

# THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY JOURNAL

Spring/Summer 2010  
Volume 20, Number 1

Academic Development Institute



# The School Community Journal

Spring/Summer 2010  
Volume 20, Number 1

Sam Redding, *Executive Editor*  
Lori G. Thomas, *Editor*

## The School Community Journal Advisory Board

Paul J. Baker  
Illinois State University  
Normal, Illinois

Alison A. Carr-Chellman  
Penn State University  
University Park, Pennsylvania

James P. Comer  
Yale Child Study Center  
New Haven, Connecticut

Diane D'Angelo  
RMC Research Corporation  
Washington, D.C.

Rollande Deslandes  
Universite du Quebec a Trois-Rivieres  
Quebec, Canada

Patricia Edwards  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, Michigan

Joyce Epstein  
Center on School, Family &  
Community Partnerships  
Baltimore, Maryland

Patricia Gándara  
University of California  
Davis, California

Thomas E. Glass  
University of Memphis  
Memphis, Tennessee

Anne T. Henderson  
Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
Washington, D.C.

Esther Sui-chu Ho  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong  
Hong Kong SAR, China

Kathleen V. Hoover-Dempsey  
Peabody College at Vanderbilt University  
Nashville, Tennessee

William H. Jaynes  
California State University, Long Beach  
Long Beach, California

Raquel-Amaya Martínez González  
Universidad de Oviedo  
Oviedo, Spain

Hazel Loucks  
National Education Association  
Edwardsville, Illinois

Karen L. Mapp  
Harvard Graduate School of Education  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Denise Maybank  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, Michigan

Toni Moynihan-McCoy  
Corpus Christi Independent School District  
Corpus Christi, Texas

Janice M. Rosales  
Chicago Public Schools  
Chicago, Illinois

Diane Scott-Jones  
Boston College (retired)  
Boston, Massachusetts

Herbert J. Walberg  
Hoover Institution at Stanford University  
Chicago, Illinois

Heather Weiss  
Harvard Family Research Project  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Roger Weissberg  
University of Illinois at Chicago  
Chicago, Illinois

# THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY JOURNAL

Spring/Summer 2010  
Volume 20, Number 1

Academic Development Institute

ISSN 1059-308X

© 2010 Academic Development Institute

## Business and Editorial Office

*The School Community Journal*

121 N. Kickapoo Street  
Lincoln, IL 62656 USA  
Phone: 217-732-6462  
Fax: 217-732-3696  
E-mail: [editor@adi.org](mailto:editor@adi.org)

## Requests for Manuscripts

*The School Community Journal* publishes a mix of:

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

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

## Editorial Policy and Procedure

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

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

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

Contributors should send, via e-mail attachments of electronic files (in Word if possible): the manuscript, including an abstract of no more than 250 words; a one paragraph description (each) of the author(s); and a mailing address, phone number, fax number, and e-mail address where the author(s) can be reached to:

[editor@adi.org](mailto:editor@adi.org)

The cover letter should state that the work is not under simultaneous consideration by other publication sources. A hard copy of the manuscript is not necessary unless specifically requested by the editor.

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

## Subscription to *The School Community Journal*

*The School Community Journal* is published twice annually – Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer. *The School Community Journal* is now a free, open access, online-only publication. Therefore, we are no longer accepting subscriptions.

The archives to the journal may be accessed (free) at <http://www.adi.org/journal>

## Contents

- Urban School Reform and the Strange Attractor of Low-Risk.....9  
Relationships  
*Brian R. Beabout*
- The Full Purpose Partnership Model for Promoting Academic.....31  
and Socio-Emotional Success in Schools  
*Jeffrey A. Anderson, John H. W. Houser,  
and Allison Howland*
- Community Paraeducators: A Partnership-Directed Approach.....55  
for Preparing and Sustaining the Involvement of Community  
Members in Inner-City Schools  
*Patricia H. Manz, Thomas J. Power,  
Marika Ginsburg-Block, and Peter W. Dourick*
- Connecting Worlds: Using Photo Narrations to Connect.....81  
Immigrant Children, Preschool Teachers, and Immigrant Families  
*Martha J. Strickland, Jane B. Keat,  
and Barbara A. Marinak*
- A Review of Research on Effective Community Programs for.....103  
English Language Learners  
*Kip Téllez and Hersh C. Waxman*
- Meetings Without Dialogue: A Study of ESL Parent–Teacher.....121  
Interactions at Secondary School Parents’ Nights  
*Yan Guo*
- In(Formal) Conversation with Minority Parents and Communities.....141  
of a Canadian Junior School: Findings and Cautions from the Field  
*John Ippolito*
- Challenges Balancing Collaboration and Independence in Home–.....159  
School Relationships: Analysis of Parents’ Perceptions in One District  
*Carolyn L. Wanat*

*Contents continued next page*

A Multisite Program Evaluation of Families and Schools.....	187
Together (FAST): Continued Evidence of a Successful Multifamily Community-Based Prevention Program	
<i>Mary Crozier, Laurie Rokutani, Jill L. Russett, Emilie Godwin, and George E. Banks</i>	
Book Review of (Mis)Understanding Families: Learning.....	209
from Real Families in Our Schools	
<i>Lee Shumow</i>	

## Editor's Comments

This issue is loaded with examples of collaboration in the real world. We hope that you will find them useful and informative, whether you are a practitioner in the field, a concerned parent, or a researcher. We begin with Beabout's look into the crucible of post-Katrina New Orleans and the lessons learned there about community-school partnerships. Next, Anderson, Houser, and Howland describe a partnership program in Indiana integrating schoolwide PBIS and systems of care principles, including the use of a Care Coordinator to assist teachers and parents to help each child excel. Manz, Power, Ginsburg-Block, and Dowrick also use a case example, highlighting the potential for local paraeducators to bridge gaps between inner-city schools and students' families if both the supervising teachers and paraeducators are adequately prepared.

Using photos and stories from home within preschool classrooms, Strickland, Keat, and Marinak studied a novel approach to connecting the disparate worlds of mainstream teachers and their immigrant students and their families. Téllez and Waxman synthesize research on helps available to English language learners and their families under the categories of parents, community resources, and peers. They note the need for further research in this critical area and the need for careful program design and implementation to ensure success. Guo and Ippolito each provide an article regarding lessons learned from relations between minority parents and schools in Canada. While Guo describes difficult communication between educators and Chinese parents whose children were enrolled in secondary school ESL programs, Ippolito examined a program for parents and elementary children. Both researchers provide valuable insights for those who wish to help connect diverse families and schools.

Wanat examines home-school relationships from the point of view of visibly involved parents and those whose involvement in their child's education is not so visible, providing insights into possible reasons for these differences and much food for thought for concerned educators. In their thorough program evaluation, Crozier, Rokutani, Russett, Godwin, and Banks describe the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program and its results in the Virginia Beach public schools. Finally, Shumow's book review gives us a peek into a recent book edited by Monica Miller Marsh and Tammy Turner-Vorbeck. This issue highlights again and again the rewards possible when we accept the challenge and work hard to truly collaborate for the benefit of students.

Lori Thomas  
June 2010

## Editorial Review Board

Jeffrey A. Anderson  
Indiana University, Bloomington

Ji-Hi Bae  
Sungshin Women's University, Seoul, Korea

Jerold P. Bauch  
Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN

Brian R. Beabout  
University of New Orleans, LA

Alison Carr-Chellman  
Penn State University, University Park

Susan DeMoss  
School Administrator, Oklahoma City, OK

Karen Estep  
Lincoln Christian College, Lincoln, IL

Laureen Fregeau  
University of South Alabama, Mobile

Alyssa R. Gonazalez-DeHass  
Florida Atlantic Univeristy, Jupiter, FL

Karen Guskin  
Parents as Teachers National Center, St. Louis

Diana Hiatt-Michael  
Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA

Pat Hulsebosch  
Gallaudet University, Washington, DC

Toni Griego Jones  
University of Arizona, Tucson

Frances Kochan  
Auburn University, AL

Kate Gill Kressley  
RMC Research Corporation, Portsmouth, NH

Revathy Kumar  
University of Toledo, OH

Diane Kyle  
University of Louisville, KY

Robert Leier  
ESL Coordinator, Auburn University, AL

Lusa Lo  
University of Massachusetts Boston

Vera Lopez  
Arizona State University, Tempe

Pamela Loughner  
Consultant, Huntingdon Valley, PA

Kate McGilly  
Parents as Teachers National Center, St. Louis

Oliver Moles  
Social Science Research Group, LLC  
Rockville, MD

Shadrack Msengi  
Notre Dame de Namur University, CA

Judith Munter  
University of Texas at El Paso

Marilyn Murphy  
Center on Innovation & Improvement, PA

Osamha M. Obeidat  
Hashemite University, Jordan

Reatha Owen  
Academic Development Institute, Lincoln, IL

Eva Patrikakou  
DePaul University, Chicago, IL

Reyes Quezada  
University of San Diego, CA

A. Y. "Fred" Ramirez  
Biola University, La Mirada, CA

Cynthia J. Reed  
Truman Pierce Institute, Auburn, AL

Timothy Rodriguez  
The Ohio State University at Lima

Mavis Sanders  
Center on School, Family, & Community  
Partnerships, Johns Hopkins University, MD

Melissa Schulz  
University of Cincinnati, OH

Steven B. Sheldon  
Center on School, Family, & Community  
Partnerships, Johns Hopkins University, MD

Lee Shumow  
Northern Illinois University, DeKalb

Martha Strickland  
Penn State Capital College, Middletown, PA

Elise Trumbull  
California State University, Northridge

Courtney Vaughn  
University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma City

Jianzhong Xu  
Mississippi State University, MS

# Urban School Reform and the Strange Attractor of Low-Risk Relationships

*Brian R. Beabout*

## Abstract

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, school leaders in a newly decentralized school system reached out to external organizations for partnerships—a job that had previously resided in the central office. The necessity of these contacts and the quantity of newly independent schools make a unique context for studying how school leaders think and act in relation to external partnerships. Iterative interviews with 10 New Orleans public school principals reveal a range of external partnerships that can be classified into a three part taxonomy consisting of charitable relationships, technical support relationships, and feedback relationships. A discussion of low-risk relationships and the importance of utilizing feedback relationships concludes the paper.

Key Words: urban schools, reform, systems theory, complexity theory, partnerships, external, change, community, relationships, improvement

## Introduction

A number of scholars have recognized the value of external partnerships to the process of educational change (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003; Fullan, 2000; Muncey & McQuillan, 1996). While the *school effectiveness* era of reform focused on the characteristics of high-functioning schools (Anderson, 2008; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993), scholarship has turned to a more *ecological* approach to school reform (Sirotnik, 2005) which combines the internal

characteristics of the school and a school's relationship to its environment to create a more holistic picture of schools and possibilities for change. Significant in this ecological approach to change are the relationships that schools create with external community partners.

Nationally, all schools have a myriad of connections to the outside environment ranging from vendors, to the district office, teachers' unions, parent groups, business partners, and athletic conferences. This paper does not argue that schools need to find *completely new* partnerships, rather that they must be *strategic* in the types of partnerships in which they engage. Having too many partnerships results in information overload, a lack of coherence (Fullan, 2001), or shallow implementation of multiple reforms—what Bryk and colleagues (1998) term “Christmas tree schools.” Instead of succumbing to information overload, schools must take in “just enough” (Doll, 2008) outside information that they remain open to change without losing their “unique personality” (Tye, 2000) or sense of being a somewhat unified entity. External relationships can be difficult to establish and maintain, but they have, in some forms, the potential to give schools the ideas, resources, and feedback that they need to be viable social institutions. Muncey and McQuillan (1996), while drawing conclusions from their five-year ethnographic study of several reforming schools, implore educators to:

seek informed and supportive outside perspectives while developing, implementing, and assessing any efforts at change...outsiders may be able to see, and to clarify for others, the multiple perspectives that are informing (and perhaps impeding) discussions about and efforts at reform. (p. 283)

While they refer here to their role as external researchers embedded in a study of school reform, it seems logical that external organizations, as well as external individuals, could provide a similar benefit to schools engaged in change. Troublingly, the results reported below show that while schools in this sample *are* establishing external relationships, they tend toward establishing low-risk relationships that are more likely to provide donations or technical support rather than support for the school improvement process. This analysis of the relationships schools enter into with external groups provides a basis for ongoing examination of how these relationships can best further the process of change.

### **The Research Context**

Between August 2005 and January 2010, the New Orleans Public School District has undergone perhaps more structural change than any other district

in the modern history of the United States. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans Public Schools was a struggling urban district with 127 schools under the leadership of an elected school board. A handful of magnet schools served a small middle class and White student population, but the overwhelming majority of schools in the district were poor and African American. During the 2004-05 school year in New Orleans, 63% of the public schools were labeled *academically unacceptable* by the state due to low test scores and attendance rates (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006). In terms of student achievement, pre-Katrina published results show that 55% of the city's 4th graders scored below a basic level in reading, and 59% of them scored below basic in math. For the high school students in the district, 59% scored below basic in language arts, while 61% were below basic in math (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006).

After the storm, President Bush offered \$21 million in federal aid to rebuild schools with the caveat that it could only be used for charter schools (Ritea, 2005). A number of schools quickly converted to charter status to get access to the rebuilding money. In November, the state legislature took over all public schools in the city that had performed poorly on achievement tests and placed them in a Recovery School District (RSD) which was to be run by the state and whose superintendent was to be appointed by the state's highest education official (Anderson, 2005). Almost four years later, this series of structural changes has left the district as the nation's most charter-intensive urban district. When students returned to school in Fall 2009, they had 54 charter schools to choose from, along with 38 non-charter schools operated by the RSD or the school board (New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools, 2009).

Despite these massive structural changes, the makeup of the student population and the challenges they face in receiving a quality education are familiar to those involved with the district before the storm. There has been no influx of middle class White students to the district as one official initially predicted (Inskeep, 2005). While the post-storm student population is 57% of the pre-Katrina figure, there is little debate that the city's public schools serve a population that is overwhelmingly poor and African American. Of students in the district (regardless of which type of public school), 83% qualify for free and reduced lunch, while 95% of the students are non-white (State of Public Education in New Orleans, 2008). This report also indicates the large number of students who are performing below grade level, struggling to get required special education services, and suffering from unaddressed storm-related mental trauma.

As this long-struggling public school system re-creates itself in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a number of non-profit and for-profit organizations have

entered the educational arena in the city (Beabout, 2008). Offering everything from facilities management to special education services to professional development, these organizations have moved into the void created by the collapse of the mammoth central office operations of the pre-Katrina district. This inquiry examines the new relationships between New Orleans public schools and their external partners in search of lessons that other schools can use to efficiently leverage such community partnerships for school improvement.

