Families' education experiences can be influenced by the inherent stereotypes that often follow a child's disability label. Educators have a propensity for using deficit-based terminology in IEP meetings (Epstein, Rudolph, & Epstein, 2000). This is often not a conscious degrading of children with disabilities, but it does often take a conscious effort to move beyond limitations and see abilities as the place to start discussions (Grace, Llewellyn, Wedgewood, French, & McConnell, 2008). Teachers may form judgments of families during these demanding times of change which could "represent people's best but very incomplete response to stress" (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006, p. 187). Previous experience with a child with a similar disability (Campbell, Milbourne, & Silverman, 2001) or family type, for example, a single mother (Green, Davis, Karshmer, Marsh, & Straight, 2005), can also influence how a teacher's beliefs and initial evaluations of a family are formed.

During transition meetings, IEP goals are established based on the child's current level of progress. If the child is coming from another program or school, paperwork in the form of assessments and/or observations typically will follow him or her in order to give the new IEP team a starting point for supporting the child. Trivette and Dunst (2005) describe the importance for professionals to supply the family with all relevant information. This practice could be

transposed in order for the families to become more empowered in their children's education as well as to introduce their children focused from the family's (rather than a practitioner's) perspective.

Transition portfolios have previously been used to transfer information from one set of teachers to the next (Demchak & Greenfield, 2000). Although some portfolio processes have involved and supported parent input, most of the data in these portfolios have typically been classroom-based accounts of the child's progress (Hanson & Gilkerson, 1999). Teachers compile student work samples into a portfolio to share with others, including parents and future teachers (Demchak & Greenfield, 2000). Often these portfolios have been utilized as informal assessment tools or a compilation of multiple assessment tools to document a child's academic progress (Jarrett, Browne, & Wallin, 2006).

Morrison (1999) drew on a collection of work samples and pictures in a preschool classroom as a tool to introduce other students to a child with a disability. Mick (1996) used portfolios with preservice teachers to help them identify and connect with students with disabilities and to begin to understand the impact of disabilities on a family. Campbell, Milbourne, and Silverman (2001) attempted to alter the perspectives of childcare providers by having them create portfolios for children with disabilities already enrolled in their classes. No matter the media or facilitator, portfolios can be employed to assemble and share information in a more creative process than what is typically found in school assessment data.

Dodd and Lily (1997) described college students in an education class that developed a "family portfolio" as a "collection of information and artifacts unique to the family" (p. 58). The goal set for this educational tool was to document the interests of a child and the needs described by a family. Further, the students were encouraged to create meaningful home learning activities based on the information they discovered about the child and family.

Jarrett, Browne, and Wallin (2006) discussed the benefits of documenting a child's progress based on his or her Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) goals. Jarrett and colleagues suggested that the portfolio assessment process be introduced to parents at the IFSP or early intervention meeting as a way to document the child's progress and to invite parental participation in documentation of the IFSP goals at home. Similar to this suggestion, family-created portfolios could be used in collaboration with other assessment portfolios in educational settings while also encouraging the family to have a substantial role in the IEP meeting. By completing the portfolio prior to the meeting, the parents or other family members are encouraged to share their viewpoints at the meeting and to provide family-centered information with the other team members.

The *Take a Look at Me* Portfolio System: A Communication Tool

The *Take a Look at Me* portfolio, developed by Mary Rugg and colleagues (Rugg, Alvarado, Stoneman, & Butler, 2006), is one particular type of family-created portfolio. A portfolio system such as *Take a Look at Me* sets itself apart from other educational portfolio systems in that it is family-created rather than completed by education professionals or students (see Thompson, Meadan, Fansler, Alber, & Balogh, 2007, for another example of a family-generated portfolio system). The *Take a Look at Me* portfolio is a 20-plus page book prepared with topics and prompts to share important information about a child and family (Institute on Human Development and Disability, 2007). Prompts include, for example, "My Family or Favorite People," "These are some of my favorite activities," "Here are some ways that help me during my daily routines (to see, hear, eat, play with friends)," and "Hopes and dreams for our child." Most prompts are written from the child's point of view. Families can decorate, add pictures or stickers, and write in words as they see fit in order to best communicate to others who their child is. Family-created portfolios such as *Take a Look at Me* contain information that can be useful in setting goals and making accommodations to environments and classroom activities and therefore could be influential within the context of a meeting preceding a child's transition to kindergarten.

The purpose of this study was to document one family's experience with creating and using a family-created portfolio and then to communicate that experience through a narrative data representation. To examine this issue, the following questions were asked: how did a mother and her family experience the process of creating a portfolio, and what was the mother's perspective of using the portfolio during her daughter's kindergarten transition meeting? Looking at one family's involvement through interviews, observations, and analysis of their child's portfolio, expected results included the beneficial effects a family-created portfolio had on both family empowerment and initiative in a child's education. However, unexpected discoveries included implications that the portfolio process affected the informal network of the family members.

Subjectivity Statement

This particular project was established due to a request from a school system already using the *Take a Look at Me* portfolio system (Institute on Human Development and Disability, 2007) with high school students with disabilities in the county. Previous to this project, my (first author's) experience with the portfolio system was working with youth (aged 4–21) living in institutional settings to create a portfolio for self-determination and/or as a community

transition tool. As an applied researcher, I have supported children with disabilities and their families in various formal and informal settings. Through my experiences with young children and families, I have learned about the importance of using an inquiry-based approach to building relationships. This means asking questions before providing answers when meeting a family. I strongly believe in the importance of strengths-based and family-generated knowledge as a source for teachers to build on when creating learning goals for children with disabilities and see this particular portfolio as a tool to assist in gathering that knowledge.

Methodology

Borrowing from ethnographic, case study, and narrative approaches, this study examined the story of one family's experiences with using their *Take a Look at Me* portfolio to represent their child. Blending multiple qualitative techniques provided the guide to analyze the data as well as to reduce the data into a narrative.

Data Collection

The study employed three ethnographic data collection methods to look at a case family's experience with the portfolio process. Case studies are a useful methodological approach to looking at one particular unit of analysis (Dyson & Genishi, 2005); in this instance, the social "unit" was a family with a child with a disability transitioning into kindergarten. While the primary perspective into this family's experience was through the mother of the child, using more than one ethnographic method of data collection provided me with insight into other family member's viewpoints as well as others involved in the portfolio process. As pointed out by Dyson and Genishi, "[t]he aim of such studies is not to establish relationships between variables (as experimental studies) but, rather, to see what some phenomenon means as it is socially enacted within a particular case" (2005, p. 10).

Through participatory observation, the family's social enactment of the portfolio process was documented in various situations. Field notes were collected across portfolio family meetings held at the family's school, and one particular meeting held at the family's school to celebrate the completion of family portfolios was videotaped. At this celebration, there were opportunities to engage family members in conversations one-on-one and in small groups over dinner. Further, the two facilitators were provided with the prompts for the group discussion and presentation segment of the meeting to complete a semi-structured focus group with family members and education professionals

present, including the focus family. In order to build on the observations (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), two semi-structured interviews were completed with Ms. Reese, the mother, which took place in the beginning of the school year following her daughter's IEP meeting. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Finally, Ms. Reese provided a copy of the portfolio that she and other family members created.

Data Analysis

Data were reduced through an analysis of each set of data (field notes, interview transcripts, and portfolio) for content related to participants' perceptions of the portfolio, the process of creating the portfolio, and its uses within the focus child's educational settings. Narrative summaries were generated as a primary means of data representation based on the mother's story communicated through interviews and on observations at the family portfolio celebration (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). A priori or predetermined categories based on the series of questions provided to the facilitators to prompt discussion at the portfolio celebration guided the deductive analysis (Ezzy, 2002). As the field notes were read and reread and the video-recorded portfolio celebration meeting was viewed multiple times, codes and categories were modified. These codes were then used to develop the questions asked in the one-on-one interviews. Engaging in descriptive coding, visual markers (Hubbard & Power, 1999) led to the categorical analysis which required modification and revision of the deductive codes created previously (Lewins & Silver, 2007). Thus, the story presented here is the situated representation of a phenomenon rather than the phenomenon itself (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

Shandrika and Her Family

This study focused on one African American family's experience with the *Take a Look at Me* portfolio created for a young girl named Shandrika. Shandrika was a five-year-old girl who was transitioning into kindergarten the following academic year from an inclusive preschool classroom. One of Shandrika's aunts described her as a "sweet, loveable girl. She's not demanding and never fussy. She loves to jump, and whenever she's hungry, she says 'eat!'" This was a primary example of the positive nature and label-absent manner in which this family already described Shandrika.

When interviewing Shandrika's mother, Ms. Reese, in her home, she stated that she, Shandrika, and Shandrika's little brother lived in their subsidized housing apartment. While Shandrika was attending a nonprofit reverse mainstreamed early childhood program at the beginning of the portfolio process, she would be transitioned to public kindergarten in the fall (the next academic

year), while her little brother was to attend the county's Head Start program for prekindergarten. Only when prompted did Ms. Reese note that Shandrika's "diagnosis is autism, severe developmental delay…" During the interview, Shandrika was observed leaning on her little brother when she walked and vocally emphasized her preference to crawl.

Ms. Reese conveyed how important it was in her family to support one another including her daughter, "My family is so close in general no matter what we are all, we all stick together with everything, so it doesn't surprise me that they're like that about Shandrika." When Ms. Reese told her family about the portfolio and the final portfolio celebration, "Everyone said, 'Well I want to come, I want to come, I want to come.'" And even though they had to attend a funeral for another grandmother that same day, Ms. Reese smiled and noted, "Everyone still want[ed] to get up and come, supporting Shandrika; it really meant a lot to me."

As previously mentioned, the data represented through narrative accounts of the mother's experience with the portfolio is based on interviews and observations. The primary goal in using this representation is to "configure [the data] into a story using a plot line" (Creswell, 2007, p. 54). This approach was chosen to not only communicate the process of creating and using a strengths-based portfolio but to exemplify the family involvement practices of the Reese family.

Findings

The narrative was developed following the time line of events described by Ms. Reese and observed in interactions with the family at school. The following themes were discovered within the data: creation of the portfolio, use and evaluation of the portfolio, transfer of knowledge, and informal support systems. Unlike a more traditional approach to presenting qualitative data, the themes were interwoven into the story through examples and quotes from the family rather than presented theme by theme in separate sections.

Ms. Reese Creates Shandrika's Portfolio

The families of children with disabilities who were transitioning to kindergarten within Shandrika's school were invited to participate in a series of family engagement meetings or workshops. A letter sent home from the school's program coordinator and city preschool special education coordinator informed families that they would have the opportunity to learn about and start creating an individualized portfolio for their child.

Ms. Reese was immediately involved in the process from the first meeting. Two introductory meetings were held, one in the morning and one in the evening, to best accommodate various families' schedules. Ms. Reese, her mother, and one of her sisters attended the morning meeting. Because the morning meeting was less heavily attended, two of the school district's parent mentors, two special education coordinators and/or I were able to speak with families through one-on-one interactions. Due to the large Hispanic population in the school district, a parent mentor who spoke Spanish was present at each meeting to help with translating information. During the meetings, the families were given a blank *Take a Look at Me* portfolio. Families could choose a Spanish version of the portfolio (*Míreme*) if they preferred. Each family was given a disposable camera in order to take pictures and then return the cameras to the school to be developed so the photos could be put in their child's portfolio. The families were told that first looking through the book may be helpful in order to match some of the pictures with specific prompts from the portfolio. For example, the second page of the portfolio asked for "My Family or Favorite People," therefore participants would want to take pictures of family and friends to display there.

Over the course of three months, which included the December holiday break, there were four or five planned opportunities at the school where parents could work on their child's portfolio without having to worry about providing their own supplies. The school district's parent mentors and I explained to Ms. Reese (and other families) at the first meeting that the portfolio was a book that she could create for her child with the supplies provided for her at the school, such as craft scissors, stickers, colored paper, and markers. Ms. Reese expressed the importance of "having everything there for me" including childcare, when necessary, when she was working on her portfolio. Additionally, multiple examples of portfolios completed by other families were available so participants could get an idea of what a completed portfolio looked like. These were not in any way to provide a script for families to follow but just to get a picture of the myriad ways to begin their own child's portfolio. Ms. Reese and other families were welcome to stop by during these scheduled meetings to work and to receive help as needed. These meetings also provided an opportunity for families who were not able to attend one of the first introductory meetings to learn about the portfolio and still take part in the process. One of the city's preschool special education coordinators was dedicated to assisting families who were a part of her caseload in completing their portfolios. For example, she typed up some of the entries that Ms. Reese had written for Shandrika's portfolio to paste into the book. Many of the staff members within the school and district expressed their commitment to a family-centered process by their

regular attendance at the family events and their involvement in setting up the specifics of the meetings.

Ms. Reese and her family worked on the portfolio at home as well. So although the school provided opportunities for the families to work during scheduled events, most families found that they still needed to work at home. This was particularly true for the Reese family who all wanted to contribute to the portfolio's content. It was important to Ms. Reese that her family contributed to the portfolio because "they might have thought of something that I didn't think of at the time, so I wanted everyone to be sure to have their opinion on what was going on….They may have seen something before I [had] seen something because she's just…with my family so much." Shandrika's entire family was involved in developing the portfolio. By viewing Shandrika's completed portfolio it was apparent that although she lived in a single-parent household, Shandrika was loved, taken care of, and had the support of a large family—something an educator may not have realized in an engagement activity that did not so readily accommodate multiple family members' participation and perspectives. Shandrika spent time with and in the care of many different family members regularly; therefore it seemed like a natural next step to involve these family members in her education to provide consistency across both education and home/community contexts.

The Reese Family Celebrates the Portfolio

The program coordinator at Shandrika's school and other city special education staff (i.e., special education coordinators and parent mentors) played a vital role in ensuring the potential success of the family meetings. Various staff took the initiative of providing families with opportunities to engage in the meetings by welcoming all family members, providing food for the meetings, and reminding families about the meetings through personal phone calls.

The final portfolio celebration was planned for an evening after typical working hours to accommodate families' schedules. It was this celebration that prompted seven of Shandrika's family members to come together around her. This family arrived at the school for the portfolio celebration having all read through and/or helped to create the completed portfolio for Shandrika Reese. Attending the final celebration with Shandrika and her mother were her grandmother, great grandmother, two aunts, her little brother, and her uncle. Shandrika's important role in each of their lives was evident not only through the number of family members in attendance, but also through the way they interacted with her. Her great grandmother paused and watched Shandrika's uncle tickle her belly, "This is my baby. This is my heart." Through her family's eyes that night, Shandrika was the center of attention.

One of the primary goals of the celebration was to provide families with an opportunity to share their portfolio in preparation for their child's upcoming IEP transition meeting. Families were also prompted to discuss their likes and dislikes of the portfolio in order to provide feedback for future family engagement projects. Families sat at tables arranged in a U-shape in the school's multipurpose room. Some county and city school staff wandered in and sat at the back of the room to observe the parents' reactions to the portfolio project; about 30 people total attended the celebration. Dinner, donated by a local pizza place, granted time for families to share with one another more informally and generate ideas for their own portfolios by viewing one another's.

As dinner wrapped up and some children left to play in another room, the facilitators of the meeting (a parent mentor and a county special education coordinator) began to ask families questions regarding the portfolio. Shandrika stayed with her family because this was her night. Facilitators asked questions, pausing for the Spanish-speaking parent mentor to translate. Ms. Reese was prepared to share the portfolio she worked so hard on, but others in Shandrika's family also wanted their voices and descriptions of Shandrika to be heard. While Shandrika's aunt wanted her contribution to the portfolio known, "I helped!" she exclaimed, Shandrika's great grandmother wanted to find out information on potty training Shandrika while there were multiple educational staff all in one place listening to her concerns for her great granddaughter.

As the facilitators guided the discussion back to specific thoughts on the portfolio, Ms. Reese responded to the inquiry about what she liked about the portfolio. "I like the questions," she stated, referring to the various prompts within the portfolio. One of Shandrika's aunts agreed; "What a great way to introduce someone. That's what I think." Other parents agreed with the Reese family's perspectives. A father noted that he and his wife worked on it together, while a mother confirmed, "My whole family enjoyed it." All emphasized what the Reese family already demonstrated—the portfolio was a tool with the possibility for bringing families together.

The Spanish-speaking parent mentor noted that she enjoyed looking at some of her families' portfolios because "[i]t really makes you think about those things they're asking the questions about. And those are not things I think we address in the lives of our children just on an everyday basis." Shandrika's aunt added that the portfolio offers an opportunity to "go back to it as a reference and look and see how much the child has grown since you did the portfolio." Her point emphasized the importance of not only showing a child's progress through work samples and developmental assessment tools, but through the growth and change seen at home. One of the other fathers of a child that attended Shandrika's school took this idea even further by thinking

about job opportunities and the future of his young child: "…it might seem like a small help right now that the child is small, but in the future, it's a great idea you're going to be needing for greater things, for interviews and that sort of a thing" (as translated by the parent mentor).

Some of the information communicated in the portfolio was seen as a necessity in any setting where someone was caring for young children. For example, Ms. Reese shared that she thought the portfolio contained "important ways of communicating health issues" to the teacher. She summarized some thoughts from her portfolio pages that indicated Shandrika's needs:

> In the classroom, knowing things about the child like [Shandrika] for instance, a vibrating, if there was a vibrating toy, she can't play [with] a vibrating toy, she might have a seizure, and you know, things like that. And she can't have cheese and milk and things like that.

One of Shandrika's aunts referred to the helpfulness the portfolio could provide to teachers as well, stating "That…from the teacher knowing…it will help her to know the child better and then, like [the parent mentor] said, like when you have that first [IEP meeting] you can't think of everything, and say, I wonder what she thinks about this, and go back, there it is. It's in there [referring to the portfolio]. It has a lot in it."

Families' hopes and dreams were another key piece that the portfolio communicated to others. The final page read "Hopes and dreams for our child" followed by "Now" and "In the future." The parent mentor sitting with two Spanish-speaking families saw similarities between families' hopes and dreams. She said, "I looked at both portfolios, these are two very different families, and they have answered almost the same thing about what would you like the future to be for [their children], and they say to be healthy and to be able to help others." Shandrika's mother decided she also wanted to share her family's current goals for their little girl. Ms. Reese stood and flipped to the last page and read "Our dreams for Shandrika now are we would all love it if Shandrika was walking a little better without assistance and doing a little talking. And in the future, going to the restroom and self-feeding are two of the things I am going to continue to work on." The hopes and dreams portfolio page was an opportunity for parents to convey both their long-term goals for their child or focus on those things that affect their child's daily lives. These families exemplified different ways to think about hopes for children.

Ms. Reese Takes Shandrika's Portfolio to the IEP Meeting

When asked about whether her family members accompanied her to the IEP meeting, Ms. Reese acknowledged that it wasn't necessary: "They were really asking questions about her at school and things like that at the IEP…I had

this [*tapped the portfolio*] so I had all of what my family was going to say really about Shandrika." Ms. Reese noted that "at that particular meeting, didn't know what to expect, I'd never been to one. There were so many people there I couldn't believe it!" In attendance at Shandrika's transition to kindergarten IEP meeting along with Ms. Reese were "the principal, her kindergarten teacher, her preschool teacher…a nurse was there, a counselor; there were a lot of people there, her OT, a speech therapist." With this many people at a meeting to talk about a parent's child, it would be easy to become overwhelmed and uncomfortable, but Ms. Reese recognized the importance of having her voice heard through the portfolio she brought with her. She was excited that "everybody read it and talked about it" during the meeting.

At Shandrika's IEP meeting, Ms. Reese felt comfortable in the fact that all the attendants including "principals, teachers, nurses, found out about [Shandrika] biting her arm, and they know why she's doing it, know when she gets frustrated." According to Ms. Reese, "She communicates differently than a lot of kids," therefore it was imperative that the new educators in Shandrika's life knew what her body language meant, that by biting her arm, she was telling them something. So even though arm-biting for children with disabilities may be seen as a stereotypical behavior or one that has a negative connotation, it was an interpretation of emotion for Shandrika, an important means of communicating frustration which teachers needed to recognize. In this light, behaviors Shandrika engaged in were not necessarily interpreted by social judgments, but were framed descriptively as a way to learn about Shandrika's unique qualities.

This idea of communicating important information about Shandrika was evident in the interviews with Shandrika's mom. She commented, "The portfolio could tell others about Shandrika; what works [best] for her." Ms. Reese was not sure how well the meeting would have gone if she hadn't completed the portfolio. She continued to say, "It made it easier to talk about her. I knew what to say and had it written out on paper. I could look at it while talking about Shandrika…it made sure that I didn't leave anything out." Ms. Reese noted that she was planning on updating the portfolio for Shandrika's IEP meeting before the transition to first grade.

Ms. Reese recognized the importance that her teachers played in Shandrika's life as well. She noted, "It was hardest for me to write about how she learns best." However, during the IEP meeting, the teachers from her daughter's preschool classroom were able to help Ms. Reese think about these while also communicating this information to those in attendance at the IEP meeting, such as Shandrika's new teachers. Whether or not this particular topic would have been discussed without Shandrika's portfolio cannot be predicted, but Ms. Reese's experience with the IEP team was contradictory to what typically transpires in this type of formal education meeting (Rock, 2000; Taylor, 2000).

Ms. Reese Finds Other Ways to Share

It is important to reiterate that Shandrika not only had the support of her mom at the portfolio celebration but the support of seven other family members. During the interview with Ms. Reese, she noted that her family, specifically Shandrika's aunt and grandmother, actively participated in the creation of the portfolio. Therefore, it wasn't limited to Shandrika's mother's perspective but also encompassed the perspectives of other family members. In fact, when Ms. Reese allowed me to borrow Shandrika's portfolio, she commented that her mother (Shandrika's grandmother) was constantly asking when it would be returned. Ms. Reese was surprised to learn that some family members who cared for Shandrika did not know about her milk allergy, a vital bit of information that the portfolio helped communicate within their own informal circle.

Ms. Reese talked about how she was going to share the portfolio her family created for Shandrika with the physical therapist who comes to her home to support Shandrika. Although she noted that the therapist had been working with Shandrika for quite some time, she was interested in what the therapist may find novel in the portfolio.

A final unexpected result of Ms. Reese's portfolio experience was the connections it encouraged within Shandrika's preschool. Ms. Reese noted that she enjoyed completing the prompt, "At preschool, childcare, or school, I spend time with…" because "I liked taking the pictures of everyone, I went all over to get everyone's pictures." Ms. Reese went into her child's school with the disposable camera she was given because although the portfolio was focused on Shandrika's life in the community, school is an important piece of her life. Ms. Reese took pictures of Shandrika's teachers, bus driver, and friends at school in order to add them to the portfolio. Her presence in the school allowed for time to observe Shandrika in her classroom context and spend more time becoming involved in her daughter's education.

Conclusion

The Reese family's experience with the portfolio demonstrates their ability to communicate knowledge about their child, the importance of support of their family, and the usefulness of a family-created tool in Shandrika's IEP meeting and in other, less formal, experiences. Ms. Reese's interpretation of her experience with her portfolio at the IEP meeting demonstrates how just having a document to offer to the IEP team provided her with the confidence she needed to be a key participant at the table. When an educator empowers a family member to take on a guiding role in their child's educational process, the teacher is supporting the family's participation in creating goals for their child

and can further encourage the application of those goals outside the school setting (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994; Petr, 2003). Ms. Reese was the first attendee to share at Shandrika's IEP meeting, and most likely this was due to the fact that she, unlike many families at IEP meetings, had her own prepared, tangible information to share with the group.

The questions in the *Take a Look at Me* portfolio were created to engage family members and educators in a dialogue about the child that produces thoughts not always discussed in a school setting. Ms. Reese's story provided an unexpected implication for engaging multiple family members in conversations around their child's education. Reaching out to multiple family members can be accomplished by addressing invitations to family engagement events to "Family members of…" rather than "Parent(s) of…". In this particular case example, the special education coordinator was able to personally convey the information that all family members were welcome through individual phone calls. As Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, and Walberg (2005) remind us, "[t]he realization of children's potential depends, to a great degree, on the contexts within which they develop and learn, as well as on interconnections between those contexts" (p. 1). The portfolio can help bridge the contexts of home, school, and community.

The transition from early childhood settings to elementary school often carries with it a transition from more family-focused (IFSP) to child-focused perspectives (IEP). Thus, scholastic information tends to take precedence over all other goals. Perhaps Ms. Reese's insights into her experiences with the portfolio are useful in reminding educators and other service providers that families are key, if not *the* key, people in a child's life, at every age.

Future Directions

Readers should keep in mind that the portfolio does not create itself. Parents with young children are busy, and those with children with disabilities often have even less time for projects. Family members need to understand the purpose of the project and feel it is a worthwhile piece for their child's education. The Reese family, particularly Ms. Reese, believed that there was a need to prepare a portfolio to inform others about Shandrika. Educators and other practitioners have to believe in the benefits of a strengths-based approach in order to support families in a portfolio's completion and utilization. A more simplistic suggestion would be for educators to encourage families to prepare a shortened version of the portfolio or a brief statement recognizing their child's strengths and interests. Whether creating the full portfolio or something shorter, offering specific examples to families to encourage their contribution to an

IEP meeting can only increase their feelings of empowerment and create more equitable family–school relationships.