## Conceptual Framework

This inquiry applies social systems theory and complexity theory to the relationships that schools in post-Katrina New Orleans have forged with external organizations. All social systems are *open* systems in that they are not machine-like constructions that operate unchangingly based upon preset rules (Banathy, 1996). Open systems operate on systemic feedback which gives information to the system from its environment. Negative (or regulatory) feedback works like a thermostat by sensing current conditions and suggesting changes to keep the system on its present course. Positive (or amplifying) feedback assesses whether the course which the system is on is a good or not. Positive feedback can offer suggested changes in system behavior to avoid declining performance. This study assumes that external partnerships have the potential to provide both regulatory and amplifying feedback to schools. As sources of this important information, external organizations can potentially have vital roles in educational improvement. But the process is not so simple. Schools are challenged to attend to the multiple, conflicting elements in the cacophony of feedback and interpret these messages collaboratively to guide practice (Riley, 2004). Access to this feedback is an integral part of the educational change puzzle.

Complexity theory is a relative of systems theory that deals with highly complex systems in which straightforward cause-effect relationships are rarely observable (Boisot & Child, 1999; Reigeluth, 2004). These systems *do* remain intact, however, and adapt to changing internal and external conditions. The behavior of complex systems is often an *emergent* phenomenon that results from innumerable low-level interactions that give shape to overall system behavior (Morrison, 2002; Reigeluth, 2006). Essential to applying complexity theory to the case of New Orleans is an understanding that complex systems operate with autonomy and survive only if they are capable of learning (McQuillan, 2008). If understood as a complex system, the post-Katrina New Orleans schools are now dependent on the millions of decisions made in radically decentralized schools. In this framework, bureaucratic control is no longer understood to be desirable or even possible (Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994).

System improvement then lies not in crafting better policies, but in building capacity at school sites (Bryk et al., 1998). Building this local capacity requires that schools not only reach out into their environments to seek resources and information, but also that they have some basis on which to separate out useful potential relationships from those that would be resource sinks. This article offers some guidance for educational leaders.

## Literature on Schools and External Relationships

Scholarship related to school–community partnerships describes both the challenges and benefits inherent in this process. While much of this literature surrounds the important relationships between parents and schools (Epstein, 2001; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005), I will focus here on the group-to-group relationships instead of the group-to-individual relationships often involved when individual parents interact with the school. I make this choice on an assumption that these group-to-group relationships are more likely to sustain school improvement. Thus, I will deal here with the role of parent groups (PTO, PTA, etc.) but not the interaction of schools with individual parents.

In the arena of educational change, relationships with external organizations have been used by schools to buffer the change process from the constantly changing social and political environment. Corcoran and Lawrence (2003) describe a K-12–corporate partnership that worked to improve science teaching. The authors were positive about the role of the external organization that sponsored the program, noting that:

Reform support organizations can help school districts stay focused. They can legitimate strategies and policies, build public support, and buy the time to make them work...Intermediaries often are able to shape the stakeholders' definition of the "problem" and build a more stable reform agenda. Unlike schools and districts, they are not subject to direct political authority and are more focused in their aims. (p. 34)

Notice here that while the external partnership is serving as a source of new information (new teaching techniques and content knowledge), there is also an element of buffering as this relationship provides continuity and political support. Bodilly, Chun, Ikemoto, and Stockly (2004) identify negative consequences to schools of the opposite case: when too many uncoordinated reforms are allowed to work at cross-purposes. While there is some reason to be wary of excessive business influence on our public schools (Apple, 2001; Cuban, 2004), schools and their leaders should be able to weigh the benefits and risks of such a relationship.

In a unique organizational partnership, Lane (2003) describes the influences that change-oriented student teachers had on their mentor teachers while student teaching in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The external supports these student teachers received from the university (emotional support, critical dialogue in courses, etc.) are shown to have been important parts of their ability to act as change agents in their placement schools.

Parent groups can also serve as important change partners. Arriaza (2004) notes “that school reform initiatives have higher chances of becoming institutionalized when the community actively participates as an empowered change agent” (p. 10) His study traces one example of a community exerting tremendous force on schooling practices. This group was not invited by the school to form a relationship, in fact they began as an activist group of parents petitioning against the schools, but they were nonetheless able to create lasting changes in how the school educated English language learners. After some tension, two-way lines of communication between the parents and the schools were created and led to a healthier system. Notice, of course, that there is also a heightened state of uncertainty in this case. Changes in the economic, social, or political landscape put pressure on schools that might not be comfortable. Reaching out into the environment presents danger. Schools will inevitably be working with groups (parents, businesses, universities, funding agencies, etc.) with divergent views of what education can, and should, be (Fullan, 2000). This case exemplifies the messiness inherent in school change from a post-Newtonian, complexity perspective. In lieu of planning and compliance monitoring, this school took in data from the external environment, and while there was a period of uneasiness and resistance, initial tension gave way to collaboration and co-evolution in which both the school and the parent group were changed from the interactions centered around the education of students.

Another mode of collaboration between schools and external organizations are the myriad of connections between reform organizations (Accelerated Schools, High Schools that Work, Schlechty Center, Coalition of Essential Schools, etc.) and the schools they serve. While the schools in the present study were all in some form of post-Katrina *start-up* or *rebuilding* mode, and none had fully operational school reform partnerships, this literature is included here as an important extant source of information about schools and their external relationships.

One salient characteristic of this reform organization research is that external partnerships that explicitly seek to change teaching practice are likely to be supported by some members of the school staff and resisted by others. Muncey and McQuillan’s (1996) study of the Coalition of Essential Schools paints a

clear picture of the tensions that emerge when institutional relationships intersect with the micropolitics of the school site and the individual history of a specific school. The result can be organization-to-organization relationships that appear healthy but in which individual educators hold a range of opinions and commitment levels. When it comes to changing teaching practice, it is this *individual* level of commitment that is most important, as teachers wield considerable freedom in most classrooms. Similarly, Blase and Blase (2001) found that even in schools with exceptional administrative support for teacher empowerment and despite specific engagement activities to enable this transformation, teacher leadership participation was a highly individual process that required support, guidance, and patience on the part of school leaders. This gap between the individual and the group remains a central challenge for schools in maximizing the benefits of external relationships. This tension is well-treated by Olson (2003) who identifies this “chasm between what the society through its institutions defines and what teachers and children make of it in their subjective and intersubjective mental lives” (p. 4). Accordingly, the present study makes no assumptions that principals’ descriptions of external partnerships imply a school staff unified in supported of a given relationship. Nonetheless, the perceptions of school leaders in the decentralized post-Katrina context are significant in that these were the people seeking out new relationships and actively framing them for the schools.

This brief review of literature centered on schools’ external partnerships in contexts of change identifies theoretical and empirical support for schools to forge long-term relationships with external partners as part of their overall change strategy. Among the benefits cited are: accessing community feedback, being buffered from political forces, gaining access to new information, and discovering broader bases of community engagement with schooling. Challenges to this approach, however, include inviting too much conflicting information to the school, the varied ability of schools to manage these relationships, and the individual-group tensions that persist when organizations agree to come together. All of the empirical work cited above, however, is situated in pre-existing schools operating in a range of conditions we might call “normal” in contrast to the rapidly changing educational context of post-Katrina New Orleans. The rapid decentralization of the district affords a unique opportunity to examine how individual school leaders prioritize and engage in these relationships without the intervening influences of central office directives and relatively stable institutional history. This study examines the external partnerships of eight schools as they created (or in some cases re-created) their identity as organizations within the broader societal context.

## Methods

As part of a larger study examining the lived experiences of New Orleans principals during 2006-2007, the results reported here emerged from the constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of transcripts from 29 interviews with 10 principals or school CEOs. Interviews took place between March of 2007 and September of 2007 and lasted anywhere from 40 minutes to over 2 hours. One principal was interviewed twice, all others were interviewed three times.

Because a related study had revealed something of a hierarchy of public schools in the new system (Beabout et al., 2007) an effort was made to include principals from a diversity of public schools in the district. This study includes three principals from RSD schools, six principals from state/district charter schools, and one principal from an RSD charter school. Because two participating schools had co-principals that both agreed to participate in the study, there were a total of eight unique schools involved. Of these, two were high schools, one was a middle school (5-8), and five schools had a K-8<sup>th</sup> grade configuration.

The use of iterative interviews (Seidman, 1998) allowed for a relationship between the interviewer and the participants. The three-interview format suggested by Van Manen (1997) was utilized for this phenomenological inquiry. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed manually by the author. These transcripts were coded with low level codes, and each instance of a low level code was imported into a "memo" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) where it could be compared with other instances of that code and where initial reflections were recorded. In time, these memos grew and were combined into the findings sections that make up this report.

## Findings

Principals in the post-Katrina New Orleans Public Schools spoke at length about a variety of new relationships with the external environment. This abundance of relationships was partly due to the lack of a centralized bureaucracy which, for better or worse, had a large influence over most schools before the storm. The explosion of charter schools and the state takeover left the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) with direct control of only five schools, down from over 100 (New Orleans Parents' Guide, 2009; Ritea, 2006). This created a relationship vacuum in which charter schools, and to a lesser degree, the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) schools and the five remaining Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) schools, had to find supports for things

ranging from extracurricular activities to payroll processing, curriculum, and personnel. While forming relationships with outside organizations is a central facet of school improvement under a complex systems paradigm (Fullan, 2001; Morrison, 2002), some principals had more experience with this than others. The principals in this study formed connections with external organizations that can be classified as charitable relationships, technical support relationships, and feedback relationships. An examination of these varied experiences with external organizations follows.

### Charitable Relationships

In the aftermath of Katrina, charitable private donations poured into the region, making up for the relative lack of federal and state emergency preparedness (Buras, 2007). Nationally, donations to the American Red Cross increased 129% in the year after the storm (Annual Report, 2006). Schools received much of this attention, with some groups and individuals sending resources from a distance and others making the trip to New Orleans to literally lend a hand in reconstruction. One charter school principal tells the story of being adopted by a middle school in suburban Chicago:

They found us on the Internet and they adopted us... She contacted [us] last year and we have this ongoing, *to this day*, relationship with them. She got her friend to spend their entire spring break at our [school] teaching art classes... her sister sent this like \$1500 donation, for faculty—you know, to treat them for something... at the end of the school year I took the money, and I treated everybody to Ralph's on the Park, which is one of the [upscale] Brennan's restaurants.

This charitable relationship was formed out of the blue, the result of a blind Internet search in Chicago, and the charter school has received financial support from the relationship. The art classes mentioned above would be classified as a technical support aspect of this relationship because they helped further the school's educational offerings for children. This points to the multidimensional nature of external relationships, which complicates the process of categorization. It seems reasonable for various aspects of a single organization–organization relationship to be classified independently. For a more pure example, another charter principal explained the financial and public relations support her school received from the Green Cross, an international environmental group:

On October 5<sup>th</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev is coming to visit our school. He is in the Green Cross, and he works with Global Green, and we... are going to receive a grant to be a green seed school, and the Global Green people

have been checking out schools. Right now they're just going to replace our windows and make them more energy-efficient. But that's nothing to sniff at. So we'll take that...it's going to be...on CNN. We are going to get a lot of press.

Schools also received resources from individuals throughout the country, from foundations, from educational publishers, and from the more traditional grant-based programs that had previously been centered at the district level. These gifts were appreciated both for their impact on school operations as well as symbols of support from the outside world that were significant to principals when Katrina began to leave the national headlines and the challenges schools faced seemed overwhelming:

One of the things that surprised me from the beginning, and continues to surprise me, is the generosity of people all around this country who have never seen us...they've never met us—not from here. So many people willing to help—and that's a wonderful feeling.

These charitable relationships that blossomed in the post-Katrina period were mostly one-way relationships, characterized by the transfer of resources from one party to another. While these relationships were certainly emotion-laden, these were not relationships of relative equals, they were not predicated on long-term interaction, often lacked more than superficial trust, and they did not focus on school improvement. While the process of rebuilding after the flood certainly required (and still requires) injections of outside resources, it is clear that these are not the type of relationships that lead to feedback or learning, nor do they seem to approach the description of *networks* and *collaboration* that Hopkins (2007) cites as a useful lever for sustainable reform. These are impoverished external relationships, and while they may have helped increase staff satisfaction or allowed the school to purchase additional educational resources, they did little to enhance the long-term health of the school.

### **Technical Support Relationships**

Principals also described forming relationships with groups that could support the school's functioning in terms of curriculum, counseling services, extracurricular activities, and support for students with special needs. These groups provided more than just resources; they provided people and expertise which added to the educational offerings of the school. One RSD principal referred to a partnership with New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) and looked forward to the building of that relationship:

I think that they are going to place—on this campus next year...an administrative intern...I think they are going to put eight interns in eight

schools, and I think one might be placed at this site. In which case, that would be a big help to try to get some more creative things going.

While NLNS was certainly focused on long-term impacts on the schools in which it works (Hess & Kelly, 2005), it was by no means clear that this principal viewed this relationship in the same way. This RSD principal described this organizational relationship quite positively, but framed it in terms of what the school would get out of it, not on the dialogue or mutual benefit that would result. The extra staff member was described as a good way to enable the school to achieve the principal's goal of instituting more "creative things" at the school, but there seemed to be no scrutiny of pre-existing agendas. Given what appeared to be a relationship that meant one thing to NLNS and entirely another to the school, I categorized this relationship in the way it was described by my participant.

Two of the eight schools in the study (both charters) were in negotiations with both the New Orleans Public Library and the New Orleans Recreation Department to create new libraries and recreation centers within or close to the schools. One of the schools had even loftier goals in terms of shared services:

Well I have four...buildings...that I don't want to use as classrooms. They are portables...I want to put a mental health unit in one of them, and the medical doctor in another one, social worker in another one, and a dentist in another one. That's what I envision for the community... then we still have the fitness center right across from the area. Then the public library...

This type of community-based schooling was much more challenging pre-Katrina because principals had to navigate the public school bureaucracy to get permission for all of these relationships. Principals interested in this type of school are having a much easier time moving forward under the new, flatter system. While only the library and recreation center relationships were active at the time of data collection, this example ably demonstrates the difference between charitable relationships and technical support relationships. The library, the recreation department, and the medical professionals on the school's wish list are not merely writing checks or donating classroom supplies, they are engaging in a long-term relationship with the school to provide specific professional services that the school feels will enhance what it offers its students. Most of these are not services the school could provide with its own budget and/or staff. But nonetheless, these relationships, precisely because they do not focus on the core instructional mission of the school, are unlikely to lead to reflection on the part of the administration and teachers on how they approach teaching and learning within the classroom context. If we accept changed teaching

and learning practice as the gold standard of educational reform (Elmore & Burney, 1997), then these relationships may not have the legs to carry school reform forward.

Some of these technical support relationships were not contractually based, like the above, but were much more serendipitous—as one RSD principal explained:

I saw this in the newspaper. [hands me a clipping advertising psychological services offered by Tulane University] So, I called Tulane. And I said, “I wanna support this, I want it for our kids. So, can I send this information out to all our children and encourage them to take advantage of it?” “Oh, absolutely” [they said], and they gave me little brochures.

It does appear that creating external relationships is indeed easier with a flat organizational structure, especially in the post-Katrina context where both schools and community organizations were actively scanning the new environment for partners. But forming new bonds is still not a trivial undertaking. Principals in New Orleans now have to reach out into the world a bit more than they did under the old administration, and this takes time and effort away from working with teachers and tending to classroom instruction. One charter principal described setting up for a one-day NASA demonstration that his school was calling “Space Day:”

The day they brought it, I had to hire a security guard...the night before...everybody was there, I was there until 12:30 that night...I was parked in the back of the school, somebody stole my front tire...I had to get a ride home.

This story is emblematic of the very real transaction cost of establishing external relationships. Even the most beneficial external relationship carries with it a trade-off or opportunity cost, and this transaction cannot always be properly evaluated at the outset. What can be assessed, however, is whether or not the partnership is likely to be instructionally focused or not. While the aforementioned technical support relationships certainly contributed to the broad goals of the school, it was clear in each case, once again, that instructional practice was not the central focus.

### **Low-Risk Relationships**

I argue that charitable relationships and technical support relationships can be classified as *low-risk* relationships in that they have little to do with core operating procedures related to teaching and learning. Even the savviest donors or temporary social workers are not in a strong position to truly influence how professional educators go about their work, especially if this

goal of instructional change is not established at the outset of the relationship. This finding supports the conclusions of extant research that finds that school–business partnerships, as one example of an external relationship, generally have little to do with school improvement (Hoff, 2002; Toubat, 1994). In Hoff’s study, 327 surveys were returned by Atlanta-area businesses which were actively engaged in a partnership with a local school. Only 4%, however, indicated that coordinating school improvement was “very much” part of their role. Of course, low-risk relationships should not be understood as inherently harmful to a school; many of the examples above indicate that schools stood to benefit immensely from what these relationships could offer them: from staff development money, to extra personnel, to special learning opportunities for students. In fact, it might be argued that urban schools could *barely function* without the aid they get from external partners on a range of social, educational, and fiscal fronts. But what is important about low-risk relationships is that they have little chance of engaging the educators at the school in an honest and critical examination of teaching and learning processes. They “help out” instead of “dig in” and prepare for sustained improvement.

As a parallel comparison, Little (1990) explains in her study of teachers’ professional relationships that many things that we might *call* collaboration (telling stories, gathering resources, asking for help) actually do not involve any interrogation of teaching practice at all. At the individual level, these activities represent low-risk relationships that help a teacher towards predetermined needs, but do not call into question the overarching goals of the teacher. At the school level, this interrogation is precisely what is needed if our underperforming schools are to seriously begin the process of sustainable change (Davies, 2007; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006).

Low-risk relationships are unlikely to upset the current mindset or the current trajectory of poorly performing schools. While such relationships were often viewed positively by the principals in New Orleans, they are not likely to help the schools move towards sustainable improvement. At best, these relationships might provide information or other resources for progress toward pre-defined goals—Argyris and Schon’s (1978) single loop learning—but they are unlikely to give information about the appropriateness of these goals in the school’s ecological context (double loop learning). Feedback relationships are much more likely to do this. The benefits and challenges of feedback relationships are discussed next.

### Feedback Relationships

Several principals in this study described external relationships that provided more than goods, services, or expertise. Instead, these relationships offered

feedback on the progress of the school and engaged holistically with the school over multiple dimensions, including teaching and learning processes. What is needed for sustained improvement are external relationships that foster the trust and professional collaboration which are requisite to improving classroom teaching, too often deemed a private affair in many American schools (Cuban, 1993; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Tye, 2000). I will refer to these types of relationships as *feedback relationships*, due to the potential they have to disrupt the status quo with regard to teaching practice. I view the idea of disruption *positively*, as a means to scrutinize and improve current practice which can become routine and implicit (Morrison, 2002; Pascale, Millemann & Gioja, 2000; Senge, 2000). Hearing principals' perspectives on their feedback relationships is helpful to understanding the differences between feedback relationships and low-risk relationships.

As one example of a feedback relationship, one charter school principal explains the "first-year visitation" process that his school experienced:

they send a first-year inspection team, which is another school leader... and someone from their instructional support team. [They] come in for two full days and assess everything that they can in two full days.... Getting to sit down, talk with another school leader and say, what about this? And this? And this?... then getting to get all of those things out and then getting to hear from... other folks... having them help me see the forest through the trees, and that—and while we had some things we could work on and tighten up in different regards, that what we're creating was—was pretty solid for our kids.

This principal experienced some nervousness relating to this "evaluation" of his school, but in the end, relished the opportunity to have a respected group of educators look at his school with fresh eyes. His use of the phrase "get all of those things out" evokes images of a socially safe space reminiscent of a counseling session or a supportive interpersonal relationship. This principal implies that school-related stressors were often *held in* and not shared with other staff. This repression is consistent with notions of charismatic leadership (House, 1976) or coercive leadership (Goleman, 2000) in which differences between leaders and followers are emphasized. This is difficult to reconcile with leadership under a complexity paradigm (Morrison, 2002; Wheatley, 1999) in which dialogue and shared decision making result in leadership that is shared and distributed throughout the organization. External feedback relationships provide a space for sharing challenges given appropriate levels of trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and shared purpose. As indicated above, they may also be useful in minimizing our historical reliance on charismatic or coercive leadership as a primary vehicle for improvement.

Another example of a formalized feedback relationship was the connection of one of the charter schools with a local university. The school, chartered only after the storm, reserved two spots on its board for university faculty, and set up a formal partnership shortly after the storm. But the principal, still scrambling to reopen a storm-displaced school, reported some initial apprehensions about making this connection:

I needed expertise in...accounting, I needed expertise in human resources, and I needed a legal person. I turn around and...the chancellor is standin' right behind me....He said, "I can help you do all of that. [our university] is there for you...let's open this school." And I thought to myself, this is great, but I was scared because [they] run two other schools very much in depth...to the point where the teachers have like 8½ hour school days, they are involved in all this professional development, and I knew that the problem [with us] wasn't with teachers, it was just because of the district and the facility issue....So I said, ya know, lets explore our options and see what kind of relationship we can have....I didn't want them running us.

As in the case of a parent group organizing to improve the education of students discussed earlier (Arriaza, 2004), there was some initial apprehension about this external relationship. Therefore, this partnership engaged in lots of technical activities (collaboratively establishing financial procedures and composing legal documents) during the first year, and slowly more feedback-focused activities were undertaken:

I've requested a middle school institute for my middle school teachers, and they're putting that together for me. They've put together a gifted cohort...they're starting in April. Intersession, they're taking an online "Introduction to Gifted" course.

With the university faculty members on the charter school board, a number of teachers engaged in custom tailored graduate coursework, and with a large number of the university's student teachers interning in the charter school, it is hard to imagine the university not having a compelling stake in this school's success. This shared sense of responsibility between organizations is a hallmark of a feedback relationship. Not incidentally, it has also been noted that teachers' shared responsibility for student success is an important characteristic of individual schools who successfully navigate the change process (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Feedback relationships can also take the form of school-to-school partnerships, which is where Hopkins (2007) centers his discussion of networks and collaboration as drivers of school change in a post-policy context. One RSD

high school principal discussed his commitment to Washington Elementary (Note: pseudonym), his feeder elementary school:

we doin'a lot of programs with Washington across the street. I have a creative writing program here...and we send kids...across the street once a week to work with the English classes to help them develop learning how to write...I'm not gonna do anything here without including Washington because that's my kids. And I gotta grow a better product so I can take the whole further.

Apparent here, once again, is the shared responsibility that can come from a feedback relationship. In fact, shared responsibility and feedback relationships may be somewhat synonymous. It is difficult to imagine one without the other. The above example is included to draw attention to the fact that school-to-school partnerships include some special advantages that make them particularly good candidates. First, both partners are well-versed in the complexities of the teaching/learning process and the challenges of improving instruction in an entire building. The natural desire to hide weaknesses might be minimized, and trust maximized, when both parties face the same complex instructional challenges. Second, if similarly situated schools (in terms of student population, teacher population, accountability challenges, etc.) are paired, then there is more likely to be a trusting relationship than in cases when the partners have very different social standing. A corporation or a high performing school that partners with a struggling school will have to prove that it does not buy into the stereotype of the hopeless urban school in order for the relationship to thrive. Third, when schools partner with other schools, the vast majority of adults in the partnership are classroom teachers. These are people with the classroom experience and teaching expertise which are prerequisites to engaging in productive dialogue about teaching and learning.

In sum, feedback relationships have three salient characteristics: (1) the two parties trust each other, (2) there is sustained interaction, and (3) improving teaching practice is one of the activities undertaken. External relationships that do not meet all three characteristics might be beneficial or even essential, but they are unlikely to help the school to improve sustainably over time.

## Discussion

Under a complexity paradigm, organizations take feedback from the environment in order to gauge expectations and adjust operations accordingly. This can result in negative feedback which provides information about progress towards existing goals, or positive feedback, which gives information about the

appropriateness of those very goals (Hutchins, 1996; Senge, 1990). Without both types of feedback, schools might cheerily check off items on their to-do lists, without realizing that important items are not even being considered.

Given the importance of feedback relationships to a healthy system, the relative lack of them presented here is a bit troubling. Every principal that participated in this study had multiple examples of low-risk relationships, but the majority of principals did not cite an example of a feedback relationship. As relationships go, low-risk relationships are more of the passionate one-night-stand variety as opposed to the productive give and take of a long-term relationship. Low-risk relationships offer short-term gains, with little effort upfront on the part of the school. A school gets a new athletic field or a new science lab by jumping through some bureaucratic hurdles or writing a compelling grant application. These are positive developments, and school leaders should certainly be encouraged to pursue these leads when they are aligned with school needs and goals.

When I was a classroom teacher in New Orleans, I recall fondly the day that our school's new computer lab equipment, purchased with money from the estate of an external donor, was delivered. I stayed at school late into the evening for weeks to get the computers and desks set up so that students could come to the lab. I wrote grants to improve our software selection and to staff the lab in the evenings so students would not have to wait in line to use computers at the public library. My motivation and commitment to the school increased tremendously because of the low-risk relationships my principal had formed with the donor's family. Clearly, our students benefitted from this low-risk relationship, and all schools should pursue them. But I also asked myself a critical question: "What was the value of my increased commitment when my pedagogical skills were both weak and unexamined?" Our school still suffered from pockets of poor teaching, and we needed to focus our energies on improving student learning. This low-risk relationship could not do that, but a teaching/learning focused feedback relationship might have.

It is my opinion that schools ought to have a mix of external relationships from all three of these broad categories. All have their benefits. But what seems essential is that schools, particularly those with a history of poor performance, have at least one feedback relationship that *will* support educators in the process of improving practice. The schools in this study, a mix of historically low and high performing schools, tended to have low-risk relationships, but not have feedback relationships. Under a framework of complexity theory, it seems reasonable to call this tendency the strange attractor of *low-risk relationships*. Strange attractors are ideas or cultural beliefs that often implicitly guide the functioning of a school system. Reigeluth (2004) identifies empowerment/

ownership, customization/differentiation, and shared decision making as examples of strange attractors that operate in public schools. If urban schools are to co-evolve with their environments and engage in meaningful reform, then they will need to fight against this strange attractor of low-risk relationships.

It is easy to understand this tendency of school leaders to interface with other organizations with notions of *their school* and *their plans* held rigidly in place. Much of our popular culture involves heroes, individuals who accomplish incredible feats in spite of significant odds. But fostering hero-worship in our schools will only extend the troubled history of school reform that has defined the last 50 years of American education (Oakes & Lipton, 2002; Ravitch, 2000; Sarason, 1990). Schooling is too complex an enterprise to be sustained by the perspective of one individual, regardless of their talents. Only with collaboration can significant improvement begin.

Schools that resist feedback relationships are seeking affirmation, maybe some handouts, but not critique. On the other hand, a school that overcomes the strange attractor of low-risk relationships is one that invites critique, has communication with a variety of stakeholder and professional groups, and can judiciously select external partners that offer necessary supports.

Fullan (2000) discusses the “inside-out” portion of educational reform in which schools reach out to their environments for information that can help them improve. Sometimes this learning requires questioning ingrained practices and carries with it the risk of upsetting the status quo. This learning process is not straightforward or clear at the outset, but school leaders should recognize:

Schools need the outside to get the job done. These external forces, however, do not come in helpful packages; they are an amalgam of complex and uncoordinated phenomena. The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship with them a productive one. (Fullan, 2000, p. 583)

I would add that the principals, situated at the boundary of the school and its environment, are the best-suited individuals to undertake this type of sense-making work. But a principals' primary responsibility is for what happens *inside* the school. That is, these probes into the external environment are primarily a means towards the goal of improving teaching and learning within classrooms. A school leader has to weigh the costs of engaging in external relationships to ensure that they do not pull more resources away from instructional improvement than is necessary. Good indicators of potential partners might be: possession of useful pedagogical or content knowledge, a basic understanding of the challenges faced by the school, belief that all students can learn at high levels, and/or lived experience with the organizational change process.

## Conclusion

Schools in the U.S. face an external environment changing in ways that would have been difficult to predict a generation ago: the rise of standards-based reform, the charter school movement, huge influxes of English language learners, and accountability for all groups of students. Hargreaves (2008) boldly points to the coming end of the standards movement, but nobody told Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Public schools have been somewhat immune to these changes as they still represent a subsidized monopoly that controls over 90% of the K-12 education marketplace. A vital component of sustained school improvement is the ability of schools to reach out into their external environment for new ideas, information, and resources. Feedback relationships may be an important source of these. They can result in large changes to the operation of the school, resulting in short-term disruptions that give way to long-term success. In fact, entering only into low-risk partnerships is certainly the riskier approach if sustainable long-term change is the goal. Seeking out feedback relationships based on trust and a commitment to improving teaching and learning appears to be a prudent investment for schools. This is especially important in those schools (urban, high poverty) that feel threatened by the current policy environment which can lead to rigid, reactive teaching practice that focuses on short-term gains rather than creating sustainable improvement (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). This is not to say that external partnerships should be the only, or even the primary, resource schools utilize for improvement. Others have shown the importance of leadership (Sammons, 1999) and professional learning (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) to sustaining reforms. But there is some evidence here that schools who engage thoughtfully in productive partnerships are asking the right questions and strengthening their offerings to students. Future research in this vein should qualitatively document the functioning of various feedback relationships, via case studies perhaps, and identify strengths and challenges to guide schools in the formation of such relationships.