Currently, the *Take a Look at Me* portfolio is being utilized and evaluated on a larger scale within a Head Start program with an approximate enrollment of 280 families. Over fifty percent of these families speak Spanish as their primary language. So although the current study has demonstrated the potential of a family-created portfolio tool within early childhood educational settings, an evaluation with more families in various settings is necessary to continue towards the goal of providing evidence-based, family-centered practices.

The goal of this article was to illustrate one context in which a family was able to partake in an activity that honored their child as a whole child, more than her disability. Through the process of creating a family-implemented portfolio *and* the discussions around the information within the portfolio, this child was seen for her capabilities as well as her needs, in the context of her supportive family. As the voices and the perspectives of parents and families begin to be heard during transition meetings and other educational processes, it will be the responsibility of educational professionals to take this information and utilize it to benefit the child in the classroom.

> *Ms. Reese and I were wrapping up our second interview; I knew that my relationship with her family was most likely going to end after today.*
>
> *I smiled as I mentioned, "I was so amazed with your…your family support and all. I mean it's just not something I've seen a lot of."*
>
> *"Yeah, yeah, I know, my…you know, Shandrika's physical therapist said to me after seeing [the portfolio], 'I really wish that I was in your family.' Cause she's been with Shandrika for almost five years, and so she knows how close we are, and she knows my grandparents and my parents. And she knows the family, and just, it's this supportive…I don't know, it's just in our blood."*

This conversation exemplified the Reese family and the support they offered each other. This piece of Shandrika's story is one that both researchers and educators can learn from. By listening to a family's story unfold through the creation of a portfolio, opportunities for sharing and comfortable contexts for authentic dialogue can emerge. Hopefully through the use of a family-created portfolio system and increased focus on family-centered practices in early childhood education, more of these powerful family voices can be heard.

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Katy Gregg is an assistant professor in Child & Family Development at Georgia Southern University. Her research interests are focused in family engagement and in personal and public definitions of quality and inclusion in early childhood settings. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Katy Gregg at Georgia Southern University, P.O. Box 8021, Statesboro, GA, 30460, or email kgregg@georgiasouthern.edu

Mary E. Rugg is the Early Intervention Program Director at the Institute on Human Development and Disability at the University of Georgia (UGA). For more than 30 years, she has trained educators, specialists, care providers, and families regarding the inclusion of infants, toddlers, and preschool children within natural environments, and she has participated in several state initiatives in early intervention and the inclusion of children with disabilities.

Mariana Souto-Manning is associate professor of Early Childhood Education in Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. She studies how children, families, and teachers from diverse backgrounds shape and are shaped by discursive practices, employing a methodology that combines discourse analysis with ethnographic investigation.

Parent Involvement in Urban Charter Schools: New Strategies for Increasing Participation

Joanna Smith, Priscilla Wohlstetter, Chuan Ally Kuzin, and Kris De Pedro

Abstract

Decades of research point to the benefits of parent involvement in education. However, research has also shown that White, middle-class parents are disproportionately involved. Charter schools, as schools of choice, have been assumed to have fewer involvement barriers for minority and low-income parents, but a 2007 survey of charter leaders found that parent involvement remains a significant challenge. This qualitative study utilizes Epstein's model of family involvement to examine parent involvement programs at twelve charter schools across six U.S. states. Findings suggest that parent involvement *activities* in the study sample of urban charter schools fit Epstein's typology fairly well. However, the *strategies* used to implement these activities and to attract hard-to-reach parents are fairly innovative: Study schools offered wrap-around services, incentives, and contracts to enhance and ensure participation; utilized technology for advertising parent volunteer opportunities; and involved parents in the decision-making and governance of the school. Overall, these strategies were linked with increasing parents' self-efficacy and comfort level in participating in their children's education.

Key Words: parents, involvement, urban, charter schools, charters, education, parental, choice, family, families, activities, strategies, innovation, contracts, technology, decision-making, governance, self-efficacy, contracts

Prior Research on Parent Involvement in Education

Before turning to our qualitative study of parent involvement in urban charter schools, the following sections outline the prior research on the benefits of parent involvement, the barriers to involvement that exist, and the potential of the charter school context to reduce these barriers.

Benefits of Parent Involvement

Decades of research point to the numerous benefits of parent involvement in education for not only students but also for the parents involved, the school, and the wider community (Barnard, 2004; Epstein, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Despite the challenges in establishing a causal link between parent involvement and student achievement, studies utilizing large databases have shown positive and significant effects of parent involvement on both academic and behavioral outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2007). For example, research has found that parent involvement is related to a host of student achievement indicators, including better grades, attendance, attitudes, expectations, homework completion, and state test results (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Cancio, West, & Young, 2004; Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Sheldon, 2003). Additional academic outcomes such as lower dropout rates (Rumberger, 1995), fewer retentions, and fewer special education placements (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999) have been found as well.

In addition to academic outcomes, parent involvement also appears to have positive effects on students' behavior. Brody, Flor, and Gibson (1999) found that parenting practices contributed to an increase in students' ability to self-regulate behavior. Higher levels of social skills and improved overall behavior were also documented. In a study of American Indian students, researchers found that a parent intervention approach reduced students' disruptive behavior in the classroom; students were less aggressive and withdrawn after parent participation in the program (Kratochwill, McDonald, Levin, Bear-Tibbetts, & Demaray, 2004). Other studies have documented the ways in which parent involvement supports children's social competencies in school (Hill et al., 2004; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004). Some researchers have found that only specific types of parent involvement appear to correlate with student achievement. These studies conclude that involvement at home, especially parents discussing school activities and helping children plan their programs, appeared to have the strongest impact on academic achievement (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Van Voorhis,

2003). Other researchers found involvement at the school site made the key difference (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Lee & Bowen, 2006).

A dominant theme in the parent involvement literature is the lack of common understanding between school staff and parents about what constitutes parent involvement; parents consistently report higher levels of involvement compared to teachers' reports (Barnard, 2004). In one study, parents described involvement as keeping their children safe and getting them to school punctually, while teachers expected parents' presence at the school. While both teachers and parents felt that involvement was important, the lack of consensus around what constitutes parent involvement has caused teachers to blame families and parents to feel unappreciated (Lawson, 2003). On the other hand, DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane (2007) found in their survey that parents did know the activities expected of them, such as attending school events, but they might not know the benefits of such involvement.

Barriers to Parent Involvement

Research has shown that family demographics are a significant factor in the level and type of involvement in their child's education. White middle-class parents are traditionally the most visibly active in public schools (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Manz, Fantuzzo, & Power, 2004; Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Mathews (2009) suggests that "the importance of parental involvement, at least in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, has been exaggerated, probably because middle-class commentators have been imposing their suburban experiences on very different situations" (para. 4). Federal policy through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 has long mandated parent involvement in disadvantaged communities through parent advisory councils, but barriers continue to exist, particularly for urban, low-income, immigrant, minority, and working-class parents. Language barriers, work schedules, and a sense of disenfranchisement have generally resulted in lower levels of (at least visible) parent involvement by working-class parents, in particular, those from ethnic and racial minorities. While a growing body of research continues to advocate for parent involvement in urban schools as a key to increasing student performance, parent involvement remains elusive (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Desimone, 1999).

Some have called for research that takes into account the particular experiences of urban minority parents when evaluating their involvement in public schools. Auerbach (2007), for instance, asserts that parent involvement is socially constructed and politically contested through the lenses of race, class, culture, and gender. She presents a parent involvement continuum for minority parents that range from "moral supporters" to "ambivalent companions"

to "struggling advocates." Moral supporters encourage their children without making appearances at the school. On the other end of the continuum, struggling advocates work hard to fulfill their role according to traditional expectations but often face barriers when they try to be present at the school. In the middle are ambivalent companions, parents who want their children to do well but do not make efforts to advocate on their behalf. To this point, David Levin, co-founder of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), concludes that initially, low-income parents may often be consumed by the challenges of trying to make a living, but if their children become successful at school, gratified families will support the schools in any way they can; good schooling comes before parental support, not the other way around (Mathews, 2009).

This strand of research bringing a critical lens to the study of parent involvement points out that educators may be unaware or unappreciative of the invisible strategies that minority or low-income parents use to support their children's education, such as making sacrifices so children can attend better schools or limiting children's chores to allow for study time (Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva, & Lintz, 1996). López (2001) found that other forms of parent involvement exist among ethnic minority parents, such as parental transmission of sociocultural values: "translating the lessons of working hard in the field into lessons for working hard in school" to their high-achieving children, and he argues that these forms should be recognized as legitimate parent involvement (p. 433). Similarly, Delgado-Gaitan (1994) revealed that cultural narratives are a form of involvement among some ethnicities, yet are not recognized by Eurocentric models of involvement.

These authors argue for an expanded conception of parent involvement that gives value to the actions of minority parents. Overall, these studies expand the dimensions of parent involvement, but they lack a coherent framework for analyzing the quality and quantity of involvement among urban parents. Questions arise from these studies as to how schools can increase the participation of traditionally underrepresented parents in activities valued by the school while at the same time valuing the less overt efforts made by parents to foster positive educational outcomes for their children. To this end, this study provides exploratory research into the parent involvement practices and strategies in place in urban charter schools, a context in which urban families may have increased avenues for participation beyond the traditional classifications.

Charter Schools: Opportunities for Innovations in Parent Involvement?

The rise of the charter school movement has been seen as an opportunity for urban parents to play a more central role in their children's education. The

majority of charter schools have been established in urban areas and dispropor-
tionately serve minority and low-income students, that is, students qualifying
for free or reduced price lunch (Christensen & Lake, 2007). As such, urban
charter schools have been touted as a setting in which the traditional barriers to
parent involvement can be alleviated, since charter schools are typically small
"community schools" with missions tailored to their student populations. In
15 states, the opportunity for parent participation is one purpose written into
the charter school law; many charter schools are established by a founding
group that includes parents (Center on Educational Governance, 2008). For
example, Tennessee's law states, "The purpose of this chapter is to…afford par-
ents substantial meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of
their children" (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-13-102(a)(6)), and Utah's law says,
"The purposes of charter schools are to…provide opportunities for greater pa-
rental involvement in management decisions at the school level" (Utah Code
Ann. § 53A-1a-503). In addition, parent contracts have emerged as a common
approach for charter schools to encourage involvement once the school is op-
erational (Corwin & Becker, 1995).

    Not surprisingly, there is an underlying assumption that charter schools
involve more parents both quantitatively and qualitatively. The theory posits
that charter school parents, because they actively choose to send their child to a
charter school, will be more involved than parents whose children are automat-
ically assigned to a district-run school (Goldring & Shapira, 1993). Due to the
greater autonomy enjoyed by charter schools, researchers have found that these
schools tend to adopt stronger and more specific parent involvement policies
than traditional public schools (Bulkley & Wohlstetter, 2004; Finn, Manno, &
Vanourek, 2000). An early study of charter schools—one of the few that com-
pared charter school parent involvement to that of non-charter public schools
in the same neighborhood—reported greater parent involvement in charter
schools. Using nine measures, including volunteering and attendance at school
events, the authors found that, across the board, parents spent more time at the
charter schools filling a variety of roles (Becker, Nakagawa, & Corwin, 1997).
Other researchers also have found that parents were more involved in charter
schools, and, most importantly, they were involved in more significant ways,
for example, serving on charter school governing boards (Finn et al., 2000).
While charter school laws vary a great deal across the nation, many states em-
phasize the role of parents in the creation as well as the governance of a charter
school, as noted above. The involvement of parents in the governance of char-
ter schools is particularly significant for minority parents. One study found
that when minority parents were represented in the governance of a school,
the overall parent involvement increased and better cultural understandings
existed between school staff and parents (Marshall, 2006).

Cooper (1991), on the other hand, found that parents who elect to send their child to schools of choice may feel like that decision alone is sufficient to ensure their child's success, and they have no need to get further involved. Murphy and Shiffman (2002) noted that parent involvement is the "cornerstone of many charter school visions" (p. 97) but that despite lofty goals and good intentions, charter schools varied greatly in how they involve parents. A 2007 survey of charter leaders in three states found that parent involvement is one area in which charter school leaders, lacking confidence in how to increase participation, struggled to translate intent into practice: 29% of leaders reported "major challenges" with engaging parents, and an additional 43% indicated it was a "minor challenge" (Gross & Pochop, 2007). Becker et al. (1997) discovered that despite a greater level of involvement, charter schools did not necessarily take a more active role in trying to involve parents; parent contracts were the only notable outreach method. The researchers also voiced concerns that parent contracts excluded minority and working-class parents from enrolling their children in the school, afraid they would be unable to fulfill the requirements of such contracts. Fuller's (2002) case studies indicated that charter schools did not necessarily escape the issues that plague parent involvement in traditional public schools. Issues like social class differences, language and culture barriers, and the intimidation felt by some parents who did not experience success in school themselves created obstacles for meaningful involvement and communication in charter schools similar to those in non-charter schools. In general, the literature on charter school parent involvement points to a need to uncover strategies that help to encourage and support minority and working-class parents.

New Research on Parent Involvement in Urban Charter Schools

The purpose of the qualitative research presented here was to examine parent involvement strategies in urban charter schools with high levels of involvement. Joyce Epstein's model of involvement was used as a backbone for the study in order to assess whether different strategies are utilized in the charter context. We begin with a description of Epstein's typology of parent involvement in schools. We then discuss the findings from our study of parent involvement in urban charter schools.

Defining What Constitutes Parent Involvement

Parent involvement has been defined as including behaviors at home as well as at school. Some researchers have defined parent involvement by the location in which involvement activities take place, differentiating among home-based

involvement, school-based involvement, and home–school communication (Barnard, 2004; Manz et al., 2004). Lee and Bowen (2006) employed a typology that takes into account both the activities and the location of parent involvement. The measures in their research included: (1) parent involvement at school, (2) parent–child educational discussion, (3) homework help, (4) time management, and (5) parent educational expectations. In all, there is a lack of cohesion around the terminology and definition of parent involvement (Christenson & Hurley, 1997; McCarthey, 2000). For instance, the terms "parent involvement," "family involvement," "parent engagement," "parent empowerment," and "school–family partnerships" are often used interchangeably in the literature. We use the term parent involvement to encompass the gamut of activities parents (and other family members) engage in to help their children succeed at school.

Epstein's Framework of Parent Involvement

Epstein's framework of school, family, and community partnerships is commonly used to analyze parent involvement in school settings. Epstein (2001, 2011) offers a model of family–school–community partnerships based on the theory of overlapping spheres of home, school, and community influences that shape children's learning and development. Although Epstein's typology has been criticized for being school-based and Euro-centric, she recognizes that parents participate in their children's education along numerous dimensions—including at school and at home—and proposes a six-part typology of parent involvement (see Table 1 for the six types and examples of each).

Epstein's model (2001, 2011) has influenced the ways policymakers and school administrators design and implement parent involvement programs. In some states, schools are asked to complete the parent involvement portion of their Title I reports using Epstein's framework. In our study, Epstein's model (2001, 2011) served as the framework through which we examine parent involvement in urban charter schools, as well as a comparison to gauge whether charter schools have developed new strategies for involving parents.

Table 1. Epstein's Model of School, Family, and Community Partnerships

Type	Description of Type	Examples
Type 1	Basic obligations of families	Providing children with basic needs such as health and safety
Type 2	Basic obligations of schools	Communication between school and family such as memos, phone calls, report cards, and parent–teacher conferences
Type 3	Involvement at school	Volunteering at the school to assist teachers in the classroom or attending school events
Type 4	Involvement in learning activities at home	Helping children with homework
Type 5	Involvement in decision-making, governance, and advocacy	Serving in a parent–teacher association (PTA), on committees, or in other leadership positions
Type 6	Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations	Making connections with organizations that share responsibility for children's education, such as afterschool programs, health services, and other resources

Research Methods

The research reported here used a qualitative approach to assess parent involvement strategies utilized by urban charter schools. We acknowledge that not all schools view parent involvement as a goal and that parent involvement activities can fall along a continuum. At one end of the continuum, schools keep parents informed of what the school is doing. In the middle, parents are involved in activities at the home and school to support student learning. At the other end, parents are engaged in the educational program and in setting and implementing school policy. We sampled at this end of the continuum, seeking schools with strong family engagement. Since the purpose of our study is to examine outliers at this end of the continuum, this drove our research methods of exploring the phenomenon in a qualitative way. We sought to uncover the strategies used by charter schools with strong family engagement.

To select our sample, we first reviewed the charter school legislation in the District of Columbia and each state with charter school laws ($n = 41$) to better understand the legislative context for parent involvement. In our review of the charter school legislation, we uncovered a range of provisions that encourage, require, or hinder parent involvement. For example, 14 states explicitly require a parent involvement plan as part of the charter school application. We selected

states for the study sample to cover a range of provisions related to parent involvement, including:

- Parent support required for conversion from a district-run school to a charter school;
- Parent support required during the application to form a charter school;
- Parent involvement plans required in the application;
- Parent involvement one purpose of the charter school law;
- Regular communication required from the charter school to parents;
- Enrollment preference given to children whose parents were active in the application process;
- Assessment of parent satisfaction required;
- Parents given the power to vote to close the charter school; and,
- School site decision-making team or governing board must include at least one parent.

Study Participants

In order to arrive at a national sample, we identified participants for our study through a multi-step process:

1. Once we had selected states for geographic diversity as well as differences in state laws around parent involvement, we selected cities within each state that were (a) urban, and (b) had between 5 and 35 charter schools with the assumption that this would increase the probability of at least one school with strong parent involvement while also increasing the likelihood that authorizers would know about the specific practices of the schools they oversee compared to authorizers with much larger portfolios of charter schools.

2. We then conducted interviews with charter school authorizers[1] in each selected city to gather nominations of urban charter schools with strong parent involvement.

3. Finally, we used a semi-structured interview protocol to conduct interviews with leaders from nominated charter schools to find out more about the specific parent involvement strategies employed, the resources needed to sustain them, and the various impacts of those strategies.

The final study sample included 12 urban charter schools in 6 states. Table 2 provides demographic data on each of the study schools. Each school leader agreed to have their school named in the study, therefore pseudonyms are not used.

Table 2. Characteristics of Participating Charter Schools

School	Location	Year Begun	Grades Served	# Students	% Free/ Reduced Lunch	% ELLs	Student Ethnicity
Community of Peace Academy	St. Paul, MN	1995	K-12	684	83%	60%	60% Hmong 30% African American 10% Latino /Caucasian
D. Huerta Learning Academy	Oakland, CA	1999	K-8	215	90%	92%	97% Latino 2% African American
EC Reams	Oakland, CA	1999	K-8	344	45%	12%	81% African American 18% Latino
Erie Charter School	Chicago, IL	2005	K-3	160	88%	3%	69% Latino 17% African American
International Community School	Decatur, GA	2002	K-6	383	63%	22%	56% African American 10% Asian American
Lighthouse Community Charter	Oakland, CA	2001	K-12	359	79%	63%	81% Latino 13% African American
IVY Preparatory Academy	Norcross, GA	2008	6	120	Data N/A*	Data N/A	All girls; Ethnicity data N/A
Manzanita Charter	Rich- mond, CA	2000	6-8	149	48%	33%	70% Latino 9% African American
Neighbor- hood House	Boston, MA	1995	PreK-8	399	72%	66%	55% African American 14% Latino 4% Asian American
Partnership Academy	Richfield, MN	2002	K-6	192	97%	76%	87% Latino 12% African American
Rise Academy	Miami, FL	2008	K-8	200	Data N/A	Data N/A	Data N/A
Univ. of Chicago CS – Donoghue Campus	Chicago, IL	2005	K-5	320	73%	Data not re- corded	97.4% African American

*N/A: not available

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted pilot tests of the interview protocol with three schools and refined the instrument slightly to ensure that the questions elicited the information of interest without bias. The final interview protocol consisted of 11 semi-structured questions (see Appendix). Questions gathered information about current parent involvement activities (e.g., volunteering, homework help, parenting classes), the goals of parent involvement at the school, the techniques employed to obtain high levels of involvement (e.g., parent liaisons, parent contracts, home visits), the ways in which parent involvement is monitored or enforced, and challenges to parent involvement faced by the school. During each 45- to 60-minute interview, we probed administrators to provide specific and detailed information. All interviews were taped with interviewee permission, transcribed, then coded and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software HyperResearch. Coding and analysis were accomplished in a series of three iterations. Three members of the research team worked collaboratively to increase the reliability of the coding process. We started with a code list derived from Epstein's typology as well as with topics generated by the interviews. The first iteration of coding was intended to capture all of the specific ideas that were discussed by the interviewees. Hence, the researchers conducted a pilot coding in which three transcripts were reviewed to generate additional codes to maximize the topics included in the code list. After the pilot coding, any additional ideas not represented by an existing code were given a code of "other" so that in the second iteration, additional codes were created based on the universe coded "other." In addition, during the second iteration of coding, ideas that were deemed multi-faceted were split into two while others were combined. In the third iteration, themes were assessed that linked back to Epstein's typology as well as a category labeled "new" to indicate themes outside of Epstein's framework.

Study Limitations

This study reflects the parent involvement strategies employed by a relatively small sample of urban charter schools. To address this limitation, and to aid in the generalizability of the findings, we purposely selected schools in states that differed both geographically and in terms of ways in which the state charter school law addressed (or failed to address) parent involvement. Further, while we only interviewed school leaders, the small size of the charter schools studied placed the school leaders in a key position in terms of both designing parent involvement strategies and in their implementation. A final limitation to the study design was in asking charter school authorizing agencies to nominate schools for selection. While the research team was not affiliated with any

study participants, some authorizers we initially approached were also unfamiliar with the specific parent involvement practices in the charter schools they oversaw, reducing the number of different locations to the six in which authorizers felt sufficiently knowledgeable to provide nominations.

Findings

Analysis of interview data revealed that parent involvement activities in these urban charters generally fall within the typology set forth by Epstein. **Type 1** activities, *basic obligations of families*, reported by interviewees included expecting parents to bring students to school on time. As one principal noted:

> The biggest problem we have is kids getting to school on time….It's really hard for kids, if they've missed the very beginning of the day. Our middle school students every morning have DEAR, Drop Everything and Read, for the first 20 minutes, and if kids are coming in during that, it's really disruptive. Our elementary school students, every morning, each teacher has a little pledge they do, like "I will go to college; I will be successful." If kids come late for that, it's just hard.

As an incentive to arrive on time, the school is holding a competition; the first class to attain 10 days of perfect on-time will be given a party.

However, while Epstein's framework emphasizes the basic obligations of families to provide their children with basic needs such as health and safety, a third of the study schools played this role by offering wrap-around services to students and their families. "[If families] have housing needs or food needs, we provide them," said the leader of a charter school started by a social service provider. Another school ran an employment office for parents, focusing on job opportunities for refugee parents with limited English skills. In addition to direct service provision, 10 of the 12 schools offered GED, English language, college-credit, and parenting classes for parents after school hours. One of these schools held discussions on qualifying for home loans to help parents move toward home ownership. Another principal described a book study the school had started for parents to learn parenting techniques: "We have gotten one of our Hmong staff people who will be facilitating the Hmong group, and we'll also have a group that's in Spanish, and an English group, and we're going to be offering several nights when parents can come in to discuss various portions of the book." Another principal described the opportunity for networking provided by the parent center at the school: "So many new families have moved into the neighborhood, and so the school has really become a hub for parents to find out things like how do you find the best grocery store, or how do I figure out other child care options after the school day."

Type 2 activities, *basic obligation of the school*, were common across all study sites. In addition to sending home report cards and holding parent–teacher conferences, several principals mentioned the use of home visits to ensure communication between the school and family. One principal noted,

> We are very flexible about scheduling meetings, and I think we go the extra mile, even to the point of going to the home rather than having them come here if it really doesn't work for them to come here….If they can't do that, then we'll do it over the phone, we'll do whatever it takes to be in touch with parents.

Common techniques to decrease language barriers were to translate material sent home into the parents' native language and to provide translators for school meetings. As one principal reported, "We have a newsletter that goes to the parents once a week, which is translated…into six languages." One principal described the use of headsets during school meetings so that interpreters can do "real time translation."

Type 3 activities, *involvement at school*, also were reported by each interviewee. Parents commonly helped out in classrooms, served as crossing guards before and after school, attended field trips and special events held at the school, helped out in the office, and participated in school-beautification projects. One principal noted that parents were encouraged to "come sit in a class and observe" until they feel comfortable taking a more active role: "The one thing that we tell all of our parents is after the third time you've come to observe, we're gonna put you to work." In three cases, parent surveys were used to identify what activities parents would be willing to help out with and what skills they had that might benefit the school. As one principal reported, "When parents enroll, we sit down with them, and we go over the family partnership plan and point out the fact that we think it's important that they're involved, and ask if they would be willing to provide some support in the school, whether that might be chaperoning or volunteering, and then we ask what days and times are most convenient for them." The school's parent coordinator used these data when she looked for volunteers. A common technique to increase parent involvement, used at half of the study schools, was to offer a reward for participation; for example, a school that utilized a student uniform gave "free dress" passes to students whose parents attended school meetings.