With all of this talk about internal and external, it makes sense to close with a thought about how we think about the boundaries of school systems. Traditionally, we might think of teachers, students, and administrators as internal components with parents, elected officials, and the business community as external components. Feedback relationships force us to think about boundaries in a much more tentative fashion. When organizations that physically exist outside of schools become trusted partners in the improvement of teaching and learning, it seems sensible that we ought to redraw the boundaries delimiting who is *in* and who is *out*. A benefit of this more inclusive view is that the

problems of schools become the problems of everyone. To tackle the complex challenges faced by schools, particularly those serving high-poverty populations, there is a dual responsibility for schools to reach out to external partners and for external partners to reach out to schools. This type of collaboration among equal partners may be just the relationship our schools need to sustain improvement.

## References

- Anderson, E. (2005, December 1). *Orleans schools takeover is official*. Retrieved from <http://www.nola.com/education>. Archived at [http://fs.uno.edu/bbeabout/tp12\\_01\\_05.htm](http://fs.uno.edu/bbeabout/tp12_01_05.htm)
- Anderson, S. (2008). Comparative perspectives on school improvement. In K. Mundy, K. Bickmore, R. Hayhoe, M. Madden, & K. Madjidi (Eds.), *Comparative and international education: Issues for teachers*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Annual Report 2006*. (2006). Washington, DC: American Red Cross.
- Apple, M. W. (2001). *Educating the "right" way: Markets, standards, god, and inequality*. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.
- Argyris, C., & Schon, D. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Arriaza, G. (2004). Making changes that stay made: School reform and community involvement. *The High School Journal*, 87(4), 10-24.
- Banathy, B. H. (1991). *Systems design of education: A journey to create the future*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.
- Beabout, B. (2008). *Principals' perceptions of school leadership in post-Katrina New Orleans*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Penn State University, University Park, PA.
- Beabout, B. R., Carr-Chellman, A. A., Alkandari, K. A., Almeida, L. C., Gursoy, H. T., Ma, Z., & Pastore, R. (2008). The perceptions of New Orleans educators on the process of rebuilding the New Orleans school system after Katrina. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 13, 212-237.
- Blase, J., & Blase, J. (2001). *Empowering teachers: What successful principals do* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Bodilly, S. J., Chun, J., Ikemoto, G., & Stockly, S. (2004). *Challenges and potential of a collaborative approach to education reform*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Boisot, M., & Child, J. (1999). Organizations as adaptive systems in complex environments: The case of China. *Organization Science*, 10(3), 237-252.
- Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. A., Kerbow, D., Rollow, S. G., & Easton, J. Q. (1998). *Charting Chicago school reform*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Buras, K. L. (2007). Benign neglect?: Drowning yellow buses, racism, and disinvestment on the city that Bush forgot. In K. J. Saltman (Ed.), *Schooling and the politics of disaster*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Corcoran, T., & Lawrence, N. (2003). *Changing district culture and capacity: The impact of the Merck Institute for Science Education Partnership*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Cuban, L. (1993). *How teachers taught: Constancy and change in American classrooms 1890-1990* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Cuban, L. (2004). *The blackboard and the bottom line: Why schools can't be businesses*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Davies, B. (Ed.). (2007). *Developing sustainable leadership*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Doll, W. E. (2008). Complexity and the culture of curriculum. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 40(1), 190-212.
- Elmore, R. F., & Burney, D. (1997). *Investing in teacher learning: Staff development and instructional improvement in Community District 2*. Philadelphia, PA: Consortium for Policy Research in Education and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.
- Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Fullan, M. (2000). The three stories of education reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 81(8), 581-584.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. New York: de Gruyter.
- Goleman, D. (2000, March). Leadership that gets results. *Harvard Business Review*, 78-90.
- Hargreaves, A. (2008). The coming of post-standardization: Three weddings and a funeral. In C. Sugrue (Ed.), *The future of educational change: International perspectives* (pp. 15-34). London: Routledge.
- Heckscher, C., & Donnellon, A. (1994). *The post-bureaucratic organizations: New perspectives on organizational change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hess, F. M., & Kelly, A. P. (2005). An innovative look, a recalcitrant reality: The politics of principal preparation reform. *Educational Policy*, 19(1), 155-180.
- Hoff, D. L. (2002). School-business partnerships: It's the schools' turn to raise the grade! *School Community Journal*, 12(2), 63-78.
- Hopkins, D. (2007). Sustaining leaders for system change. In B. Davies (Ed.), *Developing sustainable leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Paul Chapman.
- House, R. J. (1976). A 1976 theory of charismatic leadership. In J. Hunt & L. Larson (Eds.), *Leadership: The cutting edge* (pp. 189-207). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Hubbard, L., Mehan, H., & Stein, M. K. (2006). *Reform as learning: School reform, organizational culture, and community politics in San Diego*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hutchins, C. L. (1996). *Systemic thinking: Solving complex problems*. Aurora, CO: Professional Development Systems.
- Inskip, S. (Writer). (2005). Katrina to change face of New Orleans schools [Radio broadcast]. In B. Gordemer (Producer), *Morning Edition*. Washington, DC: National Public Radio.
- Lane, S. (2003). Developing novice teachers as change agents. *Teacher Educational Quarterly*, 30(2), 55-68.
- Little, J. W. (1990). The persistence of privacy: Autonomy and initiative in teachers' professional relations. *Teachers College Record*, 91(4), 509-536.
- Louisiana Department of Education. (2006). *2004-2005 summary press report*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/uploads/8102pa.xls>
- McQuillan, P. J. (2008). Small-school reform through the lens of complexity theory: It's "good to think with." *Teachers College Record*, 110(9), 1772-1801.
- Morrison, K. (2002). *School leadership and complexity theory*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Muncey, D. E., & McQuillan, P. J. (1996). *Reform and resistance in schools and classrooms: An ethnographic view of the Coalition of Essential Schools*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- New Orleans parents' guide to public schools*. (2009). New Orleans, LA: New Orleans Parent Organizing Network.
- Newmann, F. M., & Wehlage, G. G. (1995). *Successful school restructuring*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.
- Oakes, J., & Lipton, M. (2002). Struggling for educational equity in diverse communities: School reform as social movement. *Journal of Educational Change*, 3(3-4), 383-406.

- Olsen, B., & Sexton, D. (2009). Threat rigidity, school reform, and how teachers view their work inside current education policy contexts. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46(1), 9-44.
- Olson, D. R. (2003). *Psychological theory and educational reform: How school remakes mind and society*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Pascale, R. T., Millemann, M., & Gioja, L. (2000). *Surfing on the edge of chaos: The laws of nature and the new laws of business*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Patrikakou, E. N., Weissberg, R. P., Redding, S., & Walberg, H. J. (Eds.). (2005). *School-family partnerships for children's success*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Ravitch, D. (2000). *Left back: A century of failed school reform*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Reigeluth, C. M. (2004, April 12-16). *Chaos theory and the sciences of complexity: Foundations for transforming education*. Paper presented at AERA Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA.
- Reigeluth, C. M. (2006). A leveraged emergent approach to systemic transformation. *Tech Trends*, 50(2), 46-47.
- Riley, K. A. (2004, April 12-16). *Leading challenging urban schools: Demands, dilemmas, & dreams*. Paper presented at AERA Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA.
- Ritea, S. (2005, November 5). *Charter schools will get federal grant*. Retrieved from <http://www.nola.com/education>. Archived at [http://fs.uno.edu/bbeabout/tp\\_11\\_5\\_05.htm](http://fs.uno.edu/bbeabout/tp_11_5_05.htm)
- Ritea, S. (2006, January 21). *Skeleton crew left to gut N.O. system*. Retrieved from <http://www.nola.com/education>. Archived at [http://fs.uno.edu/bbeabout/tp1\\_21\\_06.htm](http://fs.uno.edu/bbeabout/tp1_21_06.htm)
- Sammons, P. (1999). *School effectiveness*. Lisse, Netherlands: Swetz & Zeitlinger.
- Sarason, S. (1990). *The predictable failure of educational reform*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Seidman, I. E. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Sirotnik, K. (2005). Ecological images of change: Limits and possibilities. In A. Lieberman (Ed.), *The roots of educational change* (pp. 181-197). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- State of public education in New Orleans: 2008 Report*. (2008). New Orleans, LA: Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives.
- Teddle, C., & Stringfield, S. (1993). *Schools make a difference: Lessons learned from a 10-year study of school effects*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Toubat, H. M. (1994). Research brief #1: What do businesses expect to get out of partnerships with education? *School Community Journal*, 4(1), 99-100.
- Tye, B. B. (2000). *Hard truths: Uncovering the deep structure of schooling*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). London, Ontario, Canada: Althouse Press.
- Wheatley, M. J. (1999). *Leadership and the new science: Discovering order in a chaotic world* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Brian Beabout is an assistant professor of Educational Leadership at the University of New Orleans. His research interests are the phenomenology of educational change, leadership for social justice, and urban school reform. He is currently organizing a post-Katrina educational research conference for Fall 2010 in New Orleans. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Brian Beabout, 348-H Bicentennial Education Center, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA 70148, or [bbeabout@uno.edu](mailto:bbeabout@uno.edu)

# The Full Purpose Partnership Model for Promoting Academic and Socio-Emotional Success in Schools

*Jeffrey A. Anderson, John H. W. Houser, and Allison Howland*

## Abstract

In 2003, a partnership between a local system of care and a large urban school district led to the creation of a schoolwide educational model called the Full Purpose Partnership (FPP). This model was implemented in several elementary schools in Indianapolis, Indiana to integrate the principles of systems of care and wraparound with the techniques of positive behavioral interventions and supports. The goal of the model is to build school capacity for simultaneously addressing students' educational, health (including mental health), social, and psychological needs. The overall objective is to positively impact school functioning for all students. The application of systems of care to schools and their integration with positive behavioral interventions and supports is relatively new, and thus, the purpose of the evaluation reported in this paper was to increase understanding. Data were collected through interviews and focus groups with members of the various stakeholder groups involved with the FPP. In addition, one member of the evaluation team acted as a participant observer in the FPP schools. Using an emergent case study design, this study focused primarily on the operation of the FPP model vis-à-vis stakeholder perceptions regarding model implementation. Emerging themes included: (1) the role of Care Coordinators in FPP schools; (2) adult "buy-in" and other factors impacting FPP implementation; (3) school climate; and (4) mental health and behavioral impact. Results suggest that the FPP model is positively influencing not only participating schools but the entire school district.

Key Words: schoolwide reform, positive behavior interventions and supports, interagency collaboration, schools, systems of care, wraparound, full purpose, partnerships, model, academic, social, emotional, students, families, parents

## Introduction

In 2003, a school-based pilot project called the Full Purpose Partnership (FPP) was developed and implemented in several elementary schools in Indianapolis Public Schools in Marion County, Indiana (Crowley, Dare, Retz, & Anderson, 2003). The FPP model emerged from a partnership between the school district and a local system of care called the Dawn Project and was designed to integrate system of care (Stroul & Friedman, 1986) and wraparound principles (VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1996) with the techniques of positive behavioral interventions and supports (Eber, Sugai, Smith, & Scott, 2002; Lewis, Powers, Kelk, & Newcomer, 2002; Sugai & Horner, 2002). Systems of care and wraparound have emerged in this country during the past 25 years specifically to serve students with the most serious long-term challenges who require sustained interventions over time from multiple child-serving systems, including child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, and special education (Anderson, Wright, Smith, & Kooreman, 2007). Wraparound has been described as “a philosophy of care that includes a definable planning process involving the child and family that results in a unique set of community services and natural supports individualized for that child and family to achieve a positive set of outcomes” (Burns & Goldman, 1999, p. 13). A core aspect of positive behavioral interventions and supports is its focus on the prevention of problem behavior through the direct teaching of expected behaviors across school settings, as well as providing more intensive and/or individualized interventions for students requiring additional supports to be successful (Horner, Sugai, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005). The FPP model has created a school-based intersection of these approaches. The purpose of this paper is to describe the model and present findings from a process evaluation of the first four schools adopting the FPP approach.

### Developing Systems of Care in Schools

Researchers have suggested that better connections among schools, social service agencies, and families can positively influence children’s school functioning, including academic achievement (e.g., Anderson et al., 2007; Harry, 2002; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Meyer, Anderson, & Huberty, 2007; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). For example, Walker, Ramsey, and Gresham (2004) noted that schools need

to be supported and encouraged to partner with families and social service agencies so they can help all children and youth to be successful in school. However, while schools increasingly have become the de facto service system for mental health and related service provision for children and youth (Farmer, Burns, Phillips, Angold, & Costello, 2003), it has also become clear that the traditional educational system was not well designed for the broad range of health, mental health, social, and psychological challenges that students may experience (Epstein & Walker, 2002; Robertson, Anderson, & Meyer, 2004; Woodruff et al., 1999).

In what has become a seminal monograph for the field, Stroul and Friedman (1986) defined a system of care as “a comprehensive spectrum of mental health and other necessary services which are organized into a coordinated network to meet the multiple and changing needs of children and adolescents with severe emotional disturbances and their families” (p. 3). Since its publication almost 25 years ago, system of care initiatives have emerged across the United States promoting communication and collaboration among child-serving systems, community and social services agencies, and families (Kutash, Duchnowski, & Friedman, 2005). These approaches often embed the principles of wraparound within a team-based framework (Bruns, Burchard, & Yoe, 1995; VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1996; Wright, Russell, Anderson, Kooreman, & Wright, 2006; Walker & Schutte, 2004) that brings together family members, individuals who support the family (e.g., relatives, family friends), a care coordinator, often the student, and representatives from the agencies involved with the family (e.g., therapist, probation officer, teacher). System of care teams begin their work by conducting a strengths-based assessment. Family members and professionals use this information to collaboratively develop a comprehensive plan that encompasses all aspects of the student’s life. For example, the team might focus on helping a student develop and maintain appropriate peer and adult relationships at home, in school, and in their neighborhood (Anderson & Matthews, 2001). Goals are monitored by the team to ensure progress and adjustments are made to the plan as necessary. Teams are both flexible enough to respond to individual situations and standardized in that they adhere to the core principles of wraparound and systems of care (Stroul & Friedman, 1986; Walker & Schutte, 2004). Although the application of systems of care to schools is relatively new, these approaches offer valuable support to educators not typically found in schools (e.g., Anderson et al., 2007; Crowley et al., 2003; Eber et al., 2002; Robertson et al., 2004). Indeed, a number of researchers have suggested that involvement with a system of care is associated with improved functioning at school (Anderson et al., 2007; Anderson, Meyer, & Somers, 2006; CMHS, 1998; Manteuffel, Stephens, & Santiago, 2002; Meyer et al., 2007).

## The Full Purpose Partnership

The inception of a system of care in central Indiana called the Dawn Project led to a variety of partnerships among the various social serving agencies that work with students experiencing emotional and behavioral challenges (Anderson, Meyer, Sullivan, & Wright, 2005). One ongoing collaboration that followed the creation of the Dawn Project has been with Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS). Together, IPS and the Dawn Project developed the Full Purpose Partnership (FPP) model. This model, paid for through district special education funding, is built around four *essential elements*: (a) effective curricula and instruction; (b) inquiry driven, data-based decision making; (c) systems of care and wraparound principles, which include authentic family involvement, strengths-based practice, cultural competence, and interagency collaboration; and (d) schoolwide positive behavior supports (Smith, Anderson, & Abel, 2008). Each of these essential elements is conceptualized through a three-tiered system of schoolwide supports and programming (e.g., Eber et al., 2002; Lewis & Sugai, 1999). Specifically, the tiers focus on prevention, early intervention, and comprehensive intervention.

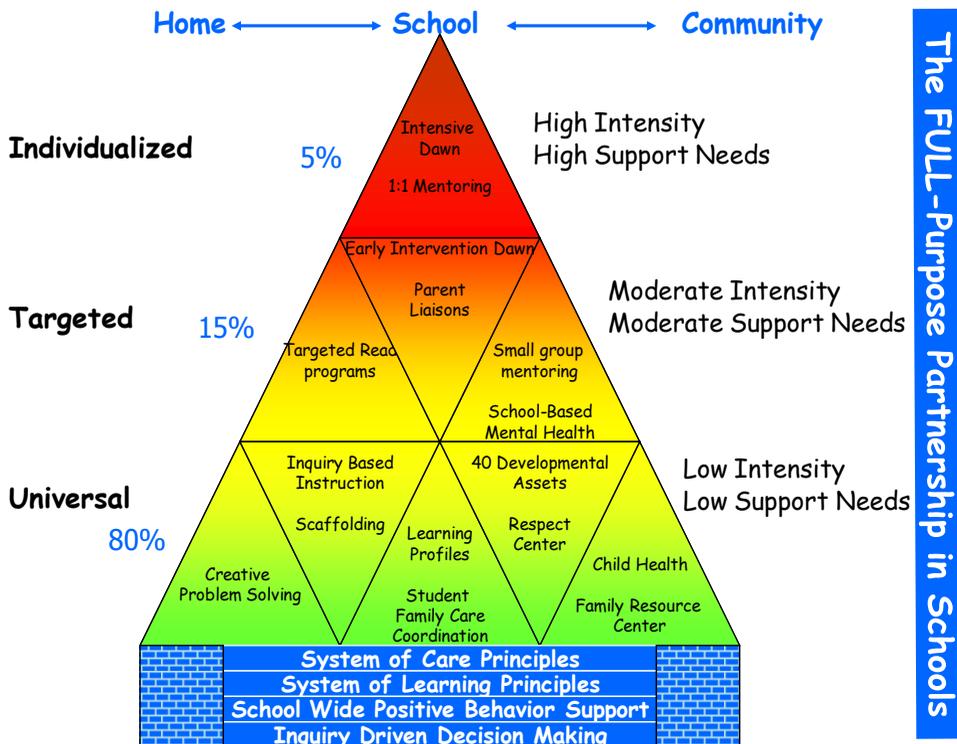


Figure 1. Continuum of Supports Triangle with Corresponding Programming (Ropa, Jackson, & Anderson, 2009).

## Continuum of Supports Triangle

The goal of FPP is to create and sustain effective opportunities for teaching and learning for all students through ongoing school–home–community connections, with the ultimate objective being improved academic achievement. Borrowing heavily from positive behavior and supports, the basic tool used to examine school functioning from this perspective is the Continuum of Supports triangle (see Figure 1). This approach was developed in the field of public health and has been widely adopted in education (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). The triangle provides a visual representation of what the school does to implement the FPP model across the three tiers. The listed percentages indicate the proportion of students in a school who may be functioning at each level. A simple way to think about this is, at any given time, 85-90% of students do not have any noticeable academic or behavioral challenges, 10-15% of students need some additional supports to be successful in school, and 1-5% of students may need more intensive levels of supports to be successful (OSEP Center on PBIS, 2009). A central goal of the FPP is to support all students and increase the percentage of students who do not need additional supports from middle and upper tier interventions.

At tier one, the school faculty first describe what is occurring at each level to support children, as well as the other kinds of supports that are needed to make sure the triangle continuum is complete. The bottom of the triangle is called the prevention level. This is what schools do to ensure that all students are successful, such as the academic instruction and supports provided to all students. This will include differentiation of instruction, proactive classroom management, breakfast and lunch programs, data study teams (sometimes called behavior teams), and many other supports. Broadly, the goal is to ensure the teaching is meaningful and interesting and that students are ready to engage in learning. Prevention also includes fully involving families in schools. The philosophy is that the more supports schools create and provide at the prevention level of the triangle, the less likely it becomes that students will develop higher support needs.

Unlike tier one's focus on prevention, the upper two tiers of the FPP model (i.e., early intervention and comprehensive intervention) concentrate on what happens *after* academic or behavior challenges occur. In the second tier (i.e., early intervention), schools provide "targeted" interventions or supports for students who are exhibiting some academic or behavioral challenges. These include tutoring, mentoring, instruction in social skills and conflict resolution, school-based mental health services, and many others. The top tier (i.e., individualized supports) includes more intensive forms of supports for students

who are demonstrating significant challenges in learning or behavior. A variety of intensive interventions may be implemented for individual students, such as behavior plans, community-based supports such as family or home-based therapy, concentrated one-on-one mentoring, or academic remediation. FPP schools ensure that services and supports are provided for students quickly after a referral (Adelman & Taylor, 2000). An additional goal of the three tiered system is to use information learned from the upper tiers to strengthen the lower tiers. For example, one school decided that a conflict resolution program being used as a second tier intervention would be helpful for all of their students and subsequently provided it to all students by moving it to tier one.

Developing and sustaining the FPP school-based model is the fundamental goal of the School and Family Care Coordinator (“Care Coordinator”), whose role is to facilitate the emergence of the system of care principles, work with the school faculty to develop schoolwide behavioral expectations, and support school efforts to implement differentiated curriculum and instruction so that all learners can be successful. Care Coordinators work for the Dawn Project system of care (i.e., they are not school employees) and are trained in collaborative teaming and working across disciplines (e.g., education, mental health, child welfare) and with families. They are supervised by a *lead* Care Coordinator who is in turn supervised by a small leadership team consisting of administrators from IPS and the Dawn Project. Care Coordinators build connections among families, schools, and communities and are committed to including caregivers in all decisions that affect their children. Simply stated, Care Coordinators support the school’s educational goals by attending to some of the tasks that teachers and school administrators typically lack the time to accomplish.

The purpose of this study was to move beyond a formative evaluation of the initial FPP model conducted during its first year of operation (see Smith et al., 2008) to generate an understanding of the basic processes of the FPP model and how these processes were perceived by program stakeholders at the first four schools that adopted the model. As a primarily process evaluation (Patton, 2003), our goal was to explore the focus and orientation of the FPP model rather than its accountability. Thus, data were gathered from key stakeholders (i.e., district and school level administration, school staff, and community partners) and analyzed to better understand how the model works, not necessarily to evaluate its performance; however, as was evidenced in the findings, respondents in the evaluation clearly viewed performance as an important aspect of the model.

## Methods

This study was conducted during the 2006-2007 school year in four elementary schools in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS), a large urban school district in the Midwest. Three of the schools were in their third year of the FPP program, while the fourth was in its first year. The study was conducted by an evaluation team that included a university researcher, a graduate student who was participating in an internship in the FPP schools, and several members of a doctoral level course on interagency collaboration in children's social services. Although the researcher had previously served as a consultant on the development of the FPP model, this study was unfunded. The Institutional Review Board at the researcher's university approved this work.

### Setting

At the time of this study, the student population of IPS included approximately 37,000 students: 58% African American, 28% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic, and 3% Multiracial. Roughly 77% of families in the district received free lunch services, while another 12% qualified for reduced lunch. Almost a quarter of the families in the district (24.3%) lived below the poverty line, 28.3% of parents reported less than a high school education, and 55.5% of the students in this school district were living in single parent homes. Additionally, at the time of the evaluation, IPS was providing special education services for 19.8% of its student population.

### Data Collection

While data for this study were collected from four different sources, most of the information for this study was gathered from semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the FPP schools. Additionally, focus groups, a variation of the interview (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001), were used to gather information from teachers and school staff. Focus groups frequently are used in evaluation studies as a recognized technique for obtaining an in-depth understanding of a program with purposefully selected participants vis-à-vis a group interview (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973).

### Participants

First, interviews were conducted with 35 members of various stakeholder groups who had been involved with the inception and/or implementation of FPP, including district and agency administrators, school principals, school staff, and School and Family Care Coordinators. Semi-structured interviews

were conducted with each participant, with the exception of school teachers and school staff, who participated in focus groups.

Second, focus groups were conducted at each school. To recruit focus group participants, the principals at the four FPP schools offered an open invitation to their teachers and staff. The evaluation team then selected a sample of 8 to 10 individuals at each school including as much as possible: 1) both males and females; 2) teachers who had been at the school before FPP as well as newer teachers; 3) representative ethnicities of the adults in the school; 4) representatives from across grade levels and/or content areas; and 5) support staff. To protect confidentiality and because of the specificity of these eligibility criteria and the relatively small number of participants per group, no further information about interviewees or focus group membership is reported.

### **Additional Sources of Data**

A third source of data for this study came from one of the evaluation team members who was a participant observer (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) in the FPP schools. Observations primarily involved shadowing the Care Coordinators for entire school days and recording their daily activities, totaling approximately 180 hours over a period of 15 weeks. This experience, along with the prior experience of the evaluation team leader in developing the FPP model, provided the study team with unique perspectives and insights about the FPP. A final source of data consisted of the artifacts collected by the evaluation team, including documents related to FPP operations (e.g., meeting notes), staff training (e.g., handouts), school correspondence (e.g., school newsletters; invitations for families to attend special events), parent center materials (e.g., informational brochures), and others. These artifacts also were reviewed as part of the analyses.

### **Analytic Strategies**

The primary focus of this study was to understand the processes involved in implementation of the FPP model, particularly from the contextualized viewpoint of the stakeholders responsible for implementation. Thus, a multicase emergent study design was selected. The goal was to obtain a “responsive and holistic understanding of the dynamics of an educational program” (Kenny & Grotelueschen, 1980, p. 5), both within and among the four FPP schools. The emergent aspect of the design was used to enable issues and themes articulated by stakeholders who were invested in the FPP process not to just emerge, but to drive the investigation (Stake, 1995). To preserve and extend the emergent design, the constant-comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) was employed, thereby allowing researchers to engage in simultaneous data collection

and analysis (Merriam, 1998). Interviews and focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed, and then examined and coded using the constant comparative method. Using this method to analyze the data from the artifacts, interview and focus group transcriptions, and observations was not only well suited to the study design, but also to the entire data collection process. As information from each of the sources was obtained, data were initially coded to clarify and extend subsequent data collection and analyses. Throughout the ensuing data collection activities, the evaluators built from the existing data to inform the collection process, corroborate or question existing themes, and allow for additional questions regarding the FPP model to emerge.

To strengthen the internal validity and trustworthiness of our findings, a number of well known strategies were used (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). First, we were able to triangulate our findings across multiple data sources (interview/focus groups, observations, and documents/artifacts), as well as through discussions among the evaluation team members who had varied interests, theoretical orientations, and disciplinary backgrounds that included school psychology, special education, social work, urban and multicultural education, and public health. Team members engaged in independent preliminary analyses of data prior to weekly research meetings during which group analyses were conducted “to establish validity through pooled judgment” (Foreman, as cited by Merriam, 1998, p. 204). Additionally, member checks with interview and focus group participants were conducted to solicit feedback about emergent themes. This ensured that themes were consistent with the shared experiences of the various stakeholder groups and individual participants. Finally, prolonged engagement (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) in the FPP model was evidenced by the extensive amount of time spent in FPP schools by at least two members of the evaluation team.

## Results

All of the themes that emerged from the various data collection processes used in this study fell into a similar conceptual framework. Indeed, there was so much consistency and overlap that findings from different data sources and across schools were combined and are reported together as four broad conclusions: (1) service coordination by the School and Family Care Coordinator (“Care Coordinator”) was associated with stakeholders’ perceptions of how well FPP was being implemented in schools; (2) adult buy-in, as well as initial and ongoing training, influenced FPP implementation, maintenance, and capacity building; (3) a child-centered and strengths-based philosophy shared

among staff, teachers, families, and students was perceived to be directly linked to changes in the school culture and a sustained positive school climate; and (4) school-based mental health services and behavior supports were critical components of the FPP model that were perceived to produce better outcomes and increased satisfaction among students and staff (see Table 1). Unique differences in the perspectives of specific stakeholder groups, schools, or sources of data are noted in the following sections.

Table 1. Themes/Subthemes from Stakeholder Interviews and Focus Groups

Themes	Subthemes
Role of Care Coordinator and FPP implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Importance of Care Coordinator to FPP success</li> <li>b. Flexibility of the Care Coordinator</li> <li>c. FPP supports teachers and teaching</li> </ul>
Factors impacting FPP implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Broad buy-in increases likelihood of FPP success</li> <li>b. Need for initial and ongoing training</li> <li>c. FPP is constantly influenced by students and staff transitions</li> </ul>
School culture and climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Importance of common, guiding principles</li> <li>b. Ownership of and accountability for all students</li> <li>c. Positive school climate/culture resulting from FPP</li> </ul>
Mental health and behavior supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Value of mental health and other services addressing the “whole child”</li> <li>b. Positive mental health and behavior outcomes</li> <li>c. Value of preventative measures</li> </ul>

### Role of Care Coordinator and FPP Implementation

This theme generated the most discussion from study participants. The data made clear how important respondents felt the Care Coordinator is to the FPP model, as well as how much the FPP model influences how schools operate. In terms of analyzing the data, it was difficult to untangle perceptions about the role of the Care Coordinator from perceptions of how the FPP model was operating in a given school. That is, the role of the Care Coordinator in a school was deeply intertwined with how well stakeholders felt that FPP was being implemented in that school. Further, given the individualized nature of FPP to the specific context of the school and community, no two Care Coordinator had the exact same job description. Each Care Coordinator’s role had

developed in response to a specific and unique context. On the other hand, similar themes emerged regarding the essential aspects of a Care Coordinator's roles. For example, findings indicated that respondents view the role of the Care Coordinator as "vital and unique" and focused on making connections. One respondent referred to the Care Coordinator as a "resource connector." Someone else noted,

We make sure that all our students' needs are being met by making sure that the medical, dental, mental health issues they may have [are met].... [The Care Coordinator makes] sure we keep them in school, making sure we do every possible thing we can to keep our students healthy and making sure they are academically being serviced appropriately.