Interviewees from each school described a range of Type 4 activities, *involvement in learning activities at home*. In many cases, this involved encouraging parents to help their children with their homework, something for which many of the schools offered parent education classes to increase parent confidence and skills. Generally, Type 4 activities were voluntary. As one principal

noted, "We received a grant in which we were able to buy parent texts, books, and activities that are in a little backpack, and parents are encouraged to take them home to do activities with their kids at home." Another principal reported, "We ask all families to read with their children, and make it really clear that they can read with their children in English or in Spanish or in Cantonese, that any of these will help their child's literacy skills." Parents at another school were invited to sit in during their children's tutoring sessions to learn techniques to help their child at home. Some schools mandated involvement at home. As the principal at one school noted,

> One of the things that we mandate is that our parents read for 45 minutes a night with their children and check homework….And that's really regardless of the academic experience or their academic level that the parents may have. We feel like if there's a parent that has some deficiencies, we can give them the help to help their kids, and that's something, as a school, we're managing our resources so that that can happen.

Involvement in decision-making, governance, and advocacy (**Type 5**) was found in 7 of the 12 charter schools studied. One strategy was to hold parent focus groups to help shape school policies. As one principal noted, "We've done a lot of focus groups with the parents to see if there are things that they'd like to see happen in the school; we kind of use that as an avenue to get parent feedback." In other cases, schools utilized a parent survey to gauge satisfaction and to plan new activities. In one school, the principal reported that they conducted an annual parent survey and, in addition, "if there's a particular issue that comes up, we always survey them first," such as changing the school day's start time:

> We don't just collect information and ask parents a few things for the sake of it, we actually use it and make changes to the program based on it, and parents see that their input is taken into consideration, and so they're more apt to give it when we ask for it.

In addition, five of the schools included parents on the school's governing board. One principal reported, "Traditionally, the board of the school has been very parent-heavy—there's a nine-member board, and usually, we have six or seven parents."

Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations (**Type 6**) were utilized by five of the study schools. In some cases, the school was started by a community organization, so that form of partnership was built in. As one principal noted:

> One of the things that our authorizer offers is this community partners program. They're pretty well-connected within the community, and they

help coordinate this program of volunteers….This is one of the avenues that the parents have [available] to be involved, if they have a certain time during the day or a day of the week that they can volunteer, they can work through that program and become a classroom aide, or they can do different projects within that program.

In other cases, community-based organizations and/or faith-based organizations partnered with the school to hold parent classes, trainings, or provide health services. Examples of parent involvement activities reported by the study schools are summarized in Table 3, organized by Epstein's six types.

Table 3: Examples of Charter School Parent Activities Organized by Epstein's Typology

Type	Description of Type	Examples
Type 1	Basic obligations of families	Incentives provided for parents to bring their child to school on time; school provided ELL classes, parenting classes, or wrap-around services to supplement parents' ability to provide health and safety for their children
Type 2	Basic obligations of the schools	Home visits conducted; material sent home translated into the parents' native language; translators at school meetings to decrease language barriers
Type 3	Involvement at school	Parents volunteered in classrooms; served as crossing guards before/after school; attended field trips and special events; helped out in the office; participated in school beautification
Type 4	Involvement in learning activities at home	Parents required to read with their children for 45 minutes nightly; monitor their child's homework completion with a homework checklist; can take home activity books to do with their children
Type 5	Involvement in decision-making, governance, and advocacy	Parents participated in focus groups; completed surveys; served on the school's governing board
Type 6	Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations	School partnered with community organizations to help train parents; offered volunteer opportunities for parents; or provided services to parents

Conclusions and Implications

Our data show that parent involvement *activities* in the study sample of urban charter schools fit Epstein's typology fairly well. However, the *strategies* used to implement these activities and to attract parents traditionally not as visibly active in schools were fairly innovative.

While the study schools expected parents to fulfill their basic obligations (Type 1), they also realized that many of the parents faced situations which hindered their ability to do so, such as working multiple shifts, raising their children as single parents, and struggling with poverty. As noted above, to help parents meet their children's basic needs, several of the study schools offered wrap-around services for the students and their families. Another difference was noted with parent–teacher conferences (Type 2). While these are a standard occurrence at public schools, many schools, especially in urban areas, struggle with low attendance at these conferences. In contrast, the interviewees in our study reported extremely high attendance rates at parent–teacher conferences, with some schools reporting 100% participation. Offering incentives (e.g., a drawing for prizes) for attendance, as well as holding meetings at night, by phone, or in the family's home helped ensure participation.

Involvement at the school (Type 3) also differed in the sample charter schools from the traditional model of relying on parents to surface as volunteers. Many of the charter school leaders reported using "parent contracts" specifying the number of hours (ranging from 10 to 72 hours) of service required from each family annually. Interviewees reported that this level of expectation helped sustain parent involvement programs which otherwise might dwindle once initial enthusiasm wanes or highly active parents leave the school. In addition, the type of volunteer activity often included school maintenance or beautification, activities not commonly assigned to parents at non-charter public schools. Several school leaders noted the sense of ownership derived from such activities, as well as the community aspect of involving parents in these ways. As one school leader noted,

> The model for the founders was related to the idea of community as defined by Martin Luther King, and it's the idea that we create a community where everybody's safe, everybody is mutually engaged with each other and mutually responsible for each other and mutually obligated to each other. So, the events that we have cover the whole range from just basic grade-level potlucks to work days for parents.

Three of the charter schools in the study reported using technology as a means of notifying parents of volunteer opportunities as well as tracking parent

involvement. Using technology to enable parent involvement had the benefit of instant communication as well as reducing the time costs associated with the school calling parents or sending home newsletters. It also allowed for two-way communication when parents were able to e-mail the school, something not afforded when information is only sent from the school to the parents. In one school, the Web site included a "parental involvement" tab, with links to the school's volunteer needs and to Web sites that the school had vetted and declared "safe" for children and parents to view together and to use to complete class assignments. Each teacher maintained his or her own Web page, updating it weekly with homework assignments, learning objectives, reference Web sites visited in class, and news of upcoming class events. The school also distributed a multi-lingual newsletter and, for emergencies, used the AllCall system in the parent's language of choice. Another school complemented its school Web site with such e-mail strategies as a weekly e-newsletter, e-blast, and Teleparent. The e-newsletter announced school activities and events; a hard copy was also sent home with students. The school used the program Constant Contact to track the readership of and reactions to specific components of the e-mail and to survey parents about school operational issues. The school reported using the e-blast system to disseminate such information as a change in schedule, a last-minute need for parent volunteers, or a special or unusual event concerning the school, parents, or students. E-blasts are short and to the point, to convey a sense of urgency. In addition, the use of Teleparent, an automated parental notification system, allowed school teachers and administrators to send student-specific or general messages home over the telephone or the Internet. It can report school attendance and tardiness, schoolwide emergencies, and messages about individual student performance. Teachers can record their own voices in the Teleparent system, which has multiple language options.

Type 5 involvement, the decision-making role, in the studied charter schools included involving and empowering parents in decision-making and governance of the school to an extent not typically found in non-charter public schools. In some cases, parents elected the charter school's governing board, making the board directly accountable to them. In other cases, parents served as members of the charter school's board of directors, playing a role in school-level governance not available to parents in a district school system, in which one central school board makes policy decisions for all of the schools in the district. This type of school-level governance role for parents is mandated by law in six states[2] (Butler, Smith, & Wohlstetter, 2008), and utilized voluntarily in individual charter schools in many other states. This relationship created a new role not only for parents but also between parents and the school leaders who were hired (and potentially dismissed) by the school's parents. It helps explain

the survey finding mentioned above that charter school leaders lack confidence in involving parents, as this type of relationship is foreign to those leaders coming from a more traditional public school setting.

Finally, involvement in the study schools often was linked with increasing parent's self-efficacy. In some cases, training was provided to help parents become comfortable with school involvement. As one principal reported,

> We had to really teach parents how to get involved. We had to say, "These are the kinds of questions you ask; this is how you behave on field trips. You are not here to just be a parent to your child but an example to all kids…." We made pamphlets that went home with directions on how to get involved and had workshops and monthly meetings with parents about how to get involved.

In other cases, training was provided on how to engage in decision-making, particularly for parents whose cultural norms dictate that school staff members are the "experts" while parents stay on the sidelines. At one school with a Parent Advisory Committee, the principal reported that

> we've had to work really hard over the years to make sure that it is a parent-run thing, not our staff trying to lead the parents. We have had to help coach them along, and it's taken a little bit of time to build their capacity and their confidence in leading something like that, because many of them have never had the opportunity to do so. And so it's kind of like training them and getting them professional development in those areas.

These findings suggest the emergence of new strategies to increase parent involvement. While the study schools differed in school size, percent ELL, and student ethnicity, these factors did not appear to influence the different strategies schools employed. Rather, a mission of parent involvement and dedication to reaching parents not typically involved in visible ways took precedence.

However, the survey results mentioned above indicate that many charter school leaders struggle to engage parents. The schools we included in our study, therefore, while providing evidence that some innovation exists, should not be deemed as typical among the charter population. Indeed, the sample was purposively selected as exemplars in strong parent involvement; they were not intended to provide generalizations to the charter population. Rather, the lessons drawn from this study suggest the benefits of an emphasis on involvement *strategies* rather than specific *activities*; while adhering to traditional forms of involvement like parent–teacher conferences, these schools used innovative strategies to ensure high attendance at these events. Leadership programs directed specifically at charter schools can help new leaders create parent involvement plans, as can trainings offered by charter school resource centers and

member associations. While state laws and authorizers can encourage parent involvement, ultimately the schools themselves must implement meaningful opportunities for parents to be involved in their child's education.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study provides a starting point to understanding parent involvement practices in urban charter schools, several questions remain. For one thing, there may be a difference between parent involvement and engagement. Many schools, charter as well as district-run, appear interested in *involvement*—letting parents know the school's expectations, having parent attend school events and meetings—but not *engagement* in which parents are an ongoing presence at the school and set school policy through serving on the school governing board or advisory council. There may be a continuum of parent participation from involvement to engagement, with a critical link to the school's mission. For example, if a charter school is highly academic but serves a low-income population, they may not expect parents who have not graduated from high school themselves to become fully engaged. These schools may set a goal of having the parents involved by being supportive of their child's education rather than expecting them to help out in the classroom. Further research into how a school's mission shapes parent participation would help shed light on this difference.

Also, the study reported here utilized interviews of school leaders, but did not include data from any parents, students, or teachers. As the literature posits benefits to all of these groups and acknowledges differences in interpreting what constitutes involvement, future research that includes the perspectives of these constituents is warranted. Finally, future investigations could include different types of schools of choice—private schools, faith-based schools, magnet schools, schools attended through voucher programs—to assess whether the findings from charter schools are indicative of different types of schools of choice. Such a study could explore the extent to which our findings relate to the geographic dispersion of families versus the characteristics of the parent population.

Endnotes

[1]Authorizers are entities identified by state charter school law to approve new charter school petitions, oversee ongoing performance, and evaluate charter schools' performance to make renewal decisions. Authorizing entities vary by state and include local school boards, universities, state boards of education, municipal bodies, or nonprofit organizations. For more on the role of authorizers, see www.qualitycharters.org

[2]Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia

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Joanna Smith is an assistant research professor at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education, where she also serves as the assistant director of USC's Center on Educational Governance (CEG). Her research focuses on education policy and reform and on innovation. Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Joanna Smith, Center on Educational Governance, University of Southern California, Waite Phillips Hall 901, Los Angeles, California, 90089, or email joannasm@usc.edu

Priscilla Wohlstetter is the Diane and MacDonald Becket Professor of Educational Policy at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education and CEG's director. Her research explores the policy and politics of K-12 urban education and the relationship between school governance and improved school performance.

Chuan Ally Kuzin and Kris De Pedro are both doctoral students at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education. Ms. Kuzin's

dissertation examines the use of parent compacts in charter schools. Mr. De Pedro's research focuses on military families and children, educational epidemiology, and the relationship between school climate and academic achievement.

Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. Tell me a little about the parent involvement (PI) at your school – what types of activities are parents involved in? (prompts: helping out in classrooms, helping out in the office, helping with field trips or extra-curricular activities, helping with their child's homework/studying at home, "parenting" classes, school governance, fundraising).
2. What percentages of parents are involved (in the activities mentioned in #1)?
   a. In your elementary program
   b. In your secondary program
3. Has your school tried to tailor PI opportunities to the needs of working parents or single-parent households? Please explain.
4. What are the goals of parent involvement at your school? (prompts: benefits to the school, to the students, to the whole family/community).
5. To what do you attribute the levels of parent involvement at your school? (prompts: is it something the school makes a conscious effort to promote?)
   a. Were parents involved in the charter application?
   b. Has the level of involvement changed over time?
6. Do you think the level of parent involvement at your school is different from other public schools in your area? If so, why and in what ways?
7. Some schools have specific policies/positions dedicated to PI. Does your school…
   a. Have a parent liaison?
      i. If so, is the position voluntary or paid?
      ii. If paid, does the money come from the general operating budget?
   b. Have a parent center?
      i. If so, what is the space used for and how often is it used?
   c. Have a parent contract?
      i. If so, what is the content of the contract?
      ii. How is the contract enforced?
   d. Have a school handbook for parents/families?
   e. Have a Web site with a specific portal for parent information? (review prior to interview)
      i. If so, what information is it used to convey (prompts: newsletter, students' grades, volunteer opportunities, tracking volunteer hours)
8. What measures do you use to monitor PI at your school? (prompts: counting number of hours, statistics on attendance at events, satisfaction surveys, etc.)

9. What do you feel are the benefits of parent involvement?
10. What challenges do you face in trying to involve parents at your school? [Prompts: involving low-income parents or parents who don't speak English, sustaining involvement in the long term]
11. What sorts of parent involvement would you like to see in coming years?

Preparing Urban Teachers to Partner with Families and Communities

Susan R. Warren, James T. Noftle, DeLacy Derin Ganley, and Anita P. Quintanar

Abstract

This study explored how graduate coursework can impact urban teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions regarding family and community involvement. (Note: California requires graduate work for teacher certification.) Specifically, the research investigated how teacher attitudes toward family and community involvement changed after taking a graduate level course taught at two separate universities. The study utilized mixed methods combining a semantic differential study of graduate student attitudes with a qualitative analysis of the students' perceptions of their experience in the course. Results from the semantic differential ($p < .05$) and qualitative data indicate a significant change in teachers in three global areas: (a) their professional knowledge and skills, (b) their professional dispositions, and (c) their authentic relationships with students, their families, and the community. The findings from this study can be used by teacher education programs, university professors, and school districts as they structure and implement programs that support and encourage teachers in interfacing with their students' families and communities.

Key Words: school–community partnerships, family involvement, community, organizations, parents, families, teacher education, urban schools, collaboration, teachers, professional development, programs, candidates, preservice

Introduction

Numerous studies over the past decade show that when schools, families, and community groups collaborate to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more (Barnard, 2004; Bryan, 2005; Epstein et al., 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Ingram, 2007; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Putnum, 2000; Sheldon, 2003, 2007). Research also confirms a need to prepare teachers, particularly those working with families of color and in poor urban communities, on how to establish more authentic relationships that will lead to increased family and community involvement and student success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson et al., 2007; Ingram, 2007; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Sheldon, 2003, 2007). This preparation can and should be a part of the preparation all teachers receive in their college or university programs (Morgan, 2009; Villani, 2004).

Family and Community Involvement in K-12 Schools

Leading researchers have found that when schools work with students' families, everyone involved benefits—students, families, and schools (Green et al., 2007; Henderson & Berla, 1997). Additionally, when families are invited to participate at their children's schools, they do become involved (Feuerstein, 2000; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, 2005; Warren & Quintanar, 2005). Warren and Quintanar (2005) found such involvement leads not only to improved academic achievement for students, but it also increased teacher morale. Some (Ingram, 2007; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; McWayne et al., 2004; Sheldon, 2003, 2007) suggest this is particularly the case in urban communities. Kellaghan, Sloan, Alvarez, and Bloom (1993) have even gone so far as to suggest that interventions with children from disadvantaged backgrounds need a home component in order to be effective.

The literature provides significant evidence supporting the value of family involvement, yet questions remain unanswered regarding how to effectively engage families, particularly in poor urban communities. The Harvard Family Research Project (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997) reported that many teachers and principals lack training on how to reach out to parents. Additionally, some researchers (Delpit, 2006; Kellaghan et al., 1993) emphasize the lack of effectiveness of schools to reach out to communities of color, where the ethnicity and background of the teachers often differs from that of the students. Delpit (2006) and Valdes (1996) assert that many educators and schools have placed the blame for lack of academic success on students and their families and suggest that much research and practice has supported this "deficit

model" that moves the accountability for student success away from the school and its teachers.

Teachers and school administrators need to understand how they can tap into community resources and how these resources can provide valuable time, talent, and materials that facilitate student success (Epstein et al., 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001). Sanders (2006) suggests that goal-oriented school–community partnerships are an effective way to generate the resources that are essential for building strong learning environments in an era of shrinking educational budgets. Furthermore, the author also proposes that community-provided human and material resources can support innovative educational programs to meet the learning needs of increasingly diverse students and to promote equity in the educational opportunities available to all students. Sanders suggests, however, that many educators have an inadequate understanding of how to effectively create these community partnerships, particularly in urban communities that may differ greatly from the communities in which they live (2006). Others concur with this sentiment and also challenge teacher educators to step up to the task of preparing future teachers to partner effectively with families and community parties (Delgado-Gaitan, 2007; Epstein, 2006).

Teacher Education Programs

Teacher education programs, aligned with state guidelines, work to ensure that their graduates are prepared to teach specific subject matter in a way that supports the academic success of all K–12 students. A key task for teacher education programs is to prepare novice teachers to utilize all available resources. These educators, for example, need to know how their teaching practices and effectiveness can be enhanced via effective connections and interfacing with the families and communities of their students and schools. Understanding the correlation between effective teacher, family, and community relations and student success, researchers (Delgado-Gaitan, 2007; Epstein, 2006; Epstein et al., 2009) argue that teacher preparation programs must deliberately focus on how teacher credential candidates understand school, family, and community partnerships. Specifically, researchers suggest that, via coursework and field experiences, graduate teacher education programs need to emphasize the respect, appreciation, trust, and collaboration between and among all of the adults who influence and affect children's lives and learning (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009). According to Epstein (2001), "there should be at least one comprehensive *required* course on school, family, and community partnerships (or home–school relations, or something similar) in every preparatory program" (p. 9). Additionally, Epstein (2001) also purports that this course should not only be required but considered as important and central as the teaching of

reading, math, or other core subjects. Furthermore, the school, family, and community partnerships course should focus on preparing teacher credential candidates to work in urban settings (Delpit, 2006).

Research Questions

This investigation explored the benefits of using a graduate course to equip urban teachers with the knowledge and skills of how to effectively involve and interface with their students' families and communities. The study was guided by the following questions: (a) How does a graduate course in family and community involvement influence the way urban teachers perceive the importance of and their role in including the families and communities of their students? (b) Can such a course help to facilitate a (positive) change in teacher attitudes regarding their students' families and communities?

Overview of the Family and Community Involvement Course

The goals of this course were to: (a) provide urban teacher candidates with knowledge and skills in family and community involvement, (b) prepare them to identify all available resources and learn to establish partnerships within the school community, and (c) equip them with specific strategies for building relationships and collaborating with families and the community to increase success for all students and be effective teachers in the classroom.

The course focused on family involvement, community dynamics, and community building as essential components of education. Participants were provided with theoretical models of family involvement in school (Epstein, 2006) and community building (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993), as well as effective engagement strategies from a variety of sources including readings, case studies, websites, videos, and guest speakers. Structured as a dialogical, student-centered seminar, participants were expected to continually reflect on the learning and actively engage in discussions.

Successful school reform models of parental involvement and their connection to higher student achievement were examined. The importance of learning about and building relationships with students and their families was integrated throughout the course. The graduate students had the opportunity to discuss and define their role in building strong partnerships with all families, especially those in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities of color.

The course also centered around the belief that communities cannot be rebuilt by focusing on their needs, problems, and deficiencies. Rather, community building starts with the process of locating the assets, skills, and capacities of residents, particularly families and local institutions. Course participants were engaged in utilizing asset-based community building strategies

in educational practice as they mapped their school communities to identify resources, conducted capacity inventories, and developed action plans for family and community involvement.

Finally, the course requirements included experiences in the community with organizations connected to children and families. Participants conducted interviews with various community members, volunteered at an organization that supported children, and visited programs that connected to students and their families. All of these experiences were documented in a resource notebook that the teachers submitted, along with their asset map projects that identified the resources in their school community, and personal action plans for family involvement and community building.

Method

Participants

Elementary and secondary urban teachers taking a graduate level course in family and community involvement at one of two different private universities (University A and University B) in Southern California participated in the study. Participants selected the course from a list of choices of required courses at the end of their 18-24 month program. Since the family and community involvement courses at University A and B were designed by the same faculty member, the courses were parallel. As University A had a much larger enrollment in their education program, there were six sections of the course offered at University A each year and one section offered at University B. Table 1 shows the number of participants for each of the four quantitative and qualitative data sources.

Table 1. Number of Participants from Universities A and B for Each of the Four Data Sources

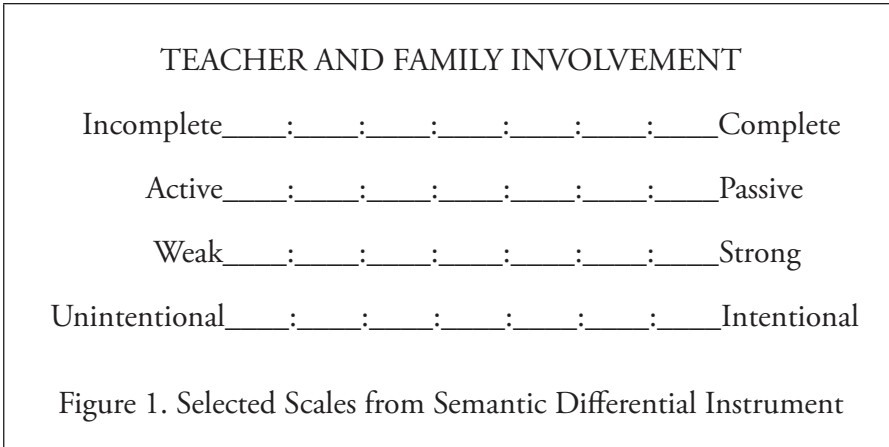| Data Source	University A	University B
Semantic Differential	26	0
Individual and Small Group Interviews	27	3
Asset Map Projects	12	32
Written Comments from Course Evaluations	7	5
*Total Evaluations Analyzed	*129	*28

*Total N = 157

Data Collection Procedures

Semantic Differential Analysis of Teacher Candidates' Attitudes Toward Family and Community Involvement

The semantic differential has proven an effective technique for measuring a subject's attitude toward a particular concept (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). The participant is asked to select where his or her position lies on a scale between two bipolar adjectives (i.e., adequate–inadequate, good–evil, or valuable–worthless). One distinctive feature of the semantic differential is its reduction of ratings to three reoccurring attitudes that individuals use to evaluate words and phrases: evaluation, potency, and activity. Examples of bipolar adjective sets for the three dimensions of meaning include: evaluation—*good–bad*, potency—*strong–weak*, and activity—*active–passive* (Heise, 2010). When applied in a graduate university setting, the method allows for the observation of a shift in attitudes from the beginning of the course to its end (Osgood, Tannenbaum, & Suci, 1957).

A convenience sample of 26 graduate students from two different class sections of the Family and Community Involvement course at University A completed semantic differential scales designed to measure attitudes toward four different concepts: "Family Involvement in Schools," "The Teacher's Role in Family Involvement," "Community Involvement in Schools," and "The Teacher's Role in Community Involvement." The sample was comprised of graduate students who were currently teaching in K–12 schools and concurrently completing requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education: Teaching (emphasis) as well the requirements for a California preliminary teaching credential. The investigators used separate semantic differential scales for each of the four concepts, with each scale consisting of nine bipolar sets of adjectives selected from Osgood's thesaurus study (1957). The bipolar sets in each scale measured the three different dimensions of meaning—evaluation, potency, and activity—for each concept (Osgood, Tannenbaum, & Suci, 1957). Teacher candidates completed the same semantic differential survey the first night of class as they did on the final night of class. Figure 1 depicts selected scales from the semantic differential instrument used to measure "Teacher and Family Involvement."

Cronbach's coefficient alpha (Crocker & Algina, 1986) was utilized for internal reliability. In addition, paired sample *t*-tests were performed on each of the scales to prove the research hypothesis that a shift in professional attitudes will occur as a consequence of participating in the Family and Community Involvement course.

TEACHER AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Incomplete____:____:____:____:____:____:____Complete

Active____:____:____:____:____:____:____Passive

Weak____:____:____:____:____:____:____Strong

Unintentional____:____:____:____:____:____:____Intentional

Figure 1. Selected Scales from Semantic Differential Instrument

Qualitative Analysis of Students' Perceptions of Their Experience as Teacher-Researchers

The qualitative portion of the investigation utilized three different methods of data collection: individual and small group interviews, course evaluations, and analysis of asset maps completed by students as part of the course. All of the teacher candidates at the two universities who completed an elective course on family and community involvement over a two-year academic period were contacted by email and/or phone to participate in the study (129 teacher candidates from University A who were in 12 course sections and 28 teacher candidates from University B who were in 2 course sections, N = 157). Those who responded were given the choice to participate in an interview or submit their asset map project. The asset map was a culminating project in which the graduate students spent several weeks in their school community investigating and identifying resources or assets (individuals, organizations, associations, and institutions). The final written report provided a historical overview as well as detailed mapping of the resources, or assets, within their school communities. Furthermore, the project included a reflection of their role in and future plans for family and community building. The sample included 30 students who participated in individual and small group interviews (27 from University A and 3 from University B) and 44 students who submitted their written asset map projects (12 from University A and 32 from University B) for analysis. In addition, the student comments from the course evaluations (129 from University A and 28 from University B) were also analyzed. Twelve of the 157 evaluations (7 from University A and 5 from University B) contained comments regarding how the course changed teacher candidates' attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors toward family or community involvement. Triangulation of data was accomplished through the use of three separate sources of data reflecting

students' perceptions of their experiences as family and community builders. Interview conversations were tape recorded, with tapes transcribed for analysis of language content and themes (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

Content analysis utilizing a constant-comparison method of the three qualitative data sets was used as the researchers agreed to participate in both an independent and collaborative process for interpreting different levels of emerging category themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For the first step, a team of three researchers read and coded the data independently, making separate initial analyses of tentative open-coding patterns. Then the researchers met to discuss collaboratively the data which included one session for each source of data. At the final meeting in this step, the researchers reviewed and reflected on the three independent data sets in order to agree upon one listing of open-coding patterns for each data source. In the second step, the researchers continued their collaborative process of reviewing, reflecting, and reconfirming as they grouped the open-coding patterns around more salient, second-level axial-coding themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For the third and final step in the qualitative analysis process, the researchers reviewed the listing of themes from axial coding with an eye on interpreting larger, global themes. Given the data-based themes analyzed at this point, the researchers asked themselves: What attitudinal changes, if any, emerged in teacher candidates through their experience in the Family and Community Involvement Course: (a) the nature of the change; (b) factors influencing the change; and (c) the depth of change?

Results

Qualitative Analysis of Interviews, Teacher Evaluations, and Asset Map Projects

After collecting the three planned sources of descriptive data—transcripts of individual and small group interviews, teacher evaluations, and asset map projects—the researchers used a two-stage process for identifying the emergent themes. As a result of the first stage, 21 patterns emerged during open coding for the interviews, 20 patterns emerged for the course evaluations; and 16 patterns emerged for the asset map projects. A summary of the first two stages, open coding [●] and axial coding [>], is depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Open (●) Patterns and Axial (>) Themes Coded in Three Data Sources

Interviews	Course Evaluations	Asset Map Projects
>**Personal Growth** ●Life-long commitment to working with families and communities ●Motivated to stay in the profession ●Change in habits to promote connections with families ●Stronger sense of self-efficacy ●Higher expectations of self, students, and families	>**Personal Growth** ●Confidence grew ●Assumed role as advocate ●Teachers are #1 intervention ●New view as change agent ●Lifelong process and commitment ●Teach from the heart	>**Personal Growth** ●Gained awareness of community building ●Paradigm shift toward school as center of community ●Accountability to make community connections ●Duty to be optimally effective
>**Teaching Strategies & Tools** ●Understand "how to" collaborate/partner with families ●Awareness of community resources ●Development of community guide ●Inspired to attend community events	>**Teaching Strategies & Tools** ●Family involvement strategies ●How to listen to families ●Significance of collaborating with families ●Greater preparation for teaching in a new community ●Integration of community into the classroom	>**Teaching Strategies & Tools** ●Awareness of community resources ●Value of action plans
>**Relationships with Families** ●Fear was obstacle ●Families are valuable ●Families as partners ●Openness to home visits ●Role of advocate ●Importance of authentic relationships ●Challenge previously held assumptions regarding families ●Specific skills to work with those in poverty	>**The Course** ●Asset maps – best graduate project ●Led to greater success ●Motivational ●Practical components ●Guest speakers	>**Advocacy** ●Transform school culture (negativity of others) ●Deliberate planning ●Commitment to initiating change >**Reflection** ●Constant self-evaluation
		Table 2 continued next page

Interviews	Course Evaluations	Asset Map Projects
>**Relationships with Students** ●Multi-dimensional view of students ●Importance of authentic relationships ●Increased confidence through successful interactions	>**Quality of Professor** ●Inspirational & passionate ●Role model ●Challenging yet supportive ●Positive attitude	>**Relationship with Students** ●Involving students in asset mapping their community ●Connecting students through service learning
>**Reflection** ●Importance of ongoing self-assessment as an educator		>**Action Plans** ●Importance of meeting & greeting families ●Understanding families' strengths ●Assuming role of community guide ●Commitment to community

While reviewing the interview transcripts, the researchers observed that a majority of the participants were surprised by the nature and extent of change that had occurred through their experiences in the Family and Community Involvement course. One aspect of this surprise was *an awareness of the assets of families and the community*. Many teachers had changed from holding negative assumptions about students' families to valuing their contributions. One teacher candidate expressed:

> This class really opened my eyes as to how much or how important it is to involve families and the community and how big of a role they play in our students' lives.…Now I really am stepping back and looking to see; how much I am including my students' families?

Additionally, participants discovered a plethora of valuable resources in the community that they could connect to students and their families. One teacher shared, "This experience [the asset map project] has provided much insight to my community. More importantly, the insight has led me to understand how the capacities of the individuals and local organizations can unite for the enhancement of the community." Another teacher said, "It is through a shared knowledge and responsibility that the home, the school, and the community are connected in providing an appropriate, stable, and productive learning environment."

A second aspect of surprise indicated in the participants' responses was *realizing a greater awareness of their role as change agents*. They had noticed that during the course the focus lens had widened, bringing themselves into view. Their role had extended beyond the classroom to include a sense of responsibility towards family and community building and advocacy. This process relied heavily on engaging more fully and honestly in critical self-assessment. One teacher noted:

> My role as an educator is crucial in forming effective partnerships between the school, my students, and the larger community that surrounds them. As I become more familiar with my school community and get involved in it as much as possible, I hope to serve as a community guide for others who may need it, especially for the large numbers of my students' families that are immigrants and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged and do not always have supportive social networks in place.

Another, also recognizing her role as change agent, reported:

> In order to understand my community in greater depth, "I" must commit to initiating change at the school level. "I" must educate my students on the services that are readily available to them beyond the limitations of the school walls…"I" will initiate change by integrating students' school studies with opportunities to become active learners and contributors in their neighborhood.

A third aspect of surprise held by participants was the *nature of the change that becoming a family and community builder had on them, their students, their families, and the community*. They had not counted on the course taking them beyond learning a few ideas for increasing family and community involvement. More specifically, they had not predicted that family and community building would lead to stronger interpersonal relationships, increased communication, and the identification of networks and resources that ultimately transformed their beliefs. In recognizing the impact of community building, one participant shared her new commitment to deepen her involvement:

> I hope to do more than learn about the various resources available in the community and refer my students to them. I plan to work with and between those organizations to strengthen their ability to create a supportive, integrated community. Additionally, I hope to set an example and compel my own students to think about and participate in social work and organizations within and beyond their own community.

Another who was surprised by a new level of confidence in community building reported:

> I feel confident about connecting my school to the community in engag-ing ways that will foster relationships that will work in two ways. First, they [strategies] will make students and teachers more comfortable inter-acting outside the realm of academia. Secondly, this new comfort [level] will cause students and teachers to learn and teach in a way that will be more authentic and result in better academic achievement.

As a result of the course activities, these teachers deepened their perspectives about the level of family and community building in which they would engage.

In the second stage of analysis (axial coding), the researchers derived a set of more salient themes, each grounded in the patterns that emerged from the open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For the interviews, 5 themes emerged dur-ing open coding, 4 themes emerged for the course evaluations, and 6 themes emerged for the asset map projects.

As depicted in Table 2, most of the themes derived from axial coding identified a congruent set of open coding patterns. A few themes from axial coding ("Reflection," "Teaching Strategies and Tools," and "Relationships with Students") were supported by only one or two open coding categories. The determination of these distinctive themes was based on their importance or gravity, not on an arbitrary number of related, open coding patterns.

Further review of Table 2 reveals that two themes from the axial coding oc-cur across the three sources of data. In all three data sources, the researchers found that teachers valued a change in their "Personal Growth" and "Teach-ing Strategies and Tools." Across two data sources, they found that teachers perceived a heightened awareness in their "Reflection" and "Relationship with Students."

For the third and final stage in the qualitative analysis process, the research-ers reviewed the listing of themes from axial coding with an eye on interpreting larger, global themes. Given the data-based themes analyzed so far, they asked themselves: *What best characterizes the more global nature of the participants' fundamental changes?* As depicted in Table 3, three distinctive global themes emerged: Teachers in the study were documenting "Change in Professional Knowledge and Skills," "Change in Professional Dispositions," and "Change in Authentic Relationships."

Table 3. Global Themes of Teacher Change Emerging from Three Qualitative Data Sources

Emerging Global Themes	Descriptors of Themes
Change in Professional Knowledge and Skills	Teachers were seeing a change in themselves as having • greater awareness of community resources • developed specific actions plans for themselves and their students • more confidence in communication and community building • a deeper understanding of the impact of diversity on families and communities and seeking effective strategies to increase student achievement
Change in Professional Dispositions	Teachers were seeing a change in themselves as having • enhanced accountability to students, families, and communities • a deeper commitment to being lifelong advocates of families and communities • increased reflection • a greater value for the assets of families and communities • a greater appreciation of other voices
Change in Authentic Relationships	Teachers were seeing a change in themselves as having • increased partnerships with families and their communities to benefit students • broader communication networks among home, school, and community

Analysis of Semantic Differential Results

The semantic differential study consisted of 36 scales measuring four concepts: "Family Involvement in Schools," "The Teacher's Role in Family Involvement," "Community Involvement in Schools," and "The Teacher's Role in Community Involvement." Each of the four concepts consisted of nine scales for a total of 36 included in the data analysis. Pre-test and post-test data were collected for 26 participants enrolled in two sections of a masters level graduate course in family and community involvement, and paired sample *t*-tests were performed on each of the scales. Table 4 depicts the Cronbach's coefficient alpha (Crocker & Algina, 1986) for the semantic differential subscales indicating internal reliability.

Table 4. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of Semantic Differential Subscales

Concepts	Pre Survey	Post Survey
Family Involvement in Schools	.711	.835
Teacher's Role in Family Involvement	.590	.788
Community Involvement in Schools	.834	.689
Teacher's Role in Community Involvement	.909	.867

Table 5 shows results, indicating that two scales yielded differences between the pre-test and post-test that were statistically significant ($p < .001$), one scale was statistically significant ($p < .05$), and one scale had a p value = .058 ($N = 28$). Results suggest that participants viewed their role in all four areas regarding family and community involvement as more active, important, and stronger as a result of their course experiences.

Table 5. Comparison of Semantic Differential Pre-test to Post-test Results – Paired Sample Statistics

Concepts	N	Pre Mean	Pre Std. Devia-tion	Post Mean	Post Std. De-viation	t value	Signifi-cance p value
Parent Involvement in Schools	26	41.14	8.10	51.38	7.65	-7.25	$p < .001$
Teacher's Role in Parent Involvement	26	43.28	4.51	50.28	7.91	-4.65	$p < .001$
Community Involvement in Schools	26	44.75	6.71	48.10	5.88	-2.02	$p = .058$
Teacher's Role in Community	26	43.95	7.59	48.55	7.96	-2.33	$p < .05$

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the benefits of using teacher preparation coursework to equip urban teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to involve the families and communities of their students and schools. The semantic differential results (Table 5) indicate a statistically significant increase in course participants' pre- and post-course perceptions of the importance of and their role in each of four areas: (a) Family Involvement in Schools, (b) Teacher and Family Involvement, (c) Community Involvement

in Schools, and (d) Teacher and Community Involvement. Teacher education programs that deliberately focus on understanding school, family, and community partnerships through coursework and field experiences can transform teacher candidates' sense of value for collaboration among adults. After taking these courses, teachers often realize the significance of their role and how they can influence partnerships. The result can be enhanced respect, appreciation, trust, and collaboration among all who influence and affect students' learning and lives (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009; Henderson et al., 2007; Sanders, 2006).

Teacher education courses are typically designed to provide candidates with new knowledge and skills in a variety of areas that prepare them to be effective teachers in the classroom. The school, family, and community partnerships course in this study, likewise, accomplished this goal as evident in the first global theme in the qualitative data (Table 3). Preparing new teachers to utilize all available resources within the school community is important (Delgado-Gaitan, 2007; Epstein, 2006). Additionally, equipping them with specific strategies for building relationships and collaborating with families and the community can lead to increased success for all students (Epstein et al., 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001). "When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7).

Perhaps more difficult for schools of education, however, is providing courses and experiences for teacher candidates that challenge their belief systems and result in a change in dispositions. This research study affirms the importance of offering courses in family, community, school partnerships in order for teacher candidates to gain a greater appreciation for this collaboration. Two of the global themes emerging from the qualitative data highlight the changes in teacher dispositions (Table 3) as a result of the course experience. Furthermore, these courses should also focus on preparing teacher credential candidates to work in urban settings (Delpit, 2006; Sanders, 2006; Valdez, 1996) which may be very different from their own communities. When teachers value and appreciate the contributions of families and the community, authentic relationships can be built that result in enhanced educational opportunities for children (Delgado-Gaitan, 2007; Epstein, 2001).

Implications for Action and Further Study

This research can be used to inform both teacher educators and school administrators as they assist in the ongoing professional development of urban

teachers. Evidence supports integrating a family and community involvement course into all teacher education programs as well as into school district professional development programs. Family and community involvement courses must be designed to prompt educators to transform beliefs and practices in ways that nurture and promote the success of all students by including all stakeholders, particularly those who are most connected to the students, their families and neighbors.

Further research can and should be done to see if the findings of this study are generalizable beyond the context of the two universities where this course was taught. Additionally, further research is needed to see if other university-based courses with similar objectives are equally as effective at facilitating changes in teachers' professional knowledge and skills; their professional dispositions; and their authentic relationships with students, their families, and the community.

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Susan R. Warren is professor of education and director of masters programs in the School of Education, Azusa Pacific University in California. She previously served as a teacher and principal for 22 years in public K–8 schools. She has been involved in school evaluation and professional development in several districts throughout her career. Her specialization is in curriculum and instruction, and her research interests include issues of diversity, equity, and social justice; teacher expectation and efficacy; school reform; action research; and parental involvement. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Susan R. Warren, 1741 N. Palm Avenue, Upland, CA, 91784, or email swarren@apu.edu

James T. Noftle is an associate professor in the Advanced Studies Department Program in the School of Education at Azusa Pacific University. He has served as an elementary school teacher, special education teacher, assistant principal, director of the Sylvan Learning Center, elementary education director, graduate reading director, and professor. His research interests include the application of metacognition as it relates to reading strategies, teacher preparation, special education, and family/community involvement.

DeLacy Derin Ganley, a faculty member of Claremont Graduate University's School of Educational Studies, has been a co-director of the Teacher Education Internship Program since 2004. Ganley taught English in high schools and colleges, both domestically and abroad, prior to her work in graduate teacher education. Her research interests are in educational reform and teacher education.

Anita P. Quintanar, a faculty member of Claremont Graduate University's School of Educational Studies, has been a coordinator and co-director of the Teacher Education Internship Program for over ten years. Quintanar has served as a teacher, project director, and principal in public schools as well as a consultant aiding schools with program improvement. Her research interests include family and community involvement and teacher preparation.

Building Community Partnerships: Learning to Serve While Learning to Teach

Pamela Hudson Baker and Mary M. Murray

Abstract

Service learning is a well researched pedagogical approach to the scholarship of teaching and learning. This essay describes two special education teacher preparation approaches that successfully linked candidate learning outcomes together with service to the community. One approach attached undergraduate teacher candidates in special education with an elementary school to facilitate the delivery of an afterschool learning program for students in need of additional skill development. The other approach connected graduate candidates with community partners in support of the development and implementation of specific projects of value to the community agency. Each of these collaborative learning opportunities created a win for the community partner and a win for the teacher candidates, as each of these opportunities better prepared these candidates to build a strong sense of community from within their school and also by reaching beyond the walls of their own setting.

Key Words: service learning, special education, teachers, preparation, collaboration, community, engagement, partnerships, serve, teaching, collaboration, agencies, organizations, afterschool, after-school, programs, needs, university, students, candidates, preservice, inservice

Introduction

Service learning is built on the foundation of inquiry, continuous learning, and discovery, which has been identified as the scholarship of teaching and

learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Service learning in teacher education is a vehicle that provides teacher candidates with an opportunity to construct meaning while engaging in a service activity that emerges from and informs classroom context. It is imperative that the service learning experience relies on reflection and ties the service experience back to specific learning goals (Gonsier-Gerdin & Royce-Davis, 2005). Reserach literature suggests that universities are not adequately preparing educators to collaborate with parents and the community (Dotger & Bennett, 2010; Murray, Curran, & Zellers, 2008; Prater & Sileo, 2004; Washburn-Moses, 2005) even though such engagement is critical for success with all students (Epstein, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Service learning has been touted as a pedagogical approach to provide candidates with real world experiences in partnering with parents and community agencies (Gonsier-Gerdin & Royce-Davis, 2005; Mayhew & Welch, 2001). There are numerous definitions of service learning found throughout the literature, yet Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition has been adopted by several universities and is applied in this essay; they define service learning as

> a credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

While effective collaboration among professionals can result in improved services and enhanced quality of life for children with disabilities (Forlin & Hopewell, 2006), collaboration has become an essential skill for serving all children within schools and beyond (Friend & Cook, 2009). Through the service learning experience, university students engage in genuine collaboration activities that are valuable not only to their educational process but also to the community partner. The community may include businesses, health care facilities, and not-for-profit organizations, as well as individuals (Hands, 2005; Sanders, 2001). For the purpose of this essay we define community as a group of people who reside in a specific locality. Hands (2005) describes the need for a "win-win situation" for successful school–community partnerships. While teacher candidate development is a central component of the process, the community partner must also benefit from the relationship. The specified candidate activities relate directly to the accomplishment of the candidates' identified learning outcomes, which are related to the specific academic curriculum. Through this process university students develop an understanding of the relationship between their service project and the academic curriculum. Such understanding is demonstrated through, but not limited to, ongoing

reflection, analysis, discussion, and/or oral presentation. Candidates are able to connect the specific activities involved in the service project with the concepts, values, beliefs, principles, and theoretical framework learned throughout the course. By participating in the service learning experience, candidates discover how they can engage in their civic responsibility and contribute to the welfare of a diverse society (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Jacoby & Associates, 2003).

According to Novak, Murray, Scheuermann, and Curran (2009), three essential characteristics are present in authentic service learning experiences, including: (a) a reciprocal relationship in which a specific community-based need is met, (b) the integration of academic content within the service learning experience, and (c) ongoing reflection connecting the content and the experience to personal growth. In this essay, we describe two service learning experiences within the special education teacher preparation programs at two Midwestern universities. One program is for undergraduates at a small private university, and the other is for graduate students at a large state university; both programs continue to be available for current teacher candidates. The two opportunities represent diverse approaches to service learning as a component of teacher preparation because the university students were at different developmental levels. The three characteristics of service learning were integral to the delivery of both experiences. Teacher preparation for special educators has long included training in collaboration, since these teachers are charged with teaming to develop individualized support programs for students with special needs. Even though the two examples shared are from the special education arena, today's general educators and community support personnel are facing the prospect of serving learners and clients with diverse needs that go well beyond disability. Community partners, including our schools, and the individuals who serve children and their families need to recognize the need to work together to obtain lasting positive impacts (Friend & Cook, 2009). These experiential service learning programs offer specific ideas to help.

Afterschool Learning Program for Undergraduates

The undergraduate opportunity consisted of a block of two courses and a field experience taught by one faculty member during the candidates' junior year (typically). A methods course, *Assessing and Teaching Children with Educational Needs*, was paired with a collaboration course titled *Communication, Consultation, and Teaming*. The intent was to create an academic realization for the teacher candidates that a special educator does not operate in a vacuum. When one needs to assess a learner, one also needs to communicate with parents and other teachers to maximize what is learned. When one wants to

employ a specific intervention, one also needs to consult with colleagues so that all adults in the child's environment are aware of the methods being utilized. When one documents that a child has made progress, then one needs to celebrate success with the entire team. The academic content of these two courses was different and yet complementary. Teacher candidate objectives for the block of courses included the following:

1. Recognize the role of assessment in curriculum development and implementation.
2. Integrate a variety of methods and intervention strategies to address content and behavior simultaneously.
3. Work as a cooperative, collaborative member of a team to plan and implement instruction.
4. Evaluate, interpret, and communicate results of candidate assessment to students, parents, and colleagues in both written and conference formats.
5. Utilize various communication techniques to enhance interactions and manage conflict.

In addition to the six credit hours of academic content, the teacher candidates were required to commit to a field-based lab in order to gain real-life experience in a school. For most teacher candidates this was the first time they would move beyond simple observation or tutoring into the realm of actually teaching real learners. They would be placed into teams of two or three to work together to plan and deliver the program. They would become responsible for all aspects of providing an afterschool learning program for teacher-identified students in grades 2–6 who were in need of extra support whether or not they were already identified for special education. Learning groups were typically 6–9 students. Teacher candidates were required to commit a minimum of 30 contact hours of service to the school partner.

The school partner identified for this service learning partnership was in an area with high need and low funding. The building principal jumped at the chance to provide free services to children while recognizing the great potential for growth in the teacher candidates. As it was clear that the direct supervisory responsibility for the program rested with the university faculty member and principal, the school-based teachers were anxious to nominate potential participants. Once the groundwork of the partnership was in place, it was time for the university students to meet the principal, tour the school, and meet the teachers. The reciprocal nature of the partnership was clear in that the students got extra help, the teachers got progress updates, the school got to provide a service to parents, and the teacher candidates got to experience a high degree of autonomy in a safe situation. Everyone wins.

Over the following two weeks, teacher candidates contacted parents to assess interest in the program and schedule face-to-face conferences. During the conference week, each team of teacher candidates were also in the process of completing classroom observations, meeting with teachers, and conducting initial assessments to identify student needs. They integrated key course concepts into each of these experiences. For instance, talking about collaboration with parents in class was very different than picking up the phone and calling them! This step was one of the first pivotal moments for the soon-to-be teachers. Additionally, they were actually using assessment measures with real live learners *and* using that data to plan theme-based units that would address the needs of all of the students assigned to their group. Finally it was time to start the program!

During 15 sessions of 90 minutes each, the teacher candidates delivered a series of thematic lessons addressing individual learner needs. Affording the students with highly engaging lessons was a priority as the program participants had already spent the whole day at school. While the university supervisor assisted with organizational items (e.g., snacks), reviewed lesson plans, and observed sessions, no grading of the field activities occurred. The teacher candidates were reconditioned to reflect upon student progress as a gauge of their own performance. This was another difficult transition for the teacher candidates. In addition to this step, they had to manage conflict on a variety of levels. While the supervisor supported this process, the teacher candidates had to actually confront issues such as peers not being prepared, teachers sending students to the afterschool program late, and parents who failed to show up to retrieve their child at the end of the day. Beyond the problems with collaboration, teacher candidates also gained insights regarding methods; they learned that some lessons flop and how to make instantaneous adjustments based upon student responses. To ensure that teacher candidates were making the connections between the content and the field, frequent opportunities for both written and oral reflection were provided.

The sense of responsibility that the teacher candidates experienced for facilitating student progress was expected. The bonus was the sense of responsibility they felt for the entire school community. The teacher candidates communicated regularly with their students' teachers and parents. They showcased their students' work in a celebration event so that the parents, teachers, students, principal, and university team could share in the progress the students had made. The teacher candidates emerged from this experience with the clear recognition that being an educator extends beyond the classroom to the greater community in which the students they serve live. When given a final reflective activity in which the teacher candidates examined this experience and looked

to their future, they invariably noted the deeper values of the experience and the importance of connecting academia with practice. Students frequently commented that this experience gave them the confidence to trust in their abilities as an educator.

Some examples of the afterschool program activities were as follows:

- Parent Conference Checklist—Each team of undergraduates invited the parents of each learner in their group to individual conferences. During this meeting they followed a checklist of items in order to be more prepared for this new experience. The checklist included reminders about (a) welcoming the parent to the program (e.g., introductions, thank them for coming), (b) gathering insights about the learner (e.g., What would the parent like the team to know?, What expectations does the parent have for the experience?), (c) sharing the intent of the program (e.g., skill development, not homework completion sessions, not playtime), (d) collecting of completed forms (e.g., consent, emergency, pick-up authorization), and (e) wrapping up the visit (e.g., Any questions?, remind of first session dates/times, thanks).

- Student Assessment—Each team of undergraduates completed student profile sheets based upon a review of records (including any existing standardized assessments and Individualized Education Programs, if applicable), observations, teacher interviews, and parent input. In addition to these resources, each team completed a diagnostic evaluation of each student in a targeted content area. For example, if the student was having difficulty in math, the team might administer the Key Math assessment to better target their instruction. Each student profile summarized critical information to highlight student strengths and areas for development.