Respondents also pointed out that Care Coordinators are important resources for teachers as well as for students and their families:

I think that it gives teachers an opportunity to be able to say, "I just really don't know how to handle this anymore, is there anyone who can help me?" and finally have something in place that people can come to a coordinator...and realize they don't have to have all the answers, they just have to know how to ask for help sometimes.

Care Coordinators described their role as one of actively transforming the culture of their schools. Specifically, these individuals noted that through activities such as "positive behavior support team meetings, working one on one with teachers, hosting brainstorming sessions, doing some...staff boosters as well as doing stuff for our students to make sure that they are feeling engaged in the school process," the school begins to buy into the FPP model. On the other hand, teachers and principals suggested that the primary focus of the Care Coordinators was to bring external resources into the school and/or link those resources with families. Teacher and principal respondents were less likely to directly connect the Care Coordinators to cultural change or the behavioral supports within the school.

Another essential Care Coordinator attribute identified by the Care Coordinators themselves was their ability to be flexible, particularly because the FPP model builds from an individual school's strengths and needs. According to one Care Coordinator,

You never know what kind of hat you're going to have on for the day... You always have this "to do list" but I think being successful in this role, you have to be flexible in saying that's my "to do list" but there might be ten other things that come up before I ever get to that list that are more important.

The importance of Care Coordinator flexibility was echoed by teachers, who repeatedly noted that Care Coordinators are able to help out with tasks that teachers cannot adequately accomplish because of the lack of capacity or time. As an example, one teacher described a mother who was struggling to navigate the Medicaid system: “We don’t have time to sit down with that student’s mother and work through that system, because that is such a complicated system, and [the Care Coordinator] could do that for her. In return, her children became better students, so it benefits the whole school.”

Several respondents used the “toolbox” metaphor in relation to the Care Coordinator, saying that that schools and educators have “more tools for their toolbox” now. In fact, this supported a common overall theme among teachers—the support they felt from both the Care Coordinator and the overall FPP program. Teachers overwhelmingly indicated that the FPP model allows teachers to focus more on teaching, thus allowing them to perform their primary role better. This perspective on being able to teach more effectively also was confirmed by the principals and by the collective input of the district level administrators. Moreover, administrators also noted that the Care Coordinators are essential for capacity building in the school and, because Care Coordinators work for an outside agency (i.e., the Dawn Project) and not the school district, they are protected from being overwhelmed by the additional school duties that often plague social workers (e.g., helping with attendance; answering phones when the school secretary is out). As one administrator pointed out, “They are not IPS employees, so they are not pulled out to put out fires and can focus solely on connecting families and communities, accessing resources, and supporting school staff and students in the FPP process.”

### **Factors Impacting FPP Implementation**

In the words of one stakeholder, for FPP to succeed in a school, those who are implementing it “have to make sure that it is a good fit with the staff.” In fact, interviewees overwhelmingly indicated that “buy-in” or “agreeing to participate in the model” was essential to the success of the FPP model. Respondents said further that without buy-in from an entire school staff, the model would be difficult if not impossible to implement fully or successfully. One Care Coordinator put it this way: “It’s not one person. It’s not that I’m the Care Coordinator, and I make the Full Purpose Partnership. The whole school buys into this philosophy and they want to model the strength-based philosophy.” Another respondent made a similar point, asserting that FPP cannot happen without having the administration, teachers, and families on board.

This perception was echoed by many of the interviewees who said that such buy-in needs to occur prior to a school actually implementing FPP. When

the model was initially being designed, IPS administration had decided that at least 85% of a school's staff had to agree to become an FPP school, and respondents in this evaluation strongly supported this requirement. At the three original schools, there was complete agreement among each staff to become a pilot FPP school, with the exception of one teacher at one school. According to a respondent from that particular teacher's school, it is common knowledge that the teacher who initially did not want her school to become a model school is now a strong advocate for the FPP model.

On the other hand, at the school that was in its first year of implementation of the model, less time had been provided to develop buy-in and common understanding. Respondents familiar with that school noted that this resulted in some confusion regarding what the FPP model meant for teachers and administrators in the school. As a result, at the time of this study, the school principal was still working to help the school's stakeholders (i.e., parents, teachers, and students) understand the FPP model and how it should function. It was clear that by not providing enough time to establish common understanding and ownership of FPP before implementation, barriers to smooth and effective functioning were created.

Respondents also said that thorough training in the principles and practices of FPP is necessary if the model is to be successful. Respondents pointed out that training needs to occur before a school implements FPP and needs to be ongoing once the school has adopted the model. Moreover, findings suggested that such training is not just important for teachers and staff, but also for the students as well, and that training is important to sustaining initial buy-in. Similarly, district level administrative respondents highlighted the importance of training specifically as a prerequisite for getting whole school buy-in and also suggested that the success of the first three FPP schools was critical for generating interest and eventually buy-in from other schools in the district. These respondents also noted how important it had been for the district to purposefully select the original schools for the pilot, pointing out that selection was based on the high-need neighborhoods these schools served. As one interviewee noted, "We knew that if we could make the FPP model successful in these schools, other schools with similar or less intensive needs would want to implement this model, too."

The importance of providing training opportunities for both new students and staff when they first join an FPP school also emerged as an aspect of this finding. As one person put it, stakeholders need to realize that there will always be new students and staff members who are "in the learning curve." The FPP model also was perceived to help such integration occur more effectively: "What I think is exciting is to watch the FPP leaders, our teacher leaders, really

support and welcome any new staff member that comes into the building and help coach them in the FPP process.” This person further noted that such processes appear to be in contrast to the culture of non-FPP schools, which are often “resistant to new people, including new staff coming into the building.” Similarly, teacher respondents noted that the FPP model reduced the impact of problems associated with high levels of mobility among students.

### School Culture and Climate

Having a set of common values and guiding principles was recognized by respondents as an important aspect of the FPP model. From our findings, several key values and principles emerged as core to the FPP philosophy. As noted previously, embracing an approach in which teachers and staff focus on the strengths and abilities of each student, rather than a “deficit model” based on student problems and weaknesses, was widely acknowledged as a fundamental FPP component and was repeatedly described as “the source of a real change” in the school culture. One teacher referred to this as an “overriding philosophy of...positive skill building.” Another interviewee noted that child-centered decision making is when the school, family, and community are united around the child. In fact, the idea of treating students as individuals was recognized by principals and teachers alike as another central aspect of the FPP. While respondents often cited schoolwide rules and expectations first when discussing school climate, much of the feedback from teachers focused more on the day-to-day attitudes and interactions in the school. Teachers specifically noted a real change towards a more positive culture in the school that involved far less negative talk among adults than in the past. Teachers also stated that as the positive climate in the school developed, it had a positive impact on students and, in turn, parents.

Respondents also identified the emergence of a new sense of community, including a range from community within classrooms to the extended school family as community. One person put it this way, “When we’re part of something, we’re part of a school, we’re part of a community, part of a parent group, then we act like it. That to me has been part of the difference FPP has made.” Not surprisingly, ethical accountability and “ownership of all children by a school’s faculty and administration” were also highlighted by interviewees as important values that guide practice. District level administrators also provided unique insights into the school culture theme based on their familiarity with both FPP and non-FPP schools. There were emphatic comments about the positive school culture of FPP schools, as in this example: “As soon as you walk through the door, you immediately sense a positive climate that is very different from schools that have not had the opportunity to implement the

FPP model. From the positive messages displayed physically, to the affirmation of students by all staff, it is a totally different feel than typical schools.”

### **Mental Health and Behavior Supports**

The mental health services that were introduced into these schools after the implementation of FPP were overwhelmingly viewed as providing a vital asset to both students and schools. In fact, providing school-based mental health services was identified as a crucial step in becoming an FPP school. As one teacher noted, having mental health services in the school “has been a benefit for our children [and families] because the children have needs that the educators cannot fulfill.” The use of wraparound care, which often utilizes mental health services and other necessary resources to “wrap” children with the supports they need to succeed, and addressing all aspects of a student’s life instead of just school were both viewed as very important. Related to bringing mental health into the FPP schools, respondents noted the increased use of problem analysis to examine the triggers, purposes, and reasons that underlie problematic behavior. When the behavior team reviews a problematic behavioral event that has occurred, data are examined to find the reason behind the behavior instead of just focusing on the incident itself. FPP schools also are expected to document every office referral and disciplinary action that occurs in the school. The school’s behavior team then uses this information to look for patterns in problem behavior such as location, time of day, and type and possible reason for behavior. One principal respondent described this process: “We look at some hot spots and what we can do differently as a team to address the hot spots...I think we can be really proactive when we look at the data, and the data helps drive us to find opportunities and solutions for our students.” Another person put it this way: “...we sit down every week to figure out what is going on. Does this child need additional academic support? Do they need additional mental health services? Do they need to be tested for special ed services? Do we need to link the family to someone?” District level administrators also described the importance of the work of the behavior teams in these schools, with one interviewee stating: “The child study teams seem more efficient in these schools because they not only have a variety of resources for students and families to access, but they are more skilled and may be more motivated to address student challenges because of the additional training they were provided.”

Respondents noted repeatedly that the increased mental health services and improved behavioral approaches led to better mental health and behavioral outcomes among students. A perceived change in student behavior that included lower levels of problem behavior was reported by principals and teachers from each of the FPP schools. One respondent put it this way:

The thing that we always hear is how quiet and well run our building is. I think that has a lot to do with schoolwide expectations. Everybody is on the same page about behavior, discipline, and expectations. There is no “this classroom does it this way” and “this grade level does it this way.” We are all on the same page.

Both teachers and principal respondents also noted that the reduced behavioral disruptions allowed teachers to increase their focus on academics and instruction. In fact, interviewees not only described how these schools make it a priority to keep students in school, they also reported that their schools were able to better address the root cause of problem behaviors, including those that typically would have led to suspension or expulsion. One person, describing the large drop in suspension rates at her school, went on to say that even after a suspension does occur, “we want to make sure—did we do everything we needed to do before it got that far?”

Finally, the importance that interviewees placed on prevention in their schools cannot be overstated. Specifically, the FPP model was viewed as incorporating a focus on prevention to avoid and reduce behavioral issues in schools. Though preventative measures such as schoolwide expectations required teachers to take time from instruction several times a year to review academic and behavioral expectations with their students, teachers also reported that this “worthwhile investment” actually saved them time in the long run. One respondent noted that preventative measures allow support staff such as the social worker to stop “putting out fires always instead of really taking care of her job” of meeting the more essential needs of families.

## Discussion

Schools can no longer afford not to have full-time staff members who are devoted solely to engaging families and the community (Warren, 2005). In the FPP, respondents clearly emphasized this point, highlighting the importance of the Care Coordinator as a neutral party whose role was to nurture the relational power among families, schools, and communities by building processes that bring together their collective resources and expertise (Sanders, 2003; see, e.g., Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006). The theory of social capital provides an applicable framework for understanding the critical importance of the FPPs’ focus on relational power, particularly for schools serving urban communities. Social capital “refers to the set of resources that inhere in relationships between and among people” (Warren, 2005, p. 135). This theory purports that regardless of resources available (e.g., expertise) or unavailable (e.g., additional funding), when the stakeholders have mutually respectful and trusting

relationships, they are more likely to achieve collective goals. Thus, developing and nurturing such relationships among school partners, including families, is particularly important to effectively utilize the social capacities of urban schools where financial shortfalls and limited access to other resources pose common barriers to educational gains. This mobilization of social capital was perhaps most clearly manifested in the school–family relationship, which has been strengthened and redefined through the FPP process. One district level administrator’s thoughts about the idea of trusting and cooperative relationships reiterate this point: “These FPP schools have been successful in engaging support and participation of many parents who did not have successful school experiences themselves and were previously disenfranchised. That speaks volumes.” A teacher described the central purpose of the FPP model as providing “extra supplements and extra resources of people and other avenues...to help our families to be more successful.” In regard to the high level of parent participation in the school, one teacher asserted that “parents feel welcome to come into the school and seek out someone that can help them. So, it’s not only getting more people in the building to volunteer, but it’s more importantly the quality of services that we can provide...for people.”

### **Parental Engagement**

By providing quality services for families, stakeholders reported that FPP schools have benefited by receiving assistance and services from parents in ways that are not typically seen in non-FPP schools. For example, rates of volunteerism in FPP schools were perceived as far surpassing non-FPP school rates. Respondents credited the presence of parents in the school and improved parent–teacher communication with increasing parents’ expectations of their children’s social competence and academic attainment. In turn, higher parent expectations were widely perceived to be having a positive impact on student behavior and performance. One principal commented that the increased trust earned from parents has led to parents to become more willing to support the school. The development of strong communicative relationships among administrators, teachers, and parents has created an environment where “all of the adults that children know, also know each other and coordinate their efforts” (Warren, 2005, p. 136). Indeed, FPP schools create “social closure,” a term used by Coleman (1988) indicating that children are presented with a similar set of expectations across environments and a united, holistic approach to their social/emotional and academic development.

### **Community Partners**

Social capital and social closure theories can also be used as a lens to sharpen and refine our view of the relationships between FPP schools and other

community organizations. These schools serve as repositories for social capital by creating and helping to sustain networks of human expertise and resources that can collectively focus on common and mutually beneficial goals, such as academic progress (Warren, 2005). The buy-in and enthusiasm from community organizations were particularly striking for one principal, who stated that “from numerous businesses to nonprofits to specific charitable organizations, we’ve been absolutely inundated, in a very good way, from all segments of stakeholders in our community.” Another principal, referring to the various organizations that provide services to or through her school, put it this way: “I should call them partners, not services, because service means they do something for us when we may not do anything in return. FPP is all about helping one another. Parents help us, we help parents. Businesses help us, we help them. And the goal is that we are going to produce more successful students that are better prepared for the workplace.” Through the FPP model, schools have been able to find “community partners that may have wanted to partner with the school, not necessarily with the whole district or corporation, but they know there is a school in their neighborhood and really didn’t know how [to establish a partnership].... We try to tell our community partners that our students today will be your employees tomorrow, so why not start getting these kids now? Why not start making them see, ‘Ok, I’m going to do this and this if I want to do this job.’”