- Lesson Planning—Each team was required to produce 15 lesson plans targeting the individual learners in their group within the context of an overall learning theme for the experience. The university supervisor reviewed the plans on an ongoing basis since this was a developmental process. Each team selected three plans to submit for final assessment (i.e., grading).

- Progress Reports—Each team produced a summative report detailing individual learner progress that was distributed to the child's teacher and parents at a final celebration event showcasing work samples produced during the 15-session afterschool learning experience.

- Reflection Log—Each individual teacher candidate reflected, in writing, upon the variety of activities and experiences of this block course situation. Comments regarding any aspect of the block were encouraged (e.g., observations of lesson successes/concerns, experiences with collaboration among team/school personnel/parents, questions about applying readings

to practice). Candidates did not need to write lengthy entries, but did need to show they were taking the time to reflect upon these opportunities for professional growth. The university supervisor reviewed the logs weekly and provided written feedback regarding questions and observations noted by the candidate.

Community Partnership Projects for Graduate Candidates

While this school-based block approach was effective for undergraduates, embedding projects within an individual course can be effective as well, especially for making connections within the greater community. The graduate course, *Consultation and Collaboration,* had previously followed a traditional lecture-and-discussion format. In order to provide authentic experiences to students this course was redesigned with an experiential learning focus. *Consultation and Collaboration* is a semester course (16 weeks with three-hour classes held once a week) required by the university for graduate candidates seeking a master's degree in special education or school psychology. Graduate candidates, 12–20 in number, typically took the course in the last semester of their program just prior to graduation.

The primary objective of the course was to provide candidates with effective strategies for working with colleagues, community agencies, and schools. Through the course, graduate candidates were to explore effective strategies for collaboration, build their collaboration and consultation skills, and then relate them to larger issues that currently exist in education. In the process the graduate candidates refined skills for effective communication, developed skills for effectively participating in difficult interactions, and grew in their awareness of how collaborative interactions vary among professional groups and parents. Graduate candidate objectives for the course included the following:

1. Identify the importance of collaboration within the school or social service setting.
2. Connect various theories and models of psychological consultation with collaborative problem solving techniques.
3. Discover strategies, techniques, and methods used by successful change agents and consultants.
4. Utilize and evaluate effective problem solving frameworks for use in collaboration.

The Community Partnership Project, the major assignment in the course, was designed to provide graduate candidates with a real life experience while meeting the course objectives and bringing theory together with practice in

community collaboration. Prior to the first class the instructor contacted local community agencies to request their potential participation in the project. Once the community agencies were identified and agreed to participate, they submitted a project proposal indicating their agency need or issue as well as the expectations for student participation within the community setting for the designated 25-hour service learning project.

During the second class of the semester, the graduate candidates were encouraged to self-select a community project that best fit their individual interests. Not all available proposals were selected; all agencies submitting proposals had been informed that they might not be chosen. Teams consisted of two to four graduate candidates and one to three community agency representatives. Due to the nature of this project, the graduate candidates and community partners were required to work together collaboratively in order to meet the determined agency need.

The community team (graduate candidates and community members together) first met to discuss the project direction and develop a work plan to identify outcomes, objectives, evaluation procedures, and sustainability options. The graduate candidates logged their hours and kept a weekly reflective journal. Each week during class the teams reported their progress and, together with the instructor and their peers, discussed issues related to collaboration. Several teams had serious conflict and communication issues that needed to be resolved. In class, the instructor and peers provided suggestions and role played how to deal with the issues. The graduate candidates then came back to class after trying some of the suggestions and reported what strategies were tried and how they had worked. At times the instructor needed to attend community team meetings to model effective strategies to the graduate candidates, thus decreasing the intensity of the issues or bringing the team to a new level.

This project included using the skills and techniques of consultation, problem solving, the process of systemic change, teaming, and collaboration which the graduate candidates had learned throughout the course of the semester. The project needed to be something that would be implemented in a school or social service setting over a semester to meet an identified need in the school or community agency. The project had to have a beginning and an end in 16 weeks time. Furthermore, the graduate candidates were required to systematically reflect on their project as well as on the course content and relate the information learned to their own personal perspectives and careers. As part of the required work plan the graduate candidates needed to develop an evaluation process to determine the effectiveness of the project. The community member was required to complete an evaluation survey as one component of the evaluation process. Lastly, in order to keep the project possibilities ongoing,

the team needed to develop a sustainability plan. This plan described what the graduate candidates would leave with the community agency so the project could be continued or replicated. Many graduate candidates developed a portfolio or video describing the process with a *lessons learned* section. This step in the process helped the community agency see that the university was not just using them as a conduit to teach the graduate candidates but was genuinely concerned about the civic responsibility of affording ongoing progress of the project. The graduate candidates' culminating activity was to invite all the participating community members to class to participate in their presentation of the project.

Some examples of community partnership projects were as follows:

- Oral Histories—A disability agency was looking for someone to help them capture the oral histories of elderly parents who raised their children with disabilities in the mid-1900s. They wanted to develop a spot for National Public Radio (NPR). Graduate candidates assisted the agency representatives with the identification of individuals who wanted to share their history, developed interview questions, prepared the interviewee, coordinated the interview process, recorded the oral histories, edited the records, and organized the stories in a retrievable manner. This was a project the agency had wanted to complete but did not have the time or expertise to do so. The graduate candidates who chose this project were special education majors with media experience. They not only completed the project but provided the agency with a book describing the step-by-step process of developing oral histories for NPR broadcasting as part of their sustainability plan.

- Promoting Awareness with Law Enforcement Regarding Individuals of All Abilities—A law enforcement agency wrote a proposal for students to develop training for their county's law enforcement officers on the identification of and strategies for working with individuals with disabilities. Graduate candidates met with a team from the law enforcement agency, developed a needs assessment, and sent it out to local law enforcers. Based on the results of the needs assessment the graduate candidates, together with designated law enforcers, developed, implemented, and evaluated the training program. As part of the graduate candidates' sustainability plan, they left the agency with all training materials, including a detailed list of how to deliver the training complete with a script that went along with the power point presentation. The team also provided suggestions to improve the training based on the evaluations.

- Promoting University Awareness of the Effects of Drinking on Babies in the Womb Health Fair Project—A Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Agency requested help with organizing a booth and recruiting students for a Health Fair on the university campus. Graduate candidates learned about FASD. They then worked with the agency to identify their needs, developed a brochure, made posters, and designed the booth. They developed activities for individuals attending the fair. They then spent time recruiting participants by developing a non-alcoholic drink contest involving sororities and fraternities on campus. Lastly, they contacted the media and passed out flyers to recruit for the event. On the day of the Health Fair the graduate candidates and the community members were present to share the information and answer questions. This team evaluated their event and left a detailed book with directions and suggestions for running the event again as part of their sustainability plan.
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Friendship Groups—A Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) support agency requested help in facilitating social groups for children who have been diagnosed as having Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder as well as leading support groups for their families. This team of graduate candidates studied about FASD before they started their project. They identified the curriculum and practiced running a group. They led a practice group while the directors of the agency watched and provided constructive criticism. They then led 10-week sessions, one group for children and another one for their parents. The graduate candidates reflected with the community agency representatives after each session and made changes as needed. They then evaluated the project and left detailed plans for sustainability with the agency.
- Teaching Advocacy Skills to Individuals with Cognitive Impairments— This project was requested by a disability agency. They needed the team to help them develop a curriculum for adults with disabilities to learn how to participate on committees and boards to advocate for themselves. This team developed an advocacy curriculum and solicited input from individuals with disabilities as well as board members to critique the curriculum. They implemented the curriculum with 3 adults with cognitive impairments. They then left the curriculum with explicit instructions with the agency as their sustainability plan.
- Transitioning Preschool Students with Autism into an Inclusive Setting—A preschool for children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) requested a team to assist them in preparing staff from an inclusive preschool to meet the needs of their transitioning preschoolers with ASD. The team first spent time in the school with the students with

ASD who were preparing to transition and their teachers; then they met with the teachers of the preschool with typically developing children. The team then assessed the typical preschool's teacher training needs prior to the transition and, together with the administration at the preschool for students with ASD, provided the requested training. The team then helped identify issues and concerns once the children began the transition process. The evaluation of the project by both preschools became part of the portfolio left with both schools to help with replication.

Upon Reflection

While each of these two approaches to service learning were delivered differently, each met the requisite characteristics of service learning previously noted in Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition and by Novak, Murray, Scheuermann, and Curran (2009). Both are credit-based opportunities to connect academic content to a need in the field, either in a school-based setting or a community-based setting. Each experience required ongoing, formative reflection as a way to assess goal attainment and professional growth. And each afforded a reciprocal relationship that was mutually beneficial for the university students and the community partner. Beyond the definition, each program helped these educators recognize the power of community as a way to support individuals with disabilities.

The undergraduate teacher candidates learned that being a teacher is complicated. They were stunned at the work load they experienced and lamented the fact that this was work that could not be ignored. They also learned that it can be a challenge to work so closely with such a variety of people—general education teachers, parents, students, administrators, faculty, co-teaching partners, and the occasional Girl Scout troop that shared the common areas of the school. As they progressed through the experience, they learned that the techniques taught in class are most helpful when learned well enough to be second nature as there was seldom time to say, "Just a minute, I'll look up that great active listening technique and get back to you!" It was only at the end of the semester that the instructor provided the teacher candidates with a list of all of the activities they had completed as a reality check of the series of steps they had taken. The teacher candidates learned that the more holistic approach to monitoring their own progress had helped them to move beyond point-picking into real-life practice. As the teacher candidates prepared the written progress reports to share with the teachers and parents of their students, they learned that watching student progress and the reactions of people is the most valuable kind of assessment input a teacher can get.

From the real experiences working with the community, graduate candidates learned that collaboration is not an easy process. It required the very skills that paralleled the course objectives. Graduate candidates needed to effectively communicate with each other as well as with their community agency representatives. They needed to listen to the needs presented by the community members. When the communication broke down, the project faltered. The graduate candidates learned how to effectively work with community partners to reach a common goal. Graduate candidates also learned how to work with individuals with a variety of styles and how to deal with and work toward resolution of conflict. Furthermore, the graduate candidates were provided with an opportunity to build relationships with community members and now have not only valuable experiences but also valuable resources.

In both cases, the community partners were given an opportunity to provide input regarding the teams and the program itself. The school-based input came from parents, students, and teachers based upon how well the teacher candidates and the program structure had addressed the assessment-based needs of individual learners. The community-based input came from the agency or school partners relative to the specific projects they had helped to develop. In both cases, services were provided that would have otherwise not existed. The school partner in the undergraduate situation had no resources to deliver an afterschool learning program for its students. Similarly, the graduate candidates were able to assist the community partners in completing aspects of projects that they otherwise may not have had the time or resources to complete. At the conclusion of both experiences, efforts to communicate the approaches used and progress made were shared with the partners in writing. Teachers and parents in the school-based experience received written progress reports along with a presentation of work samples on the last day of the program. At an even higher level of depth, the community members were all left with plans so that they could reproduce the respective projects in the future. Each agency also had received recommendations from the team implementing the relevant project.

Projects offering substantial impact are rarely without challenge. The undergraduates' school-based experience required extensive organization, not to mention forms and procedures, to ensure that each child was safe while in our care. Managing confidential medical forms, contact information, and performance data for approximately 50 children was a challenge. Steps to ensure that all snacks provided were without identified allergens meant that the faculty instructor provided all snacks. A system whereby each team of teacher candidates had access to and responsibility for the forms was developed in tandem with a procedure for making sure each child was sent home only with an acceptable adult at the end of each session. Finally, facilities were a challenge.

Finding space to work with small groups immediately after school was difficult, as many teachers still wanted to remain in their classrooms. Moving to common areas such as the library, gym, cafeteria, or outside worked on most days. However, there were times when hallways had to do, and the teacher candidates learned the value of being flexible! Interestingly, none of these obstacles were mentioned in any of the textbooks used in the academic portion of the experience. Without the service learning component taking these undergraduate teacher candidates into a partner school that needed us as much as we needed them, the development of these future teachers would have been far more superficial, and the elementary students would have received far less individualized attention. Was it worth it? You bet!

Challenges for a service learning project working with multiple community agencies and many more community members are certainly worth mentioning. Connecting with agencies and obtaining proposals as well as providing direction to the teams required many hours of time. Occasionally a community agency proposal was unclear because the agency was not sure how they wanted to meet their need. When this happened the team needed to work together with the agency to determine the agency need and the work plan steps. Teams needed to understand that the original proposal and the finished product were not necessarily going to be the same. Change is a given, and students needed to work through this concept. Students also needed to realize that the process was the learning experience, not necessarily the final product. All of those concepts were (and still are) part of the learning objectives for the course but were not something that could easily be taught out of a text. The students were able to experience collaboration firsthand through not only its trials, but mostly through a very rewarding collaborative experience. The entire experience was worth the time and energy for candidates to take up their civic responsibility and for the entire experience to be a "win" for the candidate and a "win" for the school community and beyond.

Additional benefits from these programs could be rendered if a more research-based evaluation process had been utilized. While data were gathered in each program, no official consents to use the information for purposes beyond program evaluation were sought. Therefore, many questions are open for future study: (a) How did the community partners perceive the programs? (b) Did student success within the afterschool context carry over into the classroom? (c) Were the projects started by the teacher candidates sustained? (d) What impact did the service learning experience have on the candidates? Utilizing appropriate methods to document these types of service learning experiences could be used to encourage others to build community partnerships that allow teachers to develop their own skills while they support their community.

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Pamela Hudson Baker is an assistant professor of special education at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia who studies the responsible inclusion of learners with special needs. She focuses on the preparation of effective teachers and administrators who are skilled in the use of beneficial behavioral and instructional interventions. Prior to making the move to higher education, she was the coordinator of a regional day treatment center where students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) received specialized services. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Pam Baker, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, MS 1F2, Fairfax, VA, 22030 or email pbaker5@gmu.edu

Mary M. Murray is an associate professor at Bowling Green State University, Ohio in the School of Intervention Services. Her research interests include school/community collaboration, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and preparing preservice students to implement family-centered practices. Prior to her transition into higher education, she worked as a direct service provider and an administrator for a community agency serving individuals with disabilities.

Case Studies of School Community and Climate: Success Narratives of Schools in Challenging Circumstances

Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker, Heather Grenville, and Joseph Flessa

Abstract

This paper reports on a Canadian qualitative case study project funded by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. The paper describes success stories of students and communities affected by poverty from a diverse sample of eleven elementary schools throughout the province of Ontario. Over the period of one school year (2007-2008) and through school visits, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, researchers developed narratives that describe the ways that adult members (teachers, parents, administrators, and community groups/partners) in the sample schools thought about and shaped their work with students living in challenging socioeconomic circumstances. The paper illustrates examples from the project that draw on themes related to: commitment to high-quality collaboration, teacher mentorship, and community building; parent and community partnerships; and administrative leadership and the culture of leading.

Key Words: poverty, education, case study, teacher mentorship, collaboration, community partnerships, parental engagement, administrative leadership

Introduction

Poverty is a complex issue that needs more attention from government officials, researchers, and those in partnerships with schools. This research is a

collaborative partnership between a teachers' federation, two universities, and eleven elementary schools. In Ontario, one out of every six children lives in poverty, amounting to over 478,000 children under the age of 18 below the poverty line (Campaign 2000, 2007). Community organizations such as Campaign 2000, a non-partisan, Canada-wide coalition of community organizations, are working together with schools to end child and family poverty in Ontario and across Canada. This project contributes to the research literature and to the practical understanding of how schools can best work with students and communities affected by poverty.

Our purpose as researchers of this poverty project was not only to understand and explore success in challenging circumstances, but also "to examine the school in terms of the community and climate as perceived not only by the researcher but also by students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members at large" (AERA, n.d.). At the heart of an excellent school is a school climate that is defined by excellent teaching, high-quality leadership, motivated staff and students, and a sense of community (see Alliance for the Study of School Climate, http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/). In our work across Ontario schools, our respondents repeatedly indicated that school success had at its foundation teaching excellence, high-quality collaboration, and effective leadership. These findings are the markers that help build and secure school climates that are safe, inviting, and caring for students, teachers, parents, and the community at large. In this paper, we highlight the significant themes vital to creating the kind of communities and climates which we discovered in the schools that we visited. In particular, we explore common and independent themes from our case studies, namely: commitment to high-quality collaboration, teacher mentorship, and community building; parent engagement and community partnerships; and administrative leadership and the culture of leading.

Context and Theoretical Framework

In Ontario, approximately 478,000 children live in poverty. The "working poor" and the percentage of children living in poor families in Ontario has more than doubled in recent years and is close to 40% (Campaign 2000, 2007). With the recent deterioration of social assistance benefits and lack of inflation protection, these alarming statistics will remain and likely continue to grow. The average two-parent, low-income family lives $11,000 below the poverty line (Campaign 2000, 2007).

Three groups that are especially vulnerable to such statistics are new immigrants, single parents, and people with disabilities. Among new immigrants to Canada, poverty has risen 60% over the last 20 years (Colour of Poverty,

2007). In Ontario, 47% of children in new immigrant families are considered poor (Campaign 2000, 2007). Likewise, 32% of children in non-dominant-culture families also are considered poor.

A majority (54.6%) of children living in low-income households live with their single-parent mother. These single-parent families live, on average, $9,500 below the poverty line. The realities are harsh; most women are forced into poverty because of such issues as illness, abuse, divorce, or the high cost of living. In rural areas, women have little access to support systems or communities. Many single-parent women are humiliated and discriminated against because they are poor. This situation plays itself out as a catch-22; no way out and no way in—to any support system.

For children with disabilities (learning or physical), the poverty rate is 26% (Campaign 2000, 2007). Parents with disabilities experience many work interruptions and then have little saved or coverage for medical benefits or necessities. Women with disabilities earn much less than men with disabilities (Fawcett, 2000). These groups, and the statistics associated with them, tell but a small part of the picture of the stark realities of children and their families living in challenging circumstances.

Our funded research project serves as a call to action, and it has resulted in reports on successful programs and/or supported improvement in schools with challenging circumstances. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario and its mandate to alleviate the impact of poverty on student learning helped advance public education and social justice goals through this research project.

In our project, we came to understand the issues and impact of poverty on children and families by speaking directly to parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Our project report is a narrative, written in the form of cases, which describes distinct ways schools can support each other and tell a varied story of hope and success.

Recognition of the challenges of poverty should not obscure the variability between schools serving low-income communities (e.g., Frempong & Willms, 2002; Johnson, 2005; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979) or multiple ways of defining success (Cuban, 2000). While test scores may provide some information, it is crucial to look beyond standardized indicators to issues of school community, climate, and culture and to the nature of relationships for shared meanings and practices (e.g., Fullan, 2007). Shared practices and programs need to be acknowledged and evidenced between teachers and school leaders (e.g., Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) and beyond the school into children's families (parents) and communities at large.

There is a broad literature establishing the potential benefits of parent and community involvement for schools (Epstein, 1998), both for children's

learning (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001) and for their communities (Noguera, 2008). Some have questioned the way existing parent involvement practices reinforce inequality and disadvantage for poor parents (Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Still, other popular "how-to" strategy approaches to addressing the challenges of working with children affected by poverty (Payne, 1996, 2003) have been widely critiqued (e.g., Gorski, 2008). Admittedly, teachers' and administrators' accounts of their work and success with children affected by poverty were rather more complex; so, too, were the narratives of families and communities that have been impacted by poverty.

Objectives

This project was designed to provide a close-to-the-ground description of the attitudes, beliefs, practices, and policies of schools that are successfully working with students and communities affected by poverty. Our research examined the context-specific ways that schools have become "success stories," and we describe generally what these stories have in common.

In this paper, we explore how this project contributes to the research literature and to the practical understanding of how schools can best work with challenging circumstances such as poverty by examining the school in terms of the community, climate, and culture as it is perceived by parents, teaching staff, administrators, and community partners. Thus, our project sheds much-needed light on the ways that Canadian schools have sought to address and better serve students and communities affected by poverty.

Methodology

Our project used a qualitative methodology to explore success stories in schools affected by poverty. This included the case study method (Yin, 2002), use of narrative telling (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006), and the appreciative inquiry method (Cooperrider & Sorenson, 2005).

Case studies have several strengths, including their flexibility in addressing a wide variety of viewpoints (Merriam, 1998). We asked participants *what* the school did to build positive schooling experiences for children and communities affected by poverty, *how* those programs or policies came to be and how they were implemented, and *why* the programmatic direction was chosen for the specific school. We extensively prepared for data collection before each visit, including the use of multiple sources of data, open-ended protocol questions, systematic routine by researchers to triangulate themes and categories, theoretical propositions via follow-up researcher meetings, and organization for the framework for cases (Yin, 2003a; 2003b). The development of case

studies provided context-rich descriptions of the diverse set of schools we visited across Ontario. We interpreted and were reflective in our role as researchers so as to represent uniquely each case (Stake, 1995) since "the utility of case research to practitioners and policymakers is in its extension of experience" (Stake, 1994, p. 245). We held tightly to the notion of the personal experiences and viewpoints of all who we interviewed for this project. Thus, the narratives that our participants shared were pivotal to the development of the cases.

Narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) relies on stories as powerful tools for understanding experience in education (Dewey, 1938), teacher knowledge, and practice. We understand educators' practice and knowledge over time by studying their experiences as narratives or stories. We discovered that the places, people, and things in the context of schools are complex forces (Craig, 2003) that attribute to the narrative or story of success. This was viewed as an important phenomenon during our project. In other words, in our work with schools, the method we used is the case study and the phenomenon was the telling of narratives of education stakeholders in schools affected by poverty across Ontario. There was difficulty arriving at a single definition of poverty; this reflects, in part, the diverse goals of education for every school site. Observing the goals of each school, however, provided better understanding of how schools attempted to define and meet goals they judged to be most important to them. Our research identified and analyzed the narratives of success of those who were closest to the school, with a particular point of view which provided rich contextual information about meanings, beliefs, and processes. From the narratives we learned that success had multiple meanings for participants. We use this emergent approach to let the front-line participants identify their goals. Thus, in our view, working definitions of success-in-practice can serve various purposes for various contexts.

During some of our visits to schools, we incorporated a third qualitative method known as the appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperrider & Sorenson, 2005). We focused on what participants valued about their school community and climate, what they valued about themselves as educational stakeholders and community members, and ultimately we probed them to inquire further about future positive possibilities in their school communities. We sought to use narratives that explored participants' core values as a way to more deeply understand the narrative, or core value, of the school community. Values literature and schooling is not new, especially in areas of educational leadership (Starratt, 2004; Begley & Stefkovich, 2007; Ciuffetelli Parker, 2008). We found this methodology in itself to be productive as a prompt for teacher learning and for shared goals with community members. As researchers, the principles of appreciative inquiry allowed us, too, to learn more about *how* to

conduct research in such communities. Our presence as researchers garnered more teacher inquiry; participants felt their voices were heard, that what they said mattered in the context of their school community, and that what they contributed to the success story of the school was significant to the reform initiatives, not only within and immediately for the school community, but also as it informed wider policy reforms of education. In this manner, appreciative inquiry became a bridge and a way to inform the debate between the macro (outside the school) and the micro (inside the school) levels of schooling (Flessa, 2006). It was a means to how we could best begin to answer the question of what successful schools can do to address the challenges of poverty and how these are linked to wider community and policy reforms.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our sample included six small schools from urban areas (i.e., approximately 140 students per school), three large schools from the same urban area (i.e., about 650 students per school), one suburban school, and one rural school. Our schools' student populations ranged demographically from those that were all White and English-speaking to a school that was 50% new immigrant and English Language Learners to a school that was majority Aboriginal. In Canada, there is no standard measure for student poverty. The schools selected by the Federation for participation in their project were identified from a list provided by the Ministry of Education, which used Statistics Canada data about schools' neighborhoods to determine high incidence of poverty. Further recommendation of schools using successful strategies and developing community partnerships were provided by district superintendents.

Two lead researchers, with the assistance of two graduate students, visited 11 school sites, two times each, during the 2007-2008 school year. Schools were nominated to participate based on a reputational sample of success as well as collaboration with veteran educators from various school districts. During these visits key teachers, administrators, parents, and community groups were interviewed and different programmatic policies and practices were described. Specifically, data from research participants was collected through:

- 22 full days of focus groups with over 100 teachers, administrators, parents, and community partners
- Publicly available school profiles
- Over 35 unstructured interviews and conversations
- Over 35 audio-taped sessions of focus groups and interview/conversation sessions
- Detailed field notes from school visits

We asked the general question: How are success stories possible in schools with challenging circumstances such as poverty? Other examples of focus group questions/discussions that generated narratives of success were:

1. What counts as success for you for the students in this school, which is affected by poverty?
2. How do you recognize that success?
3. How widely shared are your goals with other staff, parents, or community members?
4. What programs in your school support your definition of success?
5. What are the biggest challenges you face in this school?

A bottom-up approach allowed us to analyze the data by culling all sources, reading and coding the issues, coding the issue-relevant meanings as patterns, and then collapsing the codes into themes. Finally, the collective cases were compared to provide further insight to issues. This study was a qualitative study, not a comparative study. Thus, the researchers acknowledge that the practices used in these case studies may or may not be different from those elsewhere in schools with similar challenging circumstances, or in those schools with fewer challenging circumstances. Still, it is important to consider that the narratives presented in this paper both represent the phenomenon of success in the schools studied and gives storied practice to those termed successes by our participants.