### **Satisfaction**

The change in the school’s culture as well as new or improved mental health and behavioral management services appear to have made real differences not just in student behavior, but in their satisfaction with school as well. As researchers have suggested, when students’ psychological and social needs are adequately addressed, their likelihood of succeeding in school increases (Vander Stoep et al., 2000; Zinns, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). One person noted that the students really have responded well to being treated with respect and being allowed to make and learn from their mistakes. Students also feel safe to express themselves as individuals and seem to appreciate an environment that is safe and consistent, as established through clearly and universally established expectations and norms. A difference in being an FPP school, according to one principal, was the existence of an authentic sense of respect throughout the school; respect that is, in turn, recognized and reciprocated. Part of this stems from FPPs focus on approaching problem behaviors proactively. Using the information provided through functional assessment of problematic behavior, FPP schools are able to implement schoolwide supports aimed at reducing and preventing such behavior in the future. Rather than just

punishing poor behavior, multiple stakeholder respondents indicated that they would rather teach appropriate behavior, using reinforcement through praise and positive behavior interventions and supports (Eber et al., 2002; Sugai & Horner, 2002).

### **Strengths-Focused**

Adopting a strengths-based orientation (Rapp, 1998) was a central theme in the FPP model. Like much of the children's social services arena, schools tend to be deficit focused, and the process of developing a strengths-based orientation necessitates a substantial paradigm shift in thinking. Researchers have noted that teachers report not feeling adequately prepared for working with students from poor and diverse backgrounds (Brown & Medway, 2006) and typically approach teaching these students from a deficit base. Typically, attention is focused on problem behavior, while appropriate behavior goes mostly unnoticed. Strengths-based approaches, on the other hand, posit that all children, families, schools, and communities possess strengths and assets that can be used to overcome problems and difficulties. Working from a strengths perspective requires educators to recognize the power of appreciating the beliefs, traditions, hopes, and dreams of the children and families with whom they work (Eber et al., 2002). As such, FPP schools begin every committee meeting with a discussion of the good things that are happening. They make it a ritual to start with successes and celebrate the positive. Finally, the strengths-based focus goes beyond positive reframing (i.e., taking something negative and restating it positively), instead creating and promoting a belief system that all of us have competencies, talents, and potential (see, e.g., Epstein, 1999; Rapp, 1998).

### *Limitations*

It is obvious that any inferences drawn from this exploratory study must be made cautiously and several limitations are noted. First, we used purposeful sampling in this study and acknowledge the possibility that not all stakeholder perspectives were adequately represented in the process. However, respondents were invited to be interviewed because they were able to reflect on the FPP model from a variety of perspectives, including both teachers who were part of the initial implementation as well as staff who joined FPP schools more recently. We also checked and rechecked our respondent list before initiating data collection and have some evidence that our study sample was representative of the broad range of the adults who are working in the FPP schools. Still, we recognize the possibility in this type of research that a different group of respondents might have produced a different set of findings. Second, this research was conducted in four elementary schools in one school system in a

single metropolitan area in the Midwest, thereby making any generalization to other districts, communities, or schools unclear. Moreover, these schools were not randomly assigned and there were differences among the schools in terms of demographics. However, a review of the findings of this study may allow educators to form their own contextualized generalizations (Stake, 1995). Finally, although we used multiple sources of data for this study, our findings are largely based on stakeholder perspectives. Thus, even though, for example, respondents sometimes reported that the FPP has led to improved school functioning, we were not able to corroborate this perception with more objective sources of information such as standardized test score averages for the schools. We suggest comparing stakeholder perceptions of academic achievement with actual achievement data from each school in future research.

In spite of the limitations, we were encouraged by these findings. Respondents overwhelmingly noted the extent to which the FPP model is positively influencing not only the participating schools but the entire IPS school district. Indeed, the philosophy behind FPP was clearly seen as leading to better and sustained relationships within and among schools, increasing school level capacity for prevention and early intervention of both behavioral and academic concerns, and ultimately improving student outcomes. These results also remind us that behavioral and academic challenges are inextricably intertwined and thus need to be addressed simultaneously (Adelman & Taylor, 2006; Anderson et al., 2004; Eber et al., 2002). The FPP model appears to promote transformations that change how schools operate and how educators connect with students, parents, and community stakeholders.

## References

- Adelman, H. S., & Taylor, L. (2000). Moving prevention from the fringes into the fabric of school improvement. *Journal of Emotional and Psychological Consultation, 11*(1), 7-37.
- Adelman, H. S., & Taylor, L. (2006). *The implementation guide to student learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide: New directions for addressing barriers to learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Anderson, J. A., Dare, M. J., Rotto, K., Carrington-Rotto, P., Richards, M., Wyatt, J., James, T. L., Hart, T., & Suttle, R. (2004, June 23-27). *Developing school-based systems of care*. Institute presented at the 2004 Georgetown Training Institutes: "Developing Local Systems of Care for Children and Adolescents with Emotional Disturbances and Their Families: Early Intervention," San Francisco, CA.
- Anderson, J. A., & Matthews, B. (2001). We care for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities and their families. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 33*(5), 34-39.
- Anderson, J. A., Meyer, L. D., & Somers, J. W. (2006). The impact of system-of-care participation on school functioning: Exploring caregiver and teacher perspectives. *Preventing School Failure, 50*(3), 13-20.

- Anderson, J. A., Meyer, R. M., Sullivan, M. P., & Wright, E. R. (2005). Impact of a system of care on a community's children's social services system. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 14*(4), 505-520.
- Anderson, J. A., Wright, E. R., Smith, J. S., & Kooreman, H. E. (2007). Educational profiles of students at enrollment in a system of care. *Remedial and Special Education, 28*(1), 9-20.
- Brown, K. E., & Medway, F. J. (2006). School climate and teacher beliefs in a school effectively serving poor South Carolina (USA) African-American students: A case study. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 23*, 529-540.
- Bruns, E. J., Burchard, J. D., & Yoe, J. T. (1995). Evaluating the Vermont system of care: Outcomes associated with community based wraparound services. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 4*(3), 321-339.
- Burns, B., & Goldman, S. (1999). *Systems of care: Promising practices in children's mental health, 1998 series: Vol. IV. Promising practices in wraparound for children with severe emotional disorders and their families*. Washington, DC: Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, American Institutes for Research.
- Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS). (1998). *Annual report to Congress on the Evaluation of the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program, 1998*. Atlanta, GA: ORC Macro.
- Crowley, M. F., Dare, M. J., Retz, J., & Anderson, J. A. (2003, January). *Who said it couldn't be done? Creative response from a grant site and special education*. Paper presented at the Winter 2003 System of Care Community Meeting: "Education: A System of Care Partner—Effective Strategies for Serving Youth with Serious Emotional Disorders and Their Families." CMHS, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Portland, OR.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2003). *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Eber, L., Sugai, G., Smith, C. R., & Scott, T. M. (2002). Wraparound and positive behavioral interventions and supports in the schools. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 17*(1)-181.
- Epstein, M. H. (1999). The development and validation of a scale to assess the emotional and behavioral strengths of children and adolescents. *Remedial and Special Education, 20*(5), 258-263.
- Epstein, M. H., & Walker, H. H. (2002). Special education: Best practices and first steps to success. In B. Burns & K. Hoagwood (Eds.), *Community and treatment for youth: Evidence-based interventions for severe emotional and behavioral disorders* (pp. 179-197). New York, NY: Oxford Press.
- Farmer, E. M., Burns, B. J., Phillips, S. D., Angold, A., & Costello, E. J. (2003). Pathways into and through mental health services for children and adolescents. *Psychiatric Services, 54*(1), 60-66.
- Harry, B. (2002). Trends and issues in serving culturally diverse families of children with disabilities. *The Journal of Special Education, 36*, 131-138.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Horner, R., Sugai, G., & Lewis-Palmer, T. (2005). *School-wide positive behavior support evaluation template*. OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: Effective Schoolwide Interventions. Retrieved from [http://www.pbis.org/pbis\\_resource\\_detail\\_page.aspx?Type=4&PBIS\\_ResourceID=215](http://www.pbis.org/pbis_resource_detail_page.aspx?Type=4&PBIS_ResourceID=215)

- Howland, A., Anderson, J. A., Smiley, A. D., & Abbott, D. J. (2006). School liaisons: Bridging the gap between home and school. *School Community Journal, 16*(2), 47-68.
- Jeynes, W. H. (2005). A meta-analysis of the relation of parental involvement to urban elementary school student academic achievement. *Urban Education, 40*(3), 237-269.
- Kenny W. R., & Grotelueschen, A. D. (1980). *Making the case for case study*. Occasional paper, Office for the Study of Continuing Professional Education. Urbana-Champaign: College of Education, University of Illinois.
- Kutash, K., Duchnowski, A. J., & Friedman, R. M. (2005). The system of care 20 years later. In M. H. Epstein, K. Kutash, & A. J. Duchnowski (Eds.), *Outcomes for children and youth with emotional and behavioral disorders and their families: Programs and evaluation best practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; pp. 3-22). Austin, TX: Pro-ed.
- Lewis, T. J., Powers, L. J., Kelk, M. J., & Newcomer, L. L. (2002). Reducing problem behaviors on the playground: An investigation of the application of school wide positive behavior supports. *Psychology in the Schools, 39*, 181-190.
- Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1984). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Manteuffel, B., Stephens, R. L., & Santiago, R. (2002). Overview of the national evaluation of the comprehensive community mental health services for children and their families program and summary of current findings. *Children's Services: Social Policy, Research, and Practice, 5*(1), 3-20.
- McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (2001). *Research in education: A conceptual framework* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Meyer, L. D., Anderson, J. A., & Huberty, T. (2007). School involvement in the Dawn Project: Outcomes for youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties from ethnically diverse backgrounds. *Multiple Voices, 10*, 45-60.
- Patton, M. Q. (2003). *Practical evaluation*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports. (2009, May). *What is school-wide positive behavioral interventions & supports?* Retrieved September 19, 2009, from [http://www.pbis.org/school/what\\_is\\_swpbs.aspx](http://www.pbis.org/school/what_is_swpbs.aspx)
- Rapp, C. A. (1998). *The strengths model: Case management for people suffering from severe and persistent mental illness*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Robertson, D. C., Anderson, J. A., & Meyer, R. (2004). Individual focus, systemic collaboration: The current and potential role of schools in the integrated delivery of mental health services. In K. Robinson (Ed.), *School based mental health: Best practices and program models* (pp. 5.1-5.13). Kingston, NJ: Civic Research Institute.
- Ropa, S., Jackson, C., & Anderson, J. (2009). *Full-purpose partnership: Whole-school reform through the study of data*. Indianapolis, IN: Indianapolis Public Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.urbancollaborative.org/spring09handouts/Indianapolis%20Schools%20Full%20Purpose%20Partnership.pdf>
- Sanders, M. G. (2003). Community involvement in schools. *Education and Urban Society, 35*, 161-180.
- Smith, J., Anderson, J. A., & Abel, A. K. (2008). Preliminary evaluation of the full purpose partnership school-wide model. *Preventing School Failure, 53*(1), 28-37.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schatzman, L., & Strauss, A. L. (1973). *Field research: Strategies for a natural sociology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

- Stroul, B. A., & Friedman, R. M. (1986). *A system of care for children and youth with severe emotional disturbances* (Rev. Ed.). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center.
- Sugai, G., & Horner, R. H. (2002). Introduction to a special series on positive behavior support in schools. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 130-136.
- VanDenBerg, J. E., & Grealish, M. E. (1996). Individualized services and supports through the wraparound process: Philosophy and procedures. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 5, 7-21.
- Vander Stoep, A., Beresford, S., Weiss, N. S., McKnight, B., Cauce, A. M., & Cohen, P. (2000). Community-based study of the transition to adulthood for adolescents with psychiatric disorder. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 152(4), 352-362.
- Walker, H. M., Ramsey, E., & Gresham, F. (2004). *Antisocial behavior in schools: Evidence-based practices*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Walker, J. M., Wilkins, A. S., Dallaire, J., Sandler, H. M., & Hoover-Dempsey, K. V. (2005). Parental involvement: Model revision through scale development. *Elementary School Journal*, 106(2), 85-104.
- Walker, J. S., & Schutte, K. M. (2004). Practice and process in wraparound teamwork. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 12(3), 182-192.
- Warren, M. R. (2005). A new view of urban education reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(2), 133-173.
- Woodruff, D. W., Osher, D., Hoffman, C. C., Gruner, A., King, M. A., Snow, S. T., & McIntire, J. C. (1999). The role of education in a system of care: Effectively serving children with emotional or behavioral disorders. *Systems of Care: Promising Practices in Children's Mental Health, 1998 Series, Volume III*. Washington, DC: Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, American Institutes for Research.
- Wright, E. R., Russell, L. A., Anderson, J. A., Kooreman, H. E., & Wright, D. E. (2006). The impact of team structure and roles on achieving treatment goals in a system of care. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 14(4), 240-250.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zinns, J. E., Bloodworth, M. R., Weissberg, R. P., & Walberg, H. J. (2004). The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success. In J. E. Zinns, R. P. Weissberg, M. C. Wang., & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* (pp. 3-22). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

### Authors' Note:

This work was supported in part by the Special Education Department, Indianapolis Public Schools and by Choices, Inc., the nonprofit parent company of the Dawn Project. The authors appreciate the assistance of IPS and Dawn Project personnel in collecting the data for this study.

Jeffrey A. Anderson is a faculty member in special education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and a research scientist in the Center for Adolescent and Family Studies, both in the School of Education at Indiana University-Bloomington. He has a wide range of research interests that broadly

involve examining the role and impact of interagency collaboration and family engagement in public schools. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jeffrey Anderson; Associate Professor, Special Education Programs; Department of Curriculum and Instruction; School of Education; Indiana University; Room 3232; 201 N. Rose Ave.; W. W. Wright Education Building; Bloomington, IN 47405, or [jander2@indiana.edu](mailto:jander2@indiana.edu)

John H. W. Houser is currently a post-doctoral fellow at Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis, Indiana. His research interests include educational reform, school–community collaboration, and social justice in schools.

Allison Howland is an assistant professor of special education in the Division of Education at Indiana University Purdue University Columbus. Her research interests include family engagement and mental health integration in schools.