Findings

For the purpose of this paper, we provide data samples that generated a number of common themes from our case studies, including: commitment to high-quality collaboration, teacher mentorship, and community building; parent and community partnerships; and administrative leadership and the culture of leading. Please note: All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Commitment to High-Quality Collaboration, Teacher Mentorship, and Community Building

Teacher participants attributed school success and a positive school climate to a focus on instruction, describing teaching excellence and high-quality collaboration as key indicators. Although all schools struggled with balancing students' social/emotional needs with academic skills, teachers responded to this issue by collaborating on strategies to improve instruction. Angelica, a lead teacher in one school, revealed her experiences as a Professional Learning Centre Lead Teacher, when teachers from other schools would come to watch her teach:

> I think in my personal experience with having a Professional Learning Centre in previous years when the focus was literacy, we would invite teachers from the board to come in and see us teachers in action. And, the one line that I will never forget is when one teacher from another school said to me, "Wow, you're teaching." [That teacher] did not believe that we as a school in this community could teach these kids. She was in awe to see a perfect lesson happening. We need to model for each other, and other teachers need to see our ways of dealing with things. (Teacher Interview, 11/20/2007)

For several teachers, collective responsibility was not only about helping students manage and learn according to a code of ethics, which the school had set in action with such programs as character education, the "gotcha-doing-something-good" school program, and so on. Collective responsibility was very much about the academic achievement of all students. Another educator explained:

> Staff collaboration: I see it, it is the thing. There is collective responsibility for kids. Not just for behavior, but for their academic success. Collective responsibility is the idea that these are all our kids that are walking down the hall. Collective teacher efficacy is a refinement of that. With the divisional meetings, the idea that looking at data is not just about satisfying someone with talk, but if it informs their practice, and if they go with one another to do moderated marking or rubrics or that sort of thing. There is belief among teachers that when we work together, we become better teachers, and our students will become better. That sounds like flowery talk, but when you see it in action, it is there. (Principal Interview, 05/16/2008)

Many schools embedded directly into their School Learning Plans fresh new curriculum initiatives that translated into curriculum implementation by all teachers. One such innovation we evidenced was peer modeling and in-class coaching that was done by teachers within the school for each other. Simone, a junior teacher, revealed:

> We've always done a lot of mentoring at this school, where teachers have had an opportunity to go into other teachers' classrooms to see good modeling of teaching. We have good, dedicated teachers who understand and try to make things better. We continue to seek professional development, not only seek professional development but come back and share with others. Sharing. It's always been that our doors are open, it's never been that we come to work and close our door, that's it. (Teacher Interview, 11/20/2007)

For another teacher, Jane, when asked what had made an impact over the years, she referred back to the tremendous effect that mentoring by other teachers has had on her career:

> Going back to my story of when I first came here, I just think "thank goodness" for the mentoring that goes on in this place. At the end of school you feel the mentoring, and as a new teacher I really relied on teachers to come in who would take the time to do a guided, or do a whole week's worth of guided reading with me. Hands down, a teacher offered. I didn't even have to ask. I accepted because I wanted to excel in it; I wanted to improve. I wanted to see how it was done. (Teacher Interview, 05/16/2008)

It was evident by the teachers' narrative vignettes that they reasoned their school's success not only from curriculum implementation and innovations, but also from the close-knit familiarity and collegiality that transcended into both personal and professional development for each member. One teacher claimed:

> I'm dedicated to becoming the best teacher I can be. I can't expect my children to do their best work unless I'm doing my best work. For me, in all areas of my life, it's a journey, and I'm not there yet, and it's probably never going to be there that I can do my best work, but that's my goal. I value the opportunities for professional development. (Teacher Interview, 06/18/2008)

Teachers in successful school climates not only cared about the students in their charge, they cared also about themselves as a community of colleagues, learning together in order to improve their students' emotional and academic success. They also worked to improve their own teaching practices through site-based inquiry methods such as professional learning communities and research-embedded knowledge about teaching strategies.

Parent and Community Partnerships

Successful partnerships are built on trust. Ava, a Grade 3 teacher, described the school she works at:

> When we see a child come into the school, and I think it happens often, a child who's very troubled, sad, withdrawn, violent, aggressive, and then you see the progress over the months. You see that development, and they become, I guess they start to trust. They start to trust us as adults, they start to trust the school, and the parents, too [trust us]. And the parents are very open with us about their personal struggles, personal struggles that they had in their country. (Teacher Interview, 01/15/2008)

A teacher at another school admitted,

> …90% of parents say they do trust us. When we call home, they're on board with whatever we want to try with their child. It's like ok, go ahead if you think it's going to work, do it. They're very supportive of us. (Teacher Interview, 11/20/2007)

Parents want to work with teachers and help their child be successful. We observed character education programs in use at many schools to reinforce character traits many parents teach and model at home. These types of programs help teachers to model behaviors and characteristics they would like the students to emulate. A sense of community develops within the school when each child feels valued and values himself or herself. A parent shared:

> What I sense, and what I see is accepting everybody for who he is or who she is. That's the most important, that a young child can be loved. And every morning the announcements say "I like myself." Which is very good. (Parent Interview, 01/15/2008)

Another parent described the success of a mentoring program for her son at one school site:

> Parents who have children who come here, love it. They love the teachers, they love the staff, it's a very supportive environment….One of the things that really impressed me when I came to sign [my son] up was the mentoring program. They have the older kids taking care of the younger ones. Thinking of [another parent's son], my son fell in the yard and one of [the older students] came to help him. (Parent Interview, 11/20/2007)

During our school visits, the focus groups with parents often proved to be most interesting. Parents were quick to share how influential the school was for their children, and, in some cases, their own lives. A parent told her narrative of how volunteering at her son's school led to a career for herself and a better life for both of them:

> The thing is I am a single mother, and I love the school. I love all the principals who are here, and when my son started, I was going through a lot of problems with my ex-husband, and my son was diagnosed with ADHD, so I came here, and I volunteered a lot, I tried to be involved in my son's life. I'm here to see how I can work with the school, for the teachers and be close to them. And they saw the potential that I had, and then this principal, they always call me just about any vacancy they have for volunteers. It's motivated me to go to school, and I went to school, and I'm still in school—finishing in June to be a social worker. So in the process, I'm looking to give more of my time here as a social worker so I can go out in the field. (Parent Interview, 05/15/2008)

At a different school, a parent described how a "Mom's Group" at the school, led by the Public Health Nurse, had helped her through a dark time in her life. She confided:

> This is the mom's group…I know for me it's really good because I was stuck at home for months in a dark space. I've only been in this program for two weeks, you know, coming to the program and helping out. I've learned a lot, and I've seen a lot of people giving back, and that's what's making the difference. So for me I'm just very thankful that these programs are here, and that the people who have started them and that have continued to run them, for me it's been a blessing, because it's just something that I've been able to hold on to, and I look forward to.

> The school can't help you if you don't also help the school. I don't know if that makes sense. My mind was closed for a long time. I've had to open up and accept some of the policies, while at the same time work with the policies for a better understanding for what's going on. A lot has happened for me. (Parent Interview, 06/09/2008)

Teachers can provide guidance while they are at school, but supporting parents so they feel they are part of the school community can lead to vast improvements in all aspects of a child's life. Exhibiting compassion and understanding is a two-way street. Schools need to understand the families and their community. Communities, in turn, need to be given opportunities to interact with the school. Several of the schools we visited recognized the importance of involving the outside community and held events to bring the neighborhood into the school. Successful schools opened their doors and held barbeques, multicultural nights, movie showings, and so on. The overarching goal of these types of activities was to bring families into the school and for members of the school community to reach out and work with families as equal partners in their children's education.

Successful schools we visited often contained unconventional leaders, such as support staff and parents. Sometimes all it took was one dynamic person to make a difference. At one inner-city school, a single, teenage mother was the driving force behind many school-based initatives and school improvement plans. She organized school-wide trips, she planned fundraisers, and she recommended that the school newsletter be translated into multiple languages. Great things were possible because the administration recognized a natural leader that the community identified with and assisted her in any way possible. In another school, the head custodian was an ever-present force who was respected by all staff and students. He was often observed in the main office, speaking to parents, handing out bandaids, and supporting anyone and everyone he could. He embodied the attitude of the school by stating:

> For people to come in here—they're in poverty, and they're coming to old, old buildings all their lives. I have a hard enough time keeping the building going. Roofs leak, electrical problems….So along with that, take all the problems the teachers are dealing with, and the poverty and everything else, and translate it into an old building, it comes out to compassion, because it's really not about the brick and the mortar and everything, it's about the people in the building. (Support Staff Interview, 04/10/2008)

In communities affected by poverty, schools can be available to entire families, not only the students who attend. One of the urban schools we visited called itself the "Community Hub." Their goal was to be *the* place in the neighborhood where families could find the resources they needed to be successful. On site, the school provided half-day free preschool and had an office for a SWIS (Settlement Worker In Schools) to help recently immigrated families adjust to life in a new country. Additionally, the school came up with strategies to involve the neighborhood in the students' everyday life.

Perhaps the most influential example of the "Community Hub" at this school came from an "Executive Council" that was formed by the school principal, a nurse, a recreation centre coordinator, and the president of a local chapter of a national service club. The Council had worked together since the school was built 5 years previously to bring the community together and provide the students with as many opportunities as possible. The coordinator of the recreation centre explained how she felt when she started her position three years prior:

> When I got [to the community centre], my sense was that no kids were really in the facility. It was all rentals. Kids weren't allowed in there because of the cost factor. All there was were all these people who weren't allowed in there. It was dead. I sat there for the first four months watching the environment and watching people coming in, and I could see how un-serviced, and nobody really cared, and it was really an unfortunate feeling. It was a no-brainer, but for some reason there were too many barriers that didn't allow the kids to come in, and you could see why. [The principal] said we're going to get these kids in if we have to drag them in ourselves. We just started to find different ways to offer programs and to make it work. (Community Partner Interview, 04/15/2008)

Some schools attributed much of their success to the assistance they received from the community. During one of our schools visits, it was evident that a conscious effort was being made to have an open door policy and to welcome people into the school as much as possible. The school had an adult

volunteer program through which people could come in and read to students. They were involved with a "Roots of Empathy" value program. They had developed a partnership with a local university, bringing undergraduate students in for regular volunteer hours each week. They had even lent their school to a production company, which used the site in a popular screen movie. In addition to welcoming the community into the school, a staff member at one school regularly went into the community, to churches, service clubs, and city-wide organizations, and explained the challenging circumstances of their school. Many of the more affluent parts of the city had no idea of the magnitude of poverty experienced by their fellow citizens. One principal shared the process of "schmoozing:"

> I call it "schmoozing." I've taught [my staff] how to schmooze and make connections and build partnerships, talk about stories of the kids from your school. For example, [a teacher] did it at our church. They came in and organized a massive clothing drive for the PA day in December, provided refreshments, cookies, and the people could all shop for Christmas, get clothes, toys, all kinds of things. I talked at Christmas concerts with my roommate for quite a long time about the challenges at my school. And now [another school] has adopted us as a sister school. So it's just that it grows. (Principal Interview, 04/10/2008)

Many schools which experience poverty rely on the community for support, but interviewees expressed that it was equally important for the school to give back to the community too. At one site, outside organizations provided extra-curricular programs for the students at a fraction of the cost, or in some cases, at no cost at all. One school had a music program in which each student in a specific grade is given free tin whistle instruction for an entire school year. In the following years, students can continue with the program for a nominal cost of $1.50 per week. The students often hold concerts at community locations to raise money for more instruments and to supplement the cost of instruction. One educator explained how influential this program has been:

> I remember I was riding my bike through the park one day, [and] I heard a tin whistle; it was [one of our students] up in her balcony. She was playing, I could hear this polka. I thought, ok, this is a good program because these kids feel good about themselves. Sometimes in the schoolyard, they're playing the tin whistle. So they're influencing the whole neighborhood. There's music in the neighborhood, [it] is alive with music, so the whole metaphor is a lovely one. (Principal Interview, 11/20/2007)

Administrative Leadership and the Culture of Leading

Strong leadership by administrators, as well as teachers, was a key finding relating to successful climate and school community in our poverty project. One principal maintained that his role was to facilitate leadership by all members on his staff. He explained:

> I have a fabulous staff, I can trust them completely, and you can see there's leadership in this school. So if you power down to leadership amongst themselves, it leads to more leadership. (Principal Interview, 11/20/2007)

This type of leadership style translated to shared leadership within the schools we visited and helped to build a culture of communal leadership in and of itself. This further led to a culture of care and collaboration among teachers, principals, and students. One principal referred to this kind of climate as "the hope and dignity that every child deserves." Another principal's warm and welcoming personality made all people feel comfortable at the school and even in the surrounding community. Having a deep understanding of the community and an intrinsic knowledge about the school's needs, she set in motion a plan, describing,

> Most of our population comes three years delayed in learning, so we have a family literacy centre, which I fought for several years for. So there was an opportunity to get the kids in before that, to bridge that gap. We bring in [university] tutors, we bring in all kinds of volunteers to help support that. (Principal Interview, 04/10/2008)

This principal ensured that the school was a welcoming and inviting place, one that offered a sense of being part of the school life for all families. Rather than feeling excluded because of poverty and socioeconomic status, the way to address poverty for many leaders in these school systems was to foster a sense of care and belonging. Bonnie, a parent, shared how the principal understood the difficulties she was having as a working-poor single parent. Bonnie told her story:

> [My daughter] and I ended up in a women's shelter, and it's just down the street, and we were there for two months, and this is the closest school, and she went through some difficult times. Then I ended up getting my apartment and getting situated, but it's out of catchment. So before Christmas, [the principal] came to me and asked me if I'd like to keep [my daughter] here. And she was doing so well. And they brought me down to a room, and had me pick out Christmas gifts for [my daughter], and then she ended up coming home with a Christmas gift for me. [The school] is awesome. (Parent Interview, 04/10/2008)

Principals who lead successfully in challenging communities do so because, as one principal proclaimed, "I can relate. I can hear them." A principal explained,

> It is a culture of leaders. I am a leader of leaders, and [the teachers and staff] are all stepping up to the plate, and coming on board on their own time. I see my role as bringing out the best in people. There were no volunteers before I came here, which is interesting. And they were very gun-shy. I can't have a council, they won't come for an election night, but if I just pick up the phone, they'll be there. (Principal Interview, 04/10/2008)

Discussion of Findings

The project provided a rich description of attitudes, beliefs, practices, and policies of schools that are successfully working with students affected by poverty. Exchange of practice revealed potential for collegial critical discourse and reflective foundation for various programs and interventions. But, beyond the breakfast and nutrition programs, beyond the character education programs, beyond the positive behavioral strategies such as empathy and anti-bullying programs, what stood out most in successful schools we visited was an atmosphere of authentic care and inclusion for all students, families, teaching staff, and community members. Although this study focused on schools affected by challenging circumstances such as poverty, this is not to say these findings are limited to such schools. We will not learn how to improve student outcomes broadly by looking only at places that are already exceptional (Levin, 2006). Through the study of stories of schools in poverty, we explored possibilities. Our belief is that it is important for all schools to be using best professional practices and to strive towards excellence through a teacher inquiry lens that is site-based and contextual to the particular school community. Doing otherwise may, indeed, develop deficit models of thinking about practice. We want to avoid such deficit models; our study provides a framework as seen through narratives of practice by teachers, administrators, and parents, which help add to the literature by creating case studies of community and climate in successful schools.

Following, we discuss our findings from our case study schools that we found had created positive school climate, community, and a culture of leadership through: (a) teaching excellence and high-quality collaboration amongst teachers; (b) parental engagement along with community partnership; and (c) shared leadership amongst administrators and teachers.

Teaching Excellence and High-Quality Collaboration

Teacher participants attributed school success and a positive school climate to teaching excellence and high-quality collaboration. Balancing social/emotional needs with academic needs was a common struggle amongst all schools, but as one teacher put it:

> [When] I came here I had this image of how kids learn and I realized after my first day that I had to go back and change my teaching strategies and techniques. So, those of us who have been able to change and adapt look at who the kids are and do something about that in our class. (Teacher Interview, 11/20/2007)

This evidence is in contrast to a growing professional literature that recommends generalized and off-the-shelf remedies to address poverty and schooling issues (Payne, 1996, 2003). Rather, in our school sites, we discovered teaching staffs that learned by and for each other and used site-based inquiry to create caring and authentic learning communities and high-quality teaching strategies that were specific to the needs of their students and within their communities. There was teacher leadership both inside and outside the classroom to facilitate the success of collective responsibility and teaching excellence. An in-school policy of shared leadership, with each teacher doing their own part to make success and learning optimal, was common in schools that were deemed to have a successful school climate. In one school, teachers were committed to shared leadership by both coaching and being coached via a curriculum mentoring initiative. Reporting back successes of students' learning during divisional meetings as well as recognizing areas for growth both sustained the school learning plan and provided ongoing personal professional development for staff. Teachers were involved and both coached and were coached by other teachers in the school in order to maintain a high level of hands-on reflective practice about their teaching and to allow for continuous professional development at a grass roots level. From this experience, teachers gained confidence in their own teaching and began to see the benefit to ongoing professional learning for themselves. To this end, many teachers began to network with one another during school hours and to participate themselves in viewing their colleagues' teaching as well as having their own teaching strategies observed by same-school peers. This site-based plan embodied an ethic of care (Noddings, 1992) that immediately benefitted the school climate and the parental community, too. According to Levin (2007):

> Socioeconomic status remains the most powerful single influence on students' educational and other life outcomes….For educators working in high-poverty communities, finding an appropriate stance toward

poverty and the achievement gap can be difficult. Educators see the daily challenges in the lives of their students, including poor housing, inadequate income, and the effects of discrimination. Schools did not create these problems, and on their own they cannot solve them (p. 75).

Levin's (2007) work recognizes the impact parents and the community can have on the academic and social success of a child. Communities affected by poverty often face additional challenges, including stereotypes and discrimination.

Parental Engagement Along with Community Partnership

Our respondents reported that strong parental involvement and community partnerships created positive school climate and community. In the literature on parental involvement, there is a noticeable directionality; middle-class parents are perceived to be resources to the school, and low socioeconomic status parents are perceived to require resources (Freeman, 2004). Teachers know how to teach academics, but are not taught how to effectively engage parents in meaningful ways at school. Most teachers and administrators are educated to think of themselves as individual leaders of classrooms, schools, or districts, with little attention to the importance of teamwork and collaborations with parents, community partners, and others interested in students' success in school (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). As we saw during our site visits, schools can be successful despite challenging circumstances when all facets of the neighborhood work together towards a common goal. Communities—including poor communities—are full of untapped resources that go beyond cohesive social relationships that provide caring support for children (Riley, 2008). Students learn more and succeed at higher levels when home, school, and community work together to support students' learning and development (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Getting parents and the community to work with schools is not easy. Each community has its own set of unique conditions and challenges (Riley, 2008). Parents who have experienced discrimination during their own school experiences or who face ongoing economic stress may feel uncomfortable and fearful when visiting their children's schools (Peterson & Ladky, 2007). Schools must take the first steps towards opening their doors and breaking down the traditional barriers and hierarchies between schools and parents. When parents are involved in schools, it is often as an "audience, spectator, fund raiser, or organiser" (McGlip & Michael, 1994, p. 20). As evidenced in our sites, schools that are successful are able to go beyond these traditional roles and engage parents in meaningful aspects of their child's education. Welcoming parents means more than welcoming them in the school building; it means welcoming them into the processes of schooling in the multiple ways they deem significant (Pushor, 2007). We saw this evidenced by parents who

reshaped their lives, and even their own careers, based on their involvement in their child's school.

All members of a community are responsible for education (Hands, 2008). Sanders defines school–community partnerships as the "connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to promote students' social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development" (2001, p. 20). Partnering with community members is an avenue through which school personnel may gain access to resources in the community that they do not have within the school (Hands, 2005). We evidenced this in most of our school sites. In almost all cases, it was the principal who initiated contact with the community and attempted to develop partnerships. Congruent with the literature, we noted that partnership opportunities are limited or unavailable for schools if the principals do not see the value of the liaisons (Hands, 2005). Finally, although partnerships can be beneficial to both parties, developing partnerships is not an easy task, given the many contextual influences and the time and energy needed to get them off the ground (Hands, 2005). All schools reported the vast amount of time needed to make partnerships happen, and almost all participants asked for further resources and ideas on how to make better partnerships. However, when the effort is made, a variety of successful outcomes was possible from school–community partnerships, for both parties involved, as our data confirmed.

Shared Leadership Amongst Administrators and Teachers

Our participants reported that strong leadership by both administrators and teachers on issues of poverty was fundamental. This finding is consistent with growing research literature that emphasizes multiple paths of leadership (Leithwood, Mascall, & Stauss, 2009; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Successful administrative leaders lead by example, trying new things to reach out to the community and staff every day. When asked how accomplishment is met, a principal responded, "You have to check your ego at the door for one thing. That's the kind of leader that gets in the way of people." Affirmation of all community members—teachers, staff, parents, and students—is paramount. Strategies for success by administrative leaders and teachers involve the complexity of time and effort that is needed to reach out to the school community and to the outside surrounding communities. One principal discovered that people will do whatever they can to help when they are given an indication of the importance of their gifts and service to the community and school. Consistent with current literature, we found that successful schools interacted with community by building trusting relationships (Riley, 2008), solving issues together (Matthews & Menna, 2003), and creating a process of partnership for

success between leaders within the school and beyond to outside community partners (Hands, 2005).

Conclusion

Our participants in case studies of successful schools reported that poverty is, indeed, a complex issue and that site-based inquiry is one way to focus on context-specific issues in order to create caring school environments and successful learning for students. If socioeconomic status remains the most powerful influence on students' educational and emotional life outcomes (Levin, 2007), then schools need to look specifically to its children's needs in order to fulfill potential and to begin to reduce the stigma of poverty. However, sustaining site-based inquiry is not free, and additional resources are needed. Because teacher inquiry assists both in recognizing local challenges and proposing responses to those challenges, an investment in research helps schools articulate their stories of success and better embed these practices into their school programs. In almost all school sites, we were provided feedback that our research with teachers, administrators, and parents helped schools to better articulate their issues and solutions for their schools' dilemmas related to challenging circumstances of poverty. In this manner, this collaborative project is a contribution to the ongoing literature (e.g., Leader & Stern, 2008; Schultz, 2008) and provides a useful counterpoint to discussions of effective schooling that narrowly emphasize test scores. Rather, the narratives provoke discussion about how educators and policymakers concerned with ameliorating the effects of poverty on schooling can contribute to the benefits of building collaborations within and outside school walls in order to create positive community, climate, and a culture of shared leadership. Our research found that to build positive community, climate, and a culture of leadership, schools in challenging circumstances had at their core: excellent teaching and high-quality collaboration amongst teachers; parental engagement along with community partnerships; and shared leadership amongst administrators and teachers.

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Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. Her research interests include narrative inquiry, teacher development and leadership, literacy education, and self-study of teacher education practices. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker, 1842 King Street East, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, L8K 1V7, or email darlene.ciuffetelli-parker@brocku.ca

Heather Grenville is a secondary school science teacher, currently completing her M.Ed at Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada.

Joseph Flessa is an associate professor, Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education at OISE, University of Toronto. The major emphasis of Dr. Flessa's research is urban education. He is a researcher at OISE/UT's Centre for Urban Schooling and at the Centre for Leadership and Diversity.

Faith, Hope, Tolerance, and Sense of Community

Diane E. Johnson

Abstract

The challenge of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity has inspired new trends in community research. New models eschew an emphasis on conformity to open communities up to difference, both among members, and between members and an ever more complex social world. The data here are taken from a student-experience study of a diverse post-secondary preparatory academy for high schoolers. The paper examines student reports of the changes they experienced as they progressed through the Academy, building faith, faith in each other and in themselves, hope, necessary to support long-term investment, and tolerance, sufficient to find in their diversity the resources they need to fulfill their dreams. The analysis relies on David McMillan's (1996) sense of community to develop a thick description of student experience in this school community.

Key Words: sense of community, school community, diversity, peers, tutoring, counseling, afterschool, summer, college preparation, preparatory academy

Introduction

The pursuit of school community has always been part of a more encompassing concern with the decline of what is often called *solidarity*, or a sense of belonging, of mutual responsibility and caring in societies more generally—a topic that came to the center of the social and behavioral sciences with the onset of the industrial era in the West. As a part of that more general concern, the study of community inherited a history of scholarship emphasizing

the importance of conformity, of value consensus, shared symbol systems, and community boundaries (the distinction between "us and them"), elements that challenge the possibility of community in an increasingly diverse social environment (Apple, 2004; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In an effort to meet the challenges posed by diversity, social and behavioral scientists have sought out new ways of characterizing community that discourage exclusion and closure. Increasingly, what we seek to understand are communities that open out to the many different worlds in which they are embedded, that encourage "faith, hope, and tolerance" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 20) while preserving their own integrity.

As an example of this conceptual shift, we might look at one of the most widely applied theoretical schemes, McMillan and Chavis's sense of community (SOC). In their work published in the *Journal of Community Psychology* in1986, McMillan and Chavis drew on the traditional research on group cohesion to locate SOC in four elements: Membership, Influence, Integration and Need Fulfillment, and Shared Emotional Connection. McMillan's revision of the scheme in 1996 resonated major shifts in thinking about community, shifts that Fyson argued opened the model to *transformational community*, community which resolves "some of the tensions between 'you and me'"(1999, p. 348).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the way these conceptual changes register in our thinking about school community and what it does. The focus of the analysis is the student community in a successful post-secondary preparatory academy housed by a public university in the old-industrialized Northeast (henceforth, "the Academy"). Data for the paper were gathered in the student-experience phase of a study of the Academy. Three questions guide the analysis: Can McMillan's (1996) revised elements—Spirit, Trust, Trade, and Art—suggest how this community opens to diversity both inside and outside the Academy? Can they help us understand how this diverse school community secures its own integrity while continuing to support individual differences? What insights do these revised elements give us into student accounts of the process by which they have grown into the educational mainstream?

The Preparatory Academy

Post-secondary preparatory programs find their origin in mid-1960s federal Poverty Program legislation, the prototype being Upward Bound, a program designed to ameliorate the persisting achievement gap, the difference in educational attainment between children from prosperous and middle-income homes and those whose parents are less fortunate. There are three such post-secondary preparatory programs in the Academy: Upward Bound (UB), Upward Bound

Math Science (UBMS), and Academic Alliance (AA). Upon recommendation of high school guidance counselors in neighboring cities, the Programs admit students in grades 9-12 (1) who have been judged by their schools to be academically talented, (2) whose families live at or below 150% of the federal poverty line, and (3) who aspire to be the first in their families to attend college. Students who become part of the Academy participate in afterschool tutoring, regular Saturday sessions of supplemental instruction, extracurricular activities (excursions to cultural centers and ethnic events, seats of government, historic sites, and museums), and a five-week summer program of special classes at the host university during which students are housed and fed at the Academy's expense. Personal and financial counseling are readily available.

Students typically join the Academy the summer before ninth grade. If they remain with the Program and do not continue on at the host university, their participation ends with the "Bridge Program," summer classes at the host university in preparation for college matriculation. Those who elect to continue on at the host university are invited to participate in a college tutoring program, Smart Start.

Students who join post-secondary preparatory programs are, as often not, not only disadvantaged, they are often ethnically and linguistically diverse as well, and the Academy is no exception. In academic year 2006-2007, the year in which the data were collected, Academy records list the student population as 8.7% Caucasian, 2% Asian, 13% African or African American, 8% of mixed ethnic heritage, and 68.3% Latino students of very different origins—from Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Ecuador, Honduras, and Guatemala. On the survey that was a part of this study, about a third (28.2%) of these students reported that their parents did not speak English; 19.5% said that they still struggled with English in their classes. Nearly half (44.4%) said they bore some continuing responsibility in the parental home that took them from their studies during the week (taking care of siblings and the like). A large proportion (43.5%) contributed their summer wages to their family's upkeep, and many (30.9%) their wages during the school year. Over half (57.8%) said that they felt they were more at risk than other eligible students, and 54.9% reported that their parents did not know how to help them succeed. At the time of the study, according to Academy records, 100% of its former graduates had moved on into post-secondary education.

Methods

Research on the Academy's student population proceeded in two phases: (1) an exploratory phase spring and summer 2006, involving focus groups of

students who had graduated from high school and continued on at the host university, and (2) a confirmatory phase in which students' statements from these interviews were submitted to the whole of the regularly attending high school and college population.

The Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with Smart Start (SS) students ($n = 14$), spring and summer 2006. (Note: The small size of the Smart Start student group relative to the student population of the entire Academy is an epiphenomenon of the growth of the Academy's student population in the years leading up to the time of the study.) Like all of the materials used in the study, including the informed consent form students signed to participate the study and the student questionnaire constructed from the focus-group data, the interview protocol was approved by the University's Institutional Research Board (IRB). Semi-structured interviews dealt with students' preparation for college life and relevant areas in which—in their tenure with the Academy—they might have experienced change: in their study habits; in their academic success; in their self-concepts; in help seeking; in future plans; and in their relations with teachers, with neighborhood and high school acquaintances, with fellow students at the Academy, and with their families. Questions explored the process through which these changes occurred and how they might have eased the students' transition to college life. Students were also asked how they might change the Programs and how they might be better served. In line with IRB standards, students were promised strict confidentiality. Academy staff had no access to the interviews, to the interview data, or to completed questionnaires.

Ninety-minute interviews were conducted by an unaffiliated faculty member in an office somewhat removed from the Academy's facilities. Students arrived in groups of four to five students each. Interviews were tape recorded. Running notes identified signs of consensus in students' responses to each other's comments. Students were repeatedly asked to reflect on one another's statements: "Have you all had similar experiences?" (see Chipuer et al., 1999 for a similar criterion).

Rapley and Pretty (1999, p. 679) have cautioned against research techniques that impose concepts on students, that may not represent students' own "categories in use" as they talk among themselves about their experiences. Accordingly, neither community nor SOC appeared in the interview protocol; these topics entered into consideration only as they were introduced by the students. No standardized scales were used. Student statements which elicited high levels of agreement in the interviews were transcribed, cleaned of any identifying material, and transformed into a series of Likert-type items (5 =

strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree). There were 126 items of this kind, including statements that seemed to contradict the dominant opinion—this to control for confirmation bias. These items—together with demographic, academic, family, and neighborhood data and a series of evaluative questions with respect to Program components—were submitted to the whole of the Academy's student population.

Questionnaire Administration

The questionnaire was administered to high school and Smart Start students and to students who had graduated from high school and chosen to attend colleges and universities other than the host institution for the academic year 2006-2007. High school students completed the questionnaire during regularly scheduled Saturday sessions, Smart Start students, when they came into the tutoring center. Of the high school students, 98% (105/107) completed the questionnaire, of the Smart Start group for fall 2006, 100% (n = 19). With three mailings and two phone solicitations, completed questionnaires were received from only 57% (13/23) of Academy graduates at other colleges and universities. Students at these other schools were reflecting on their experience in the Academy a year or more distant. Because they were no longer involved in the Academy and because of the low response rate, data from this last group were used only to check for systematic variation between these students and students who remained in contact with the Academy. No significant differences emerged, though results regarding this portion of the analysis must be qualified by the low response rate.

Interview data were analyzed by the investigator using the grounded theory method of constant comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Turner & Husman, 2008; Van Vliet, 2008). Constant comparison is an inductive method for analyzing a stream of qualitative data. It begins with the identification of meaning units, here, in the recorded focus group interviews. An example of a meaning unit or data bit would be this statement from a student: "I get better and better at putting the different pieces of my life together now and understanding who I am." The contents of meaning units are compared, establishing categories of data bits. Categories are explicitly defined, first, in very concrete terms. As the comparison of data bits within and across categories continues, categories become increasingly abstract and the relationships among categories are clarified. Comparison and categorization of data bits and the definition of categories continues until the analysis reaches a point of saturation at which all of the data have been accounted for and further work adds little or nothing to the analysis. Constant comparison thus yields an interpretation of a data stream.

Within the general context of the students' reports of their growth in the Program there were nine general categories: growth in intersubjectivity, reflexivity, autonomy, self-control, self-esteem, self-efficacy, sense of community, together with changes in interpersonal relations and in accommodation to the academic environment (including study skills). Accommodation to the academic environment included Jerome Bruner's capacity "to go beyond the information given" (Bruner, 1973, pp. 218-237) or to create new knowledge. A final category was reserved for statements evaluating Program elements. Results of the analysis, cleaned of all identifying material, were shared with the Director of the Preparatory Academy and his comments elicited.

Results: Community and Diversity

Post-secondary preparatory programs generally pursue community among participants (Dottin, Steen, & Samuel, 2004; Gándara, 2005; Gándara & Bial, 2001; Jehangir, 2009; National Study Group, 2004). But this community may look very different from the one envisioned in the 1986 McMillan and Chavis model, and the Academy's student community is no exception. McMillan's revision of the scheme in 1996 resonated major shifts in thinking about community in at least five ways: (1) It recognized what some had come to feel was the most important need individuals brought to community: freedom from shame (Nathanson, 1995; Rorty, 1989); (2) It allowed for the importance of discourse and the individual's need to express what he or she really feels (Habermas, 1995); (3) It highlighted the importance of "just" authority (Habermas, 1995); (4) It underlined the role of diversity in need fulfillment (Giddens, 1991, 1994); and (5) it recognized the significance of narrative (Rorty, 1989), as narrative captures what is "transcendent and eternal" in the shared history of the community (McMillan, 1996, p. 323). Student reports of their experience in this school community reflect the need to move beyond the elements of Membership, Influence, Integration and Need Fulfillment, and Shared Emotional Connection to emphasize the elements of McMillan's revised model—Spirit, Trust, Trade, and Art—insofar as they see these elements as working to (1) foster a sense of belonging, mutual caring, and responsibility, as they (2) accommodate to diversity, and (3) extend the boundaries of this community, adapting to a larger and larger range of environments—including the academic environment of higher education.

Spirit

In McMillan and Chavis's 1986 SOC, the first element, Membership, underlined the importance of boundaries between "us and them" (created in part

by shared symbol systems, e.g., Black Power's clenched fist) to the "security that protects group intimacy" (1986, p. 10). This element does not fully capture students' experience of the Academy. There are, for example, no identifying t-shirts, caps, or symbols to distinguish students who attend the Academy. Guidance counselors report that the Academy's students merge easily into their respective high schools during the week. Continued participation in the Programs requires regular attendance at afterschool tutoring and Saturday sessions. Interaction over many years is the rule. But while students participate in the community, they return daily to the high schools and neighborhoods from which they are drawn and to homes vital to ongoing emotional and financial support. Student interaction is more intense during the summer months on campus, but this too is penetrated again and again by contacts with the college environment, particularly as students occupy student housing and patronize university dining halls and local businesses. What, then, accounts for the requisite emotional security students report? McMillan's answer is Spirit, the drawing power of friendship.

Spirit implies continuing "faith that I will belong" and I will be accepted (McMillan, 1996, p. 117), an environment in which students can see themselves "mirrored in the eyes of others" (pp. 315-316). In the survey, 71% of the students at every level of the Academy—grades 9-12 and college participants—agreed (agree + strongly agree), "I feel I can be more myself with the people in the Academy;" 79% agreed, "I am much more my own person since I joined the Academy," and 89.5% agreed, "The students in this Program rely on each other; we take care of each other. It's like having another family."

Student: Upward Bound is very diverse; it's like a melting pot. Everyone treats everyone else as an equal. We live with each other in the summer, and we see each other every day, 24/7. You have to learn to get along. You have to learn to deal with other people's faults. No matter who you are, where you are from, you are accepted.

Trust

In McMillan and Chavis's 1986 SOC, the second element, Influence, indicates a transactional "force toward uniformity…[coming] from the person as well as the group…uniform and conforming behavior indicates that a group is operating to consensually validate its members as well as to create group norms" (p. 11). In 1996, McMillan revised this element to focus on Trust. Trust implies something more than member influence and a strain toward conformity. Trust suggests that a community "has solved the problems arising from the allocation of power," of "processing information and making decisions" (1996, p. 318). In McMillan's 1996 SOC, Trust demands justice, authority based on

principle. In the Academy, justice demands fairness, an understanding that students will make mistakes, and an openness to trying again. In the survey of the Academy, 97.5% of the students affirmed, "This program doesn't let those stereotypical barriers that society sets on you be a reason to fail;" 71.6% agreed, "It's important to me that teachers do not dwell on my mistakes."

> Student: They [staff] make you feel good about yourself because they don't dwell on the mistakes you make, like "You're so bad; oh, you're so bad." They say, "OK, you did a mistake. OK, this is what you have to do to fix it." They never close a door; they leave your options open.

Established norms, rules, and laws are critical if members of a community are to know what to expect from one another and to "develop a sense of personal mastery," writes McMillan (1996, p. 319). However, norms, rules, and laws must not be so confining that they threaten members' capacity to "speak the truth"—particularly about their feelings about themselves and others. In the Academy, close relationships among staff and students sensitize adult tutors to unanticipated individual needs and challenges:

> Student: She [one of the tutors] just called me right now to see how I was doing. She knew I was tired yesterday, and I had so many things to do. She just didn't ask me about my grades. She said, "How are you doin'; how are you feelin'?"

Sensitivity to the very different needs students bring to the Programs is furthered by the tutors' practice of actively transferring their own skills to the students, engaging and training the students in openness and helpfulness in their relations with themselves and each other.

> Student: In the Academy, you learn to study like you do with the tutors. You ask yourself questions about the reading, schedule your own time—things like that. We learn to help other students with their work and encourage them like the tutors do.

The result is an open space in which the students feel they can let down their defenses, explore their own strengths and weaknesses, and negotiate the conditions they need to grow.

> Student: You are forced to mature here.…You grow up; it happens without your realizing it. You learn how to negotiate with people—to get the kinds of conditions you need. You learn to deal with other people's differences.

Acceptance and continuing problem-focused discourse are associated in the students' experience of marked growth in reflexivity, or "the capacity to attend to one's own thoughts and feelings, what one 'brings to the table'" (Bruner,

1996, p. 35). From the students' perspectives, growth in reflexivity is one of the most important benefits of participating in the Academy, with nearly all (95.2%) reporting, "I get better and better at putting the different pieces of my life together now and understanding who I am."

Peer tutoring and counseling, another of the core functions of the Academy, encourages feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem as well:

> Student: If someone needs help, [the adult tutors] interpret it and explain it. Like before, I was the type of person who could read and understand it, but when it came to explaining it to [another student], I had no idea how to get that information to her. And I feel like now, I can like read and interpret it and relate it to her in a way that she can understand it by giving her examples.

A large portion of students (89.5%) echoed the sense of growing empowerment so evident in the focus groups: "I feel much more powerful since I joined the Academy; I feel I can handle things better."

Growth in self-efficacy and self-esteem registers in other areas of the students' activities, encouraging them to take more control of their lives. In the survey, 92.7% of the students agreed, "I think a lot about my future now and how what I am doing will affect it," 96.8%, "Now I listen to other people, but I make up my own mind," 93.5%, "I can hold my own in discussions now even about important issues," and 94%, "I have learned to deal with people who might look down on me and to hold my own in ways that do not get me into trouble."

The experience of this open space in which they are accepted, of stable norms and rules that allow them to plan and predict and grow, participation in the core functions of the Programs, and the prevailing sense that the authority the Academy exercises is just are associated with widespread support for the Programs. Students do feel the pressure to meet academic standards. In the survey, 58% of the students revealed that they were "as afraid of failing" as they "used to be." At the same time, 73.4% agreed, "You have to do something really ignorant to get kicked out of the Academy."

> Student: I would make the standards even higher. People get kicked out because of their attitude. And you wonder why people do the things that they do….If you get kicked out, it has to be something very ignorant…. Like these two girls today, for fighting. You ask, "How can they be so stupid that they can't control themselves?"

Close relationships with teachers and the peer tutoring and counseling work against any seeming apathy toward students' difficulties (Monroe, 2009), breaking down barriers to the internalization of Program goals (Hallinan,

Kubitschek, & Lui, 2009). In the survey, 82.5% of the students observed, "I feel badly about myself when I slack, when I do not try hard," and 86.1%, "I have gotten to a point at which I keep driving myself to do better and better."

Trade

Relationships are cemented, argued McMillan and Chavis in 1986, when they are reinforced. Value consensus integrates a community; complementary statuses and roles provide for reciprocal reinforcement (p. 13).

Student data from the Academy suggest the limited contribution of value consensus to our understanding of community under conditions of diversity. Continued participation in the Academy requires maintenance of academic standards in high school and college classes and conformity to the STAR policy, "setting the tone for an atmosphere of respect," in students' interactions with both staff and other students. But outside these basic requirements, conformity—the sharing of values and culture and symbol systems—is limited by the ethnic diversity of participants. Diversity, moreover, is encouraged; in fact, honoring diversity serves as one of the touchstones of the Programs.

The emphasis on the integrating force of value consensus in the 1986 model echoed a similar theme in traditional sociology. By 1996, sociology had moved on and so had McMillan. In McMillan's 1996 revision, the third element in the 1986 model, Integration and Need Fulfillment, is replaced by Trade. Speaking of this element, McMillan (1996) writes that, of the resources members provide for one another, none is more important than freedom from shame.

The guilt students experience from internalizing Program goals, suggest Orth, Berking, and Burkhardt (2006), does not have the same potentially maladaptive consequences as shame. Shame indicates a global judgment on the self, not on a behavior—one feels guilty about a behavior—but rather, on the whole self (Lewis, 2003). A self shamed is a self unworthy, fundamentally flawed. Particularly in a case in which shame is unacknowledged, when the individual attempts to hide shame from consciousness, the experience has been associated with painful, at times disabling, mental and emotional consequences (Scheff, 1990). Scheff (2006) has defined shame as a threat to the social bond. The opposite of shame is "attunement," a sharing of minds; attunement is a source of pride (Scheff, 2006, p. 144; see Walton & Cohen, 2007, on the differential effect of belonging on White and Black students' achievement). The STAR policy, the demand that students treat each other with respect, is a central feature of the Academy:

> Student: People say to you, "How can you get up at seven o'clock on a Saturday morning to go to school." But, this isn't like going to school. We are respected here. We treat other people with respect.

Freedom from shame together with peer counseling and tutoring open the door to self-disclosure, the "medium of trade" in a diverse community (McMillan, 1996, p. 321). Self-disclosure—revealing my own perspective on a topic, my approach to my classes, the way in which I handled a particular problem, how I feel about a shared circumstance, the difficulty with which I feel I need help—not only alerts adult tutors and friends to problems the students encounter; as the students share with one another, it also puts into circulation new ideas and perspectives (Geldard & Patton, 2007) critical to students who are experiencing significant change, both personal and academic.

A significant number of students in this study reported substantial change both personally and in their relations with family and neighborhood as a result of their participation in the Academy. A majority (64.2%) of survey respondents agreed with the focus groups, "I try to find a balance now between who I am in the Academy, and who I was before," 54.1%, "Things have really changed with my parents and my friends back home, but we work these things out. It's easier because the students are all in this together and we talk about it," and 79.5%, "We work out our problems together in the Academy, even when the tutors are not here."

Judging from the student reports, moreover, it's difficult to separate out growth in understanding each other's personal problems from the contribution self-disclosure makes to academic success. "When we study in groups," answered 89.6% of the students, "people have different ways of thinking about things, and I think it helps me understand." "I learn new methods of studying from other students in the Program," answered 75%. And this is associated with marked growth in accommodation to what Bruner (1996) has called the "culture of education."

The study produced high levels of agreement on all of the culture of education items, a large portion of the students agreeing (84.7%), "I am beginning to feel that I can master the material in my classes, that I am understanding it like my teachers do," 92.7%, "The Program has helped me think more deeply about things," 93.5%, "I no longer just absorb knowledge; I get ideas of my own now. I figure out new things for myself," 86.3%, "Sometimes I think about my class work outside of class and how it might apply to what I am doing," and 75.8%, "I participate more actively in my classes than I used to." Moreover, in the students' experience, self-understanding is to a high degree dependent on their understanding of others, with just over 83% of the students at all levels of the Academy agreeing, "The more I learn about other people, the better I feel I understand myself."

Contributing to the community is critical to members' feelings of belonging (McMillan, 1996). Interaction and mutual investment in each other's

work tends to lead to a condition McMillan labels a "state of Grace" in which students stop counting, in which they readily share in each other's successes (1996, p. 322). In the survey, 90.3% of the students agreed, "We compete in the Program, but I am happy when one of us does well, even if it's not me."

From the students' perspective, growth in intersubjectivity, the capacity "whether through language, gesture, or other means" (Bruner, 1986, p. 20) to "understand the minds of others" (pp. 40-42) is another of the most important aspects of their progress through the Academy. Growth in reflexivity and intersubjectivity develops students cognitively. They become more capable of dealing in abstract principles as these relate to their lives and those of others. They develop empathy. These skills are critical to being able to participate in local and national deliberations and to a sense of being a part of the larger sociopolitical arena (Habermas, 1995). "People come from different places; their backgrounds are different. When I know how they are, I can deal with them," said 92.8%. Over 80% agreed, "I feel I understand life and lots of things outside my home and my neighborhood better than I did before I joined the Academy."

As they grow in reflexivity and intersubjectivity, the students become more confident of their capacity to maintain their own individual boundaries, to decide for themselves regardless of what their friends say or do. They have a greater sense of *individual autonomy*, or the individual's capacity to "feel choiceful" in one's action and "be the locus of the initiation of those actions" (Kaufman & Dodge, 2009, p. 102). Research has found separation-individuation, or "the developmental process…[beginning]…with separation from parents, peers, and other significant persons…[and extending]…to individuation and the development of a coherent, autonomous self" (Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004, p. 213), is facilitated by a relational context in which students maintain strong ties with others and is positively associated with college student adjustment (Mattanah et al., 2004).

As students disclose themselves to one another, they discover unforeseen ways in which their differences might serve one another. Giddens (1994) has called the process by which one becomes at once both more autonomous and more aware of one's interdependence with others *individualization*. Individualization is associated not with a rejection of outsiders, but with a tendency to relate to people everywhere in a different way:

> Student: I thought when I came here all of my friends would be just like me, you know, serious about their classes. After a while, you begin to notice little things, like not coming to class and coming late to class. And you begin to realize every person is himself for a reason. Before, you know, you see the leader and you follow subconsciously, because its cool

and it feels good. But my perspective on my friends has changed. I am myself. They are themselves.

Student: I was like in the gifted and honors program in high school, and I was one of two Latino students, so a lot of kids would say, "Wow! You're in the wrong spot. This is hard." I'm just like, "OK." Then at the end of the marking period, I'd be the one with an A, and they'd be like, "How'd you do that; you must have cheated." I'm like, "No, I read the book, and I did the homework. Ha! How'd you like that?" And my senior year was a year of change. 'Cuz a lot of kids saw me not as Puerto Rican, but as an equal….Especially in my chemistry class. We started having real in-depth discussions about religion, all kinds of things. By the time the year ended, we were closer to each other than we would be amongst people of our own race.

Student (a young African-American woman): I've had people come up to me and say, "Oh, you think you're better because you're 'white.'" Things like that. In high school, the first thing that would come to my mind: "Oh, you're not going to disrespect me. I don't care who you are." My anger would come out. But now, I tend to want to educate them. Like I just go, "You think I'm white because I speak well. Well, let me tell you that not all white people speak well."

Student: I think, like, I expect less from my friends. When I go home, I take the time to understand what my friends [who are not part of the Academy] are doing, but they don't take the time to understand why I do what I do. But now I don't expect everyone to understand everything I do. If they don't understand, then I understand, because I don't have such high expectations.

The students are learning to transcend the Academy's community. The diversity of the Academy's students one from another and their differences from staff and tutors provide not limits, but possibilities—the option of "going for it" with growing confidence that they will succeed. A student articulates a central point:

Student: We really have an advantage. Like in our class, if you were closed-minded, it would be a lot harder to start a study group with a lot of people you don't know. Like suppose you are in a class with a bunch of Latinos, a bunch of Blacks, a bunch of Asians. So instinctively [if you are "closed-minded"], you will go with the other white people….instead of spreading it out….[T]hat really helps you….Like if you get a group that is a bunch of different people from different countries and cultures, you'll get different ideas and different points of view. That may be that

extra edge that you need for that essay….That's one of the things the Academy helps you see, that diversity is really a great thing…it helps you.

Art

Finally, to encounter the Academy's students is to encounter narrative, as evidenced by all of the stories behind the interview statements above. Stories which affirm the central values of this diverse community lead to *redescription* (Rorty, 1989), narratives that open possibilities, ever new ways of dealing with the conflicts that plague the students' lives as they grow into the mainstream. McMillan and Chavis's (1986) fourth element, Sense of Emotional Connectedness, relied on community organization, events at which members might acknowledge their bonds. The fourth element in McMillan's revised scheme (1996), Art, is again more fluid, growing, metamorphosing, more in keeping with the nature of this open community. Art acknowledges the importance of students' redescriptions of what they have come to expect of others and of themselves as they extend themselves out into their worlds (Rorty, 1989). Art provides moments to reflect on Spirit (McMillan, 1996), but it also, at one and the same time, leads not to closure, but to ever more understanding as students grow into and with their many worlds.

Summary and Discussion

Traditional concepts located community in conformity, shared values, and common symbol systems. These concepts are not adequate to capture what the Academy's students mean when they talk about community. Over 91% of these students (including students who were in their first year) reported, "As they work together year after year, the students…build their own community." Yet as we have seen, the students themselves view this community as very diverse, and they have come to value this diversity as an important component in their growth.

The analysis suggests that the SOC these students report can be captured by community psychologist David McMillan's four elements: Spirit, Trust, Trade, and Art (1996). This is a community founded in acceptance and authenticity, just authority, a fruitful exchange of resources, and the collective creation of narratives that resonate the transformation of their lives. Associated with these elements is growth in reflexivity and intersubjectivity, in personal mastery, in boundary maintaining behaviors, and in individual autonomy, self-esteem, and sense of self-efficacy. As applied to school community, the data suggest extending SOC in at least four ways.

First, McMillan (1996) has emphasized the importance of freedom from shame in community members' relations with one another. In the interviews it was difficult to discern which the students regarded as the greater achievement—freedom from shame or their growing capacity to avoid shaming others—an important source of pride in this community. Traditional sociology leads us to expect that being part of a community that actively meets the ideals of American democracy is, in itself, rewarding (Collins & Makowsky, 2010); the Academy's student community is no exception.

Second, and also very important, is an educational environment that addresses the whole person. It is not only good grades that motivate these students. It is the continuing process of personal development, the sense of power inherent in the process of extending one's capacities to deal with any situation with which one is presented. Not to be ignored is the resemblance between this school community and the vision Dewey (1966) placed at the center of U.S. education nearly a century ago. This is a school community that prepares students to find community with their fellows and to continue to grow together wherever they find themselves.

Third is an environment in which life is other than a one possibility thing—in which I can choose who I am rather than accepting what is handed to me. McMillan (1996) touches on this when he talks about being accepted for what is authentically me. Integral here is a vision of failure as an opportunity for growth, not an end of new visions. The right to fail encourages trying new things. A related point notes the richness of the resources these students provide for one another. Recall here that the breadth of available resources in the Academy is dependent on the students' diversity (see McMillan, 1996). And fourth are opportunities to integrate all of these experiences into a coherent sense of self. Discourse is an important facilitating component here.

The big question here is this: Can any of what we have learned from this school community be applied in the high schools from which these students come? Also, can these insights inform the development of community in other schools at other levels in other regions? It is here that the limitations of the study are readily apparent. This is a school community of less than 150 students. The diversity here pales in comparison to most urban schools. The most pressing research need in exploring the potential of this SOC is to see what it can tell us about successful school community in even more diverse or more typical educational environments.

There are other limitations. While the analysis focuses on the high level of agreement on survey items, on no item was agreement complete. With more resources, the study might well have explored the experience of these naysayers and students who had dropped out of the Academy. Also, whatever a student's

interpretation of his or her experience, that experience was inevitably penetrated from the first by the staff's own sense of what the Academy was trying to do. In support of the study's results are the detailed and insightful ways in which students make their cases as reported above, and the Academy's success rate in passing graduates on to post-secondary education.

As budgets tighten and postsecondary preparatory programs can no longer obtain the resources to continue, one looks to these programs for approaches that can be applied in mainstream educational environments, for ways of accommodating the needs of disadvantaged students in the course of a normal school day. In courting this possibility, it is important not to underestimate what the Academy's students share with others more privileged. Privileged students deal with a complex environment as well, full of people and cultures they do not understand, a world that may at times seem alien and threatening. Privileged students can be shamed. They need to integrate new experiences into a coherent sense of self. They can be empowered by learning to help others. They will benefit from life-extending stories. At the same time, implementing the Academy's program in mainstream educational institutions faces formidable obstacles. Among these, at least two would seem especially productive avenues for ongoing research.

The most pressing would appear to be locating effective ways of building school communities which are free from shame in which students feel free to be themselves, to make mistakes, and to try on new ideas and behaviors without fear of rejection. Certainly prejudice and discrimination are potent sources of shame; but there are other sources as well, many endemic to surrounding communities.

Shame has many positive functions. "[T]he wish to avoid shame motivates maturation and development, and the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and success" (Gilligan, 2003, p. 1173). It alerts the individual to violations of internal or external standards and rules (Lewis, 2003). When it is endogenous, relevant for the matter at hand, it can encourage commitment to prosocial behavior and achievement (de Hooge, Breugelmans, & Zeelenberg, 2008). It promotes a "realistic self-appraisal" (Nathanson, 1987, p. 262). Persistent, repeated, toxic shame, particularly when it is internalized, however, has been related to a variety of potentially debilitating mental and physical conditions: "depression, anxiety, somatization, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, paranoid ideation, psychoticism" (Tangney, 1995, pp. 1140-1141). Because shame is about the self (not about specific actions as is the case with guilt), it can shut down adaptive action altogether. "[R]ather than resetting the machine…[adopting more acceptable behavior]…it stops the machine. Any action becomes impossible because the machine itself is wrong" (Lewis, 2003, p. 1189). Nathanson (2001,

2003) reports on ongoing research in this area with respect to the desire to eliminate school violence. The Tomkins Institute's DVD "Managing Shame, Preventing Violence: A Call to Our Teachers" is an aid for dealing with shame in the classroom. There are other resources. Persisting problems suggest that much remains to be done.

A second challenge for ongoing research has to do with responding intelligently to the great variety of individual student needs and challenges. It is the awareness of need that spurs the development of diverse resources in the Academy. But, even in the Academy, intense relationships between full-time Program tutors and a small number of students are not adequate to sensitize the school community to individual need without the aid of peer tutoring and counseling. These data suggest that part of the solution in the schools generally lies in a similar recourse.

In the Academy, students' skill in peer tutoring and counseling developed naturally out of their experience with the adult tutors. Public school teachers seldom if ever have the luxury of spending so much one-on-one time with students. There is a need for much more work on the possibilities and implementation of peer tutoring and counseling, particularly under conditions in which more attention is being directed toward competition in both school and society.

With all that, this research suggests that the vision of student communities that build faith, hope, and tolerance is not a hollow promise. Such student communities exist. From the perspective of these students, communities that build faith, hope, and tolerance build whole persons as well. To paraphrase what one student told me, as we grow into our worlds, we grow into ourselves. The foundation for this growth is community.

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Diane Johnson is associate professor of sociology at Kutztown University. She is interested in shame and its implications for child development and academic achievement. Her current research is focused on child abuse and boundary dissolution and on the role of freedom from shame in building community. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to D.E. Johnson, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Kutztown University, Kutztown, PA, 19604.

Book Review of *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*

Marilyn Price-Mitchell

Key Words: family engagement, preparing educators, engaging families, teacher education, school reform, educational policy, systems theory, Epstein

The second edition of *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools,* by Joyce L. Epstein (2011) makes a significant contribution to understanding how families and schools work collaboratively to benefit children. Part One focuses on the foundational theory and research of these partnerships. Part Two applies the research to school and classroom practices and to educational policy development. Aimed at university-level audiences of education, sociology, and psychology professors, it aspires to help train the next generation of teachers, administrators, counselors, and other professionals to integrate effective partnership programs in schools. It promises to share recent progress in research, policies, and practices, and to help future educators think in new, more in-depth ways about partnerships.

Divided into four sections, this review first critiques the overall content, research, readability, and value of the edition. Second, it assesses each chapter in Part One for its theoretical contributions and merit. Third, it considers each chapter in Part Two for its potential impact on school, classroom, or policy practices. Finally, a conclusion suggests how the book may best be utilized in college coursework related to educational partnerships.

The author, Joyce L. Epstein, is no stranger to professionals in the field of family engagement. Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools, she is a

research scientist and professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University. Epstein's theoretical model using the concept of overlapping spheres of influence is widely used by schools and researchers, and has been adopted by the National Parent Teacher Association as a tool for understanding family engagement and improving partnership practices.

Overview

The book was reviewed with several criteria in mind. First, I looked at whether it achieved its own learning goals and was conceptually sound. Designed as a volume to be used as the basis for a full course on partnerships or to supplement coursework in other areas related to education, I also looked for qualities that would make it an outstanding textbook in its field. According to the author's own insights, a textbook must include (a) differing theoretical perspectives, (b) research using various approaches, and (c) practices that can be put to use in schools and classrooms (p. 13). When assessed by these criteria, the book has strengths and shortcomings. While it excels at describing Epstein's own conceptual framework and the research that supports her theory, it lacks discussion and debate of other theories on family engagement and approaches that may support different ways of thinking about partnership. Applying theory to practice is one of its greatest strengths. Particularly helpful are suggested activities and exercises at the end of each chapter that foster critical thinking. Despite its shortcomings, it provides exceptional insights into the field, facilitating dialogue important to education reform.

The included research studies represent diverse populations and encourage discussion on critical issues facing today's families and educators. Numerous readings focus on traditionally underserved groups, including inner-city families, ethnic minorities, and single-parent families. The volume would be enhanced by adding more recent research including case studies to encourage examination of the impact of race, class, culture, and linguistic diversity on family–school partnerships at a higher analytical level. While the studies are relevant, only 3 of 18 were updated from the first edition, making most of the research 15-20 years old. This limitation can be overcome by the addition of supplemental materials.

A recurring and important question, if addressed, would result in a stronger text. How does Epstein's model and ideas about partnership fit with systems thinking? While many terms are borrowed from systems theorists, including concepts like permeable boundaries (p. 69), social capital, and learning communities (p. 44), it is not clear how the concept of overlapping spheres of influence integrates theoretically with contemporary systems theory. The

addition of this conceptual bridge would lead to greater understanding and applicability of family engagement theory and spark needed discussion and debate among students.

The writing, readability, and organization of this book merit exceptionally high marks. Epstein provides well-articulated introductions to each chapter's readings and well-organized activities and discussion questions at the end. Since Epstein authored or co-authored all of the designated readings in the book, consistency of style prevails throughout. The book's well-organized 634 pages consist of seven chapters, three in Part One and four in Part Two.

Part One: Understanding School, Family, and Community Partnerships

Epstein constructs an excellent introduction in Chapter 1, laying a foundation for what the book hopes to accomplish and why teacher education must incorporate the theory and skills to work with families. She defines *partnership* as a shared responsibility of home, school, and community where "members work together to share information, guide students, solve problems, and celebrate successes" (p. 4). Students are viewed as the active learners in all three contexts, and the book is devoted to developing *programs* that "inform and involve all families" (p. 5). While programmatic development is an essential aspect of partnership, Epstein's definition seems limited, failing to acknowledge the active learner role of all partners, including parents, students, educators, and community members. When these partnerships succeed, they generate new and actionable knowledge, becoming what systems theorists define as natural learning communities or communities of practice (Senge, 2000, 2006; Wenger, 1998; Wheatley, 1992).

The first reading in Chapter 2 builds a coherent argument to support Epstein's theoretical model of overlapping family and school spheres of influence. Several helpful terms are introduced, including descriptions of "school-like families" and "family-like schools" (p. 36). The second reading, new to this edition, includes references to systems-oriented concepts like social capital and learning communities, yet it is difficult to understand how Epstein views her model through a systemic lens. Instead of minor mention of other theories related to family engagement, like Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994), a more in-depth discussion of these theoretical perspectives would be helpful. This lack of analysis presents a confusing dilemma when Epstein suggests her model, developed in 1987, would help researchers "think new" about family engagement (p. 45). By this point, the bias towards Epstein's theory and positivist research methodologies is evident. Even

with this limitation, the chapter presents an array of important family engagement concepts, including principles for critically thinking about partnerships.

Chapter 3 reviews Epstein's original research, providing a basis on which studies of family, school, and community partnerships continue to build. The eight readings are unchanged from the first edition and include survey results of (a) teacher practices in inner-city schools, (b) the effects of marital status on parent and teacher interaction, and (c) how homework practices affect student outcomes. Each reading is augmented by valuable suggested activities, including field experience opportunities for students and discussion questions. This chapter provides an abundance of important data but lacks studies from the past two decades, making one wonder how similar studies would differ today, given changing contexts and a greater variety of research methodologies.

Part Two: Applying Research on School, Family, and Community Partnerships

The policy implications of partnerships at the federal, state, district, and school levels are the focus of Chapter 4. Epstein makes an excellent argument for policy changes that involve improved leadership and research. She introduces the concept that school policies must "enable teachers, families, and others in the community to work effectively together—as an action team—on behalf of the children they share" (p. 303). The new reading in this chapter is particularly relevant as school districts struggle to address the implications of "The No Child Left Behind Act" (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) and its requirements for parental involvement. The suggested activities at the end of the chapter are timely and applicable to educators, particularly those interested in administration and policy development.

Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive roadmap of how Epstein's model of overlapping spheres of influence can be transformed into practice. Delving deeply into its six types of involvement (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community), the readings explore ways to understand each type and activities that are essential to working with families. Epstein describes how it is possible to have high-achieving schools without family involvement, or high family involvement in low-performing schools. Neither of these, she says, exemplifies the kind of partnership that results in a "caring, educational environment" (p. 392). This is arguably the best chapter of the book, with high impact potential for schools and classrooms.

Homework and parent volunteers are central to the readings and discussions in Chapter 6. New to this edition, the first reading introduces the topic

of parent–child interactive homework, pointing out that certain homework designs have potential to involve families. Epstein cites considerable research to support how interactive homework can positively impact parent–child relationships and mutual learning, demonstrating how research is applied in practice through the Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) process (Epstein, Salinas, & Jackson, 1995). Also discussed is a process for organizing volunteers in the middle grades to increase students' art appreciation and understanding of the connections between art and history. Readers are asked to consider applications to other specific curriculum areas and grade levels, designing an interactive homework assignment of their own. Particularly relevant to coursework on teaching methodology and practice teaching, this chapter excels at connecting family involvement to academic success.

A summary and call to action, the final chapter asks "How might new teachers, principals, counselors, and others who work in schools and with families be prepared to conduct effective partnership practices?" (p. 573). It addresses issues of diversity and equity in family–school partnerships and advocates for action teams of teachers, parents, and administrators to implement partnership practices. While the chapter contains excellent ideas and applied learning, it is written in a rather directive style, advocating the development of what Epstein calls Action Teams for Partnerships (ATP) rather than encouraging future educators to critically *think anew* about this important question. The text would be stronger with the addition of information on alternative approaches to inquiry, including participatory action research (PAR), a methodology that focuses inquiry to the local context with people involved in the process of planning for change (Stringer, 2007). Epstein's ATP's are perfect arenas for such research but differ from the classic positivist approach of defining variables and predicting outcomes. This is one example where discussion of qualitative research methodologies would enhance Epstein's research and encourage new thinking.

Conclusion

The question of relevance lies at the heart of evaluating any textbook. And certainly this book is relevant, particularly for its ability to provide clear, in-depth understanding of Epstein's theoretical model and how it is applied in practice. But it does not provide the whole picture. Missing are differing theoretical perspectives on family engagement and discussion of other approaches to research—information that would encourage a higher level of critical thinking. Recent calls by family involvement experts suggest the need for a more comprehensive theoretical framework (Caspe, 2008; Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008). Textbooks should attract students' curiosity and pique their

interests in doing research that will contribute to future theory-building. As Epstein suggested, it should encourage them to *think anew*. While this textbook could achieve more, it offers an exceptional window into the field of partnerships and gives future educators tools to integrate effective partnership programs in schools and classrooms. Combined with supplemental readings that provide alternative insights into theory, research, and methodologies, this edition of *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools* will achieve its goal of helping future educators work with families as partners in education.

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Marilyn Price-Mitchell is a scholar–practitioner and interdisciplinary researcher with interests in positive youth development and family–school–community partnerships. She is founder and president of the nonprofit National ParentNet Association. Correspondence concerning this review may be addressed to her at P.O. Box 11609, Bainbridge Island, WA, 98110, or email mprice-mitchell@email.fielding.edu

An Essay Book Review of *Parental Involvement and Academic Success* by William H. Jeynes

Ward Weldon

Key Words: parental involvement, academics, success, meta-analysis, expectations, communication, schools, home, parents, children, parenting style, early childhood, English language learners, single-parents, achievement, Jeynes

Introduction

This book reports and interprets three related meta-analyses performed by the author dealing with the effects of parent influence on the academic success of their children. The first combines studies of elementary school student achievement. The second combines studies of urban secondary school student achievement, and the third focuses on studies restricted to minority student achievement.

Meta-analyses can use large numbers of individual studies and result in information from very large numbers of individual respondents. The elementary school meta-analysis reported in this book used 41 studies with more than 20,000 total respondents. The secondary school meta-analysis used 52 studies and more than 300,000 subjects, while the meta-analysis of K–12 minority student achievement used 27 studies with nearly 12,000 subjects.

Each meta-analysis attempted to measure both the overall effects of the degree of parental involvement and also the effects of different sub-components and specific activities which are included in the general term "parental involvement." Jeynes cites additional meta-analyses focused on the question of which types of parental involvement are most effective in promoting student achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2005). These analyses agree with the

author's finding that some forms of parental involvement (such as parental expectations, extensive parent–child communication, reading with children, and general parenting style) have more effect than others (such as checking homework and attending school functions).

The author describes the process by which studies were selected for inclusion in the meta-analyses, giving specific information about the procedures used to ensure that the quality of the individual studies is sufficient to justify their inclusion in the overall combination of studies analyzed. Because of the great importance of helping students make a good start in school, special attention is given to early education, with the author commenting (in his interpretation of findings) on the possibility that school personnel should provide parent education even before students enter formal schooling.

In discussing the development of parental involvement research, the author identifies previous family structure and family functioning research as having already established the hypotheses that children with greater and more consistent access to their parents have substantial advantages. This lays the foundation for asking whether parent participation in the child's school experiences has now been found, based on previous studies, to be associated with higher academic achievement of children.

Both concepts being studied (parental involvement and student academic success) are complex and multi-faceted. As the author points out, the different expressions of parental involvement may include supervising and checking homework, attending school functions, communications with teachers, and communicating (often in subtle and implicit ways) high expectations for student academic achievement and high respect for education to their children. Breaking parental participation down into these components is a detailed and comprehensive way to look at this important factor in student achievement.

When educators and parents speak of their desires to have more parental participation, a good follow-up question is: "Which specific activities included in parental involvement do we value most, and why?" Jeynes provides his answer by identifying high parental expectations for student achievement and a family structure and culture that supports comfortable and frequent communication about school matters as the factors that matter most. There is an irony here. Forms of parent participation in which there is little contact with teachers are shown in this meta-analysis to be the most effective ones in increasing student achievement. Would an ideal parent–school partnership be one in which the so-called "partners" operate quite independently of each other?

As to the "why" part of the above question, Jeynes uses greater comparative improvement in standardized test scores and teacher grades as his rationale for giving special value and emphasis to these two factors. As our field develops

more comprehensive assessment techniques, such as performance measurements and student work-sample techniques, perhaps other factors may assume a greater importance.

Summary of Findings

The overall findings of the meta-analysis may be summarized as follows:

1. Greater parental involvement is associated with higher student achievement, and this is true for all racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic groups, as well as being true for students in both elementary and secondary schools.
2. Because this study compares different types and components of parental involvement, as mentioned above, it is possible to "drill down" into these various types of parental involvement. Jeynes finds that subtle and implicit forms of parental involvement (i.e., parental expectations and parenting styles) have the strongest associations with student academic achievement.

The Historical Decline of Parental Involvement as Presented in This Book

The author argues that there is a long early history of high parent involvement in the schooling of their children, but that this pattern was interrupted when the ideas of John Dewey began to permeate the thinking of educators. Dewey's concepts related to the professional responsibilities of teachers and the use of the schools to promote the continuation of an inclusive democratic society are presented as forces which have alienated teachers from parents and reduced the general level of parent involvement in schooling. This is a less positive view of the influence of John Dewey than the one held by many American educators.

In addition to his negative perspective on John Dewey, Jeynes mentions two demographic trends as also contributing to a decline in parental involvement in schools. These are (1) an increasing number of single-wage-earner families, and (2) limited English language proficiency of many parents of children in schools in this country.

Jeynes has kind and appreciative words to say about the efforts that single parents make on behalf of school success for their children. Nevertheless, he suggests that the potential benefits to the academic achievement of their children by single parents' involvement is lessened by the time that they must spend in working to provide the basic economic necessities for their children. When

this is the case, it is especially important that schools and teachers find ways for single parents to communicate and cooperate with teachers. Sometimes this can be done through logistic arrangements of scheduling parent–teacher conferences and other school activities at convenient times for single and working parents to participate. Other accommodations may include welcoming parents to bring children with them to school conferences and activities and allowing non-parent relatives to participate when the parent finds it impossible.

The author's discussion of the limiting effects of low levels of English language proficiency is troubling. Some parents who are in the early phases of learning English place a very high value on the educational success of their children in the English-speaking schools of this country. Their high levels of expectations and support for their children may compensate for their unfamiliarity with English vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. This is especially true in the light of the author's finding that subtle factors including parent expectations and parenting style have substantial levels of association with student academic success.

An anecdote will illustrate this point. The reviewer was conducting a training session in Spanish for a Local School Council which included monolingual Spanish speakers. A team-building and communication skill-building activity asked the Council members to identify what, for them, represented a "highlight" of the school's year to date. A mother replied that her "highlight" was being allowed to serve as a volunteer in the school's cafeteria so that she could be in the same building with her young son and become familiar with the environment and school life her son was experiencing. This is just one mother's report, but it shows that language barriers may be overcome and "subtle" forms of effective parent involvement achieved by those who are may lack complete English language fluency but place great value on their children's education.

This illustration of the devotion of a Spanish-speaking mother reflects an ideal situation that is, unfortunately, not the reality in many U.S. families and schools. Nevertheless, in a global economy and multicultural domestic society, educators can serve children well by taking a positive view of the ability of parents and their children to master multiple languages and to have a working knowledge of cultures other than their own.

Parent Participation in Children's Education Prior to School Entry

The author discusses the great importance of learning in the early preschool years when parents may be the main or only teachers their children have. This is another example of parent activities that influence the school success of their

children, but do not ordinarily allow for direct contact and communication between the parent and school personnel. The suggestion is made that schools may perform a valuable function by providing parent orientation and parent education even before the child enters school. Educators who feel that the school's financial and staff resources are already stretched thin may wonder if this suggestion is feasible. Nevertheless, this suggestion should be taken seriously and studied thoroughly by policymakers and education funders. If children enter school at a higher level of cognitive functioning and with skills and attitudes that support rapid progress when they begin schooling, this may, indeed, be a good use of the resources we devote to education. In addition to the benefits experienced by the children, parents who have received the support and expertise of educators before their children's school entry may become an effective cadre of parent participators as their children progress through later years of their schooling. Although parenting is one of the most important responsibilities that adults may have, there is presently little formal orientation and training to help parents perform optimally. The reviewer welcomes suggestions by Jeynes that educators can and should do more to support parents even before their children reach school age. This should, of course, be in addition to efforts to continue and disseminate successful programs to help parents of school-age children.

Studies of the beneficial effects of early childhood educator services to children and parents on student and parenting success deserve mention here. The Perry Pre-School Longitudinal Study (Parks, 2000) found that, although test-score advantages for students in this project (when compared with a demographically similar control group) eventually faded, participating children experienced long-term benefits in terms of higher rates of employment and income, along with lower rates of welfare status and incarceration. Another study (Campbell & Ramey, 1995) described the Carolina Abecedarian Project, also reporting positive, ongoing effects of educator interactions with preschool children and their parents. Yet another study (Reynolds, 2000) used a cost-benefit economic approach in examining the effects of the Chicago Child–Parent Centers, concluding that long-term social and personal benefits much outweighed the costs of this program.

A Summary of Recommendations by Jeynes

The final chapter of *Parent Involvement and Academic Success* has the title "What Do We Know and What Do We Still Need to Know?" Jeynes lists three things now known and confirmed by his meta-analyses:

1. The meta-analyses show that parental involvement has a very broad influence and is a strong positive force on student achievement, for all races, socioeconomic classes, and genders, as well as indicating that many component aspects of parent involvement have positive effects on student achievement.
2. Many of the programs studied in the meta-analyses designed to increase parental involvement, do, in fact, do so.
3. Some educators do not welcome teacher–parent partnerships, actively resisting parent involvement.

Four things that we still need to know are mentioned:

1. Are the most beneficial types of parental involvement those that are most frequently and intensively taught in parent involvement programs?
2. Are the subtle but effective practices of high parental expectations and communicative parenting as easy to teach as the more overt ones of reading to children, checking homework, and so on?
3. How does family structure influence parent involvement?
4. What attracts parents to become involved?

Further research is needed to give helpful answers to these questions.

Further Questions

Although the author provides separate chapters reporting on parent involvement in elementary and secondary schools, this reviewer would like to know more about patterns of parent participation at the high school level. Many parents who participate closely in the school experiences of elementary school students stop doing so when their children reach high school. What can be done to encourage more involvement by parents of secondary school students? Are the "subtle" factors of high parental expectations and supportive and communicative parenting styles ones which continue into high school, and are they enough to help students achieve well at this point?

The Audience for This Book

This book is written in a way that will be especially and directly helpful to researchers in this field. There are clear implications of the findings for both school personnel and parents, but more work needs to be done in the future to translate these findings into terms that provide concrete and readily understood guidance for practitioners and parents. Jeynes is aware of this need and devotes a part of his final chapter to the sub-topic of "What We Need to Do

With What We Know." There is a Deweyan pragmatism in this section, emphasizing the thought that we are not mere spectators of what is known, but can become active participants in its effective use. Jeynes mentions the possibility of using technology in this post-industrial information age to find more and better ways to support parents in enhancing the educational achievement of their children. He stresses the great social significance of his topic with the motto, "A nation is only as strong as the families that constitute that nation."

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Ward Weldon is an associate professor of educational policy studies in the College of Education of the University of Illinois at Chicago. He teaches courses in educational administration and foundations of education. He has worked on educational projects in nine countries outside of the United States, most recently in Ethiopia. Correspondence concerning this review may be sent to Dr. Ward Weldon, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1040 West Harrison (Mail Code 147), Chicago, IL 60607, or email wweldon@uic.edu