# Community Paraeducators: A Partnership-Directed Approach for Preparing and Sustaining the Involvement of Community Members in Inner-City Schools

*Patricia H. Manz, Thomas J. Power, Marika Ginsburg-Block, and Peter W. Dowrick*

## Abstract

Inner-city schools located in high poverty communities often operate with insufficient resources to meet the educational needs of students. Community residents serving as paraeducators offer the dual benefits of expanding instructional capacity and fostering family–school relationships, provided they are appropriately prepared and incorporated with professional staff. This paper introduces a community partnership model for preparing members of the local community to serve as paraeducators and for fostering their working partnerships with professional school staff. A theoretical rationale demonstrating the significance of this model for students from low-income and ethnic minority backgrounds is presented, and key elements in establishing it are discussed. The application of the community partnership model for preparing paraeducators is illustrated through a case example, the Reading Partners program. Future directions to empirically advance the community partnership model are presented.

Key Words: school–community partnerships, paraeducators, urban, schools, communities, capacity building, involvement, families, paraprofessionals, instructional aides, inner-city, reading, literacy, tutors, relationships, teachers

## Introduction

Improving educational outcomes for children who live in poverty is a priority for educators working in inner-city school systems. Although census data indicate that 39% of children live in socioeconomic disadvantage nationally, most of these children live in inner-city communities (National Center for Children in Poverty [NCCP], 2007). Additionally, low-income children are most likely to be ethnic minority or non-English speaking and experience a range of social complexities commonly associated with poverty, including maternal educational level below high school, single-parent family constellation, as well as caregiver unemployment (NCCP, 2007).

The disproportionately high percentage of families with young children below the age of 6 years who live in poverty is particularly disconcerting for educators (Children's Defense Fund, 2000; NCCP, 2007). The experience of poverty and related social problems during early childhood may alter healthy trajectories for the development of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies, setting the course for long-term academic difficulties (Dupper & Poertner, 1997; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). The impact of poverty is evident in the high prevalence of underdeveloped school readiness among children who live in poverty (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005; Miller, Andrews, Cuéllar, & Jensen, 2007). Nearly half of these children enter school with substantial weaknesses in early literacy and numeracy skills, as compared to economically advantaged counterparts (U. S. Department of Education, 2000).

In the face of many barriers, urban school systems are challenged to provide learning environments that meet the needs of a high number of students with learning difficulties while preserving appropriate educational opportunities for students with grade expected or higher academic abilities (U. S. Department of Education, 2000). Often, these school systems do not have sufficient educational support services for students nor professional development opportunities for teachers. In addition, teacher retention is poor and the availability of competent applicants for teaching positions is limited (Brooks, 2009). Making matters worse, many urban schools operate with the absence of one of the most important ingredients for student achievement—positive, supportive interrelationships among the school, family, and community (Bempechat, 1998, Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Comer, 1984; Smith et al., 1997).

A promising resource for urban schools is the employment of paraeducators, noncertified staff who can fulfill various roles and responsibilities to expand schools' instructional capacity and foster home-school relationships (French, 1998, Giancreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003). Affirmation of the importance of paraeducators was evidenced in IDEA '97, which authorized and

encouraged the utilization of paraeducators. Over recent years, the utilization of paraprofessionals to provide educational services to students has been on the rise. At present, the nearly 250,000 paraeducators in our nation's schools are the largest group of noncertified teaching personnel who provide instructional services to students, particularly to those with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2000; White, 2004). For the most part, paraeducators work in special education contexts (French, 1998; Wall, Davis, Crowley, & White, 2005) and are largely involved in instructional activities with students who present with disabilities (French, 1998).

Although the primary purpose for including paraeducators in schools is to assist with instruction, they offer the serendipitous advantage of bolstering the cultural congruence among home, community, and school environments (Monzó & Rueda, 2003; Reed, 2009). Paraprofessionals often live within the neighborhoods surrounding the schools and, therefore, are likely to represent the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students and families. For instance, the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE; U.S. Department of Education, 2000) revealed that paraeducators were twice as likely as special educators to speak the native language of linguistically diverse students. Perhaps due to their familiarity with one another, paraeducators and families often share mutual regard for one another (Chopra & French, 2004; Reed, 2009; Werts, Harris, Tillery, & Roark, 2004). This positive relationship enables families to have a comfortable point of contact within the school, as it is reported that families are likely to maintain communication with paraeducators (Chopra & French, 2004; Werts et al., 2004). Likewise, paraeducators who reside in the surrounding community possess localized knowledge which enables them to function as advocates for children and families among school personnel (Brooks, 2009; Reed, 2009). Paraeducators have also been shown to foster social connections among students within the school setting and to connect families to services within the school and community (Chopra et al., 2004).

Increasing rates of paraeducator employment has raised school professionals' awareness of the need to provide training for them. In fact, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 established prerequisite credentials for paraeducators, including the completion of 2 years post-secondary education, attainment of an associate's degree, or demonstration of knowledge on state or local testing. Beyond this preservice education, specific training in instructional strategies and behavior management techniques have been identified as priorities by both teachers and paraeducators (French, 1998; Wall et al., 2005).

The effectiveness of paraeducators is not solely contingent upon skill training, however, but also requires system-level planning for their integration

into the educational workforce of schools. Commonly, standards for defining and monitoring their roles and responsibilities and incorporating them into the organizational framework of school systems are lacking (Kubiszyn & Oddone, 1998; Lewis, 2004; Pickett, 1996). Giancreco, Edelman, and Broer (2003) introduced a comprehensive framework for guiding school teams in incorporating and supporting paraeducators. This framework includes key components, such as systems-level planning among school administrators, educators, paraeducators, and families; identification of specific priorities and goals for paraeducators; and evaluation of the effectiveness of paraeducators.

Although the training needs of paraeducators are starting to be addressed and the benefits of schoolwide planning are gaining recognition, attention to the need for building productive and trusting relationships among paraeducators and school professionals has been insufficient. Studies have found that paraeducators perceived greater personal competence when they felt valued by their professional colleagues (Chopra et al., 2004; Lewis, 2004). In contrast, paraeducators felt less effective when they perceived a lack of trust and support from teachers and school administrators. Moreover, paraeducators perceived that their close associations with students and families could alienate them from the professional staff rather than attain their appreciation for the unique opportunities to strengthen family–school relationships.

This paper presents a community partnership model for incorporating paraeducators into inner-city schools that maintains a comprehensive focus on training and supervision along with formulating genuine and productive partnerships between paraeducators and their professional colleagues. This paper begins by delineating a theoretical justification for strategically enlisting community residents as paraeducators (referred to as community paraeducators). Second, the community partnership model is detailed and illustrated through a case example, the Reading Partners program. The paper concludes by outlining future directions for empirically advancing the community partnership model as one approach for incorporating paraeducators and improving educational outcomes for urban students.

## **Rationale for a Community Partnership Model in Urban Schools**

The community partnership model delineates a collaborative process for enlisting and preparing residents of schools' local communities to serve as paraeducators. The rationale for this model draws from perspectives on expanding schools' instructional capacity as well as ecological theory of child development.

### Expanding Schools' Capacity to Meet Diverse Children's Needs

A natural response to the enormous needs and limited resources is to flood urban schools with remedial educational and mental health services. However, more is not necessarily better. Addressing students' educational and socio-emotional needs through disconnected and discrete services often yields a fragmented approach that lacks accountability and wastes valuable resources (Dryfoos, 1996; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). In contrast, building school capacity to meet student needs requires cultivating and supplementing natural resources within the school and community in conjunction with restructuring service delivery strategies (Brooks, 2009; McLaughlin, Leone, Meisel, & Henderson, 1997). The fundamental steps for building capacity are highlighted in Figure 1 and described below.

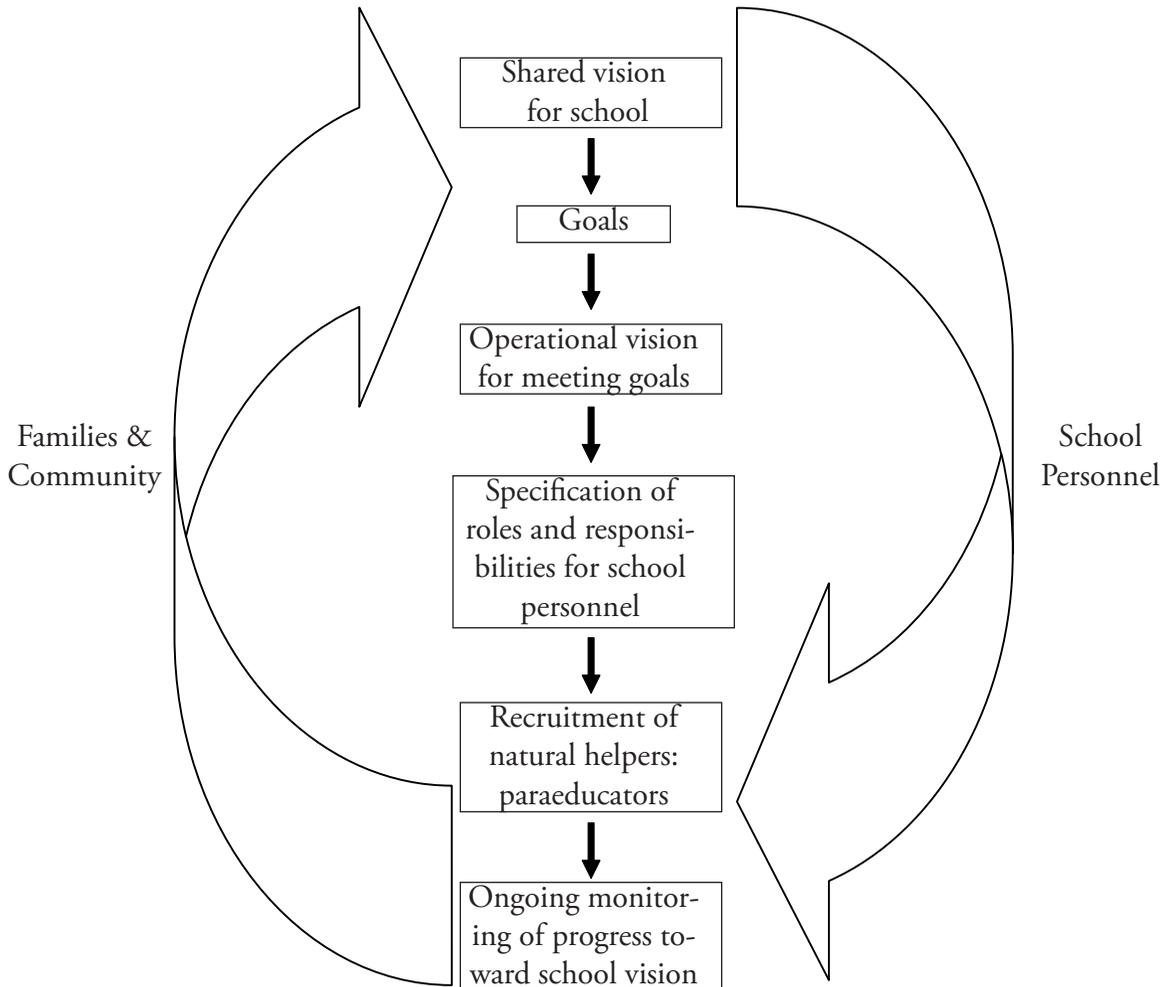


Figure 1. A Collaborative Process for Building School Capacity

Building school capacity begins with a shared vision that is collaboratively created by educators and community members to reflect their mutual aspirations for children's education and development (Charvis, 1995). A school vision delineates goals and an operational plan for achieving the goals, including the specification of roles and associated responsibilities for school personnel and natural helpers from the community, such as parents and neighborhood residents, who may serve as paraeducators. Paraeducators are a tremendous resource for capacity building, provided they are: (a) involved in meaningful roles that are consistent with their interests and strengths, (b) supported in forming relationships with school staff that are based on mutual respect and regard (Cochran & Dean, 1991; Christenson, 1995), and (c) offered adequate training and supervision (French, 1998; McLaughlin et al., 1997). Ongoing monitoring of the progress toward the collaboratively established school vision is equally shared by paraeducators and professional staff (Charvis, 1995; Christenson, 1995). By doing so, paraeducators and professional staff can make informed decisions about the incorporation of additional, possibly external, resources needed to further strengthen and supplement school capacity. In contrast to "flooding" schools with external resources, this approach involves the strategic planning and facilitating of supplemental resources which is consistent with school vision and capacity.

In inner-city schools serving ethnically diverse children and families, the foundation for building capacity must proceed in a manner that is responsive to the values and life circumstances of the surrounding community (Brooks, 2009). Too often urban schools do not share positive, collaborative relationships with the surrounding communities (Comer, 1984). Without such relationships, school personnel may unknowingly restrict the emergence of natural helpers from the community by setting inappropriate standards for their involvement. In contrast, when educators and community members team to develop and progress toward a mutually acceptable school vision, the cultural responsiveness of the school climate and educational programming can be substantially enhanced.

### **Developmental Importance of School–Community Partnerships**

The ecological model of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2006) underscores the value of incorporating community residents as paraeducators in school improvement plans. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2006) portrayed development as a complex web of dynamic, reciprocal interactions between children and adults associated with various contexts, such as home, school, and neighborhood. Unique to the ecological model is the recognition that interrelationships of adults within and across important contexts (e.g., mother

and father, mother and teacher) have a strong influence on child development (Garbarino, 1989; Power & Bartholomew, 1987). Accordingly, objectives for school improvement include creating school climates that reflect an appreciation of students' cultural backgrounds, fostering relationships among students and their families with school staff members, and providing positive models of effective partnership between school and family members.

Given that the culture reflected by schools is often consistent with that of European American, middle-income populations (Vickers & Minke, 1997), students of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds often experience discontinuities in the values and expectations represented in their homes and schools (Slaughter-DeFoe, 1995). For example, there may be differences in communication and interpersonal styles (Ogbu, 1988) and insufficient incorporation of the students' cultural heritages in the school curriculum (Slaughter-DeFoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990). This cultural mismatch breeds school climates that prohibit the formation of strong, developmentally beneficial attachments between teachers and students (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Pianta & Walsh, 1998).

Community paraeducators have a significant impact on the cultural climate of schools by expanding the diversity of cultures represented among school staff and within the social climate and curriculum (Davies, 1991; Reed, 2009). Community paraeducators are able to complement instructional goals and strategies with cultural and historical experiences that are familiar to children (Monzó & Rueda, 2003). They help school personnel incorporate cultural themes and values in school activities, events, and curriculum. Further, avenues for the exchange of useful information between school and community are created by community paraeducators (Chopra et al., 2004). For instance, Brooks (2009) illustrated how the engagement of community members as partners enabled school administration to address neighborhood fears which impacted children's learning and development, including drug trafficking on the school grounds, violent crime, and unemployment, while also creating avenues for enhancing families' engagement in their children's formal education.

In addition to the cultural climate, opportunities to form positive relationships with significant adults in the school are necessary for advancing children's cognitive and social development (Pianta & Walsh, 1998). For young children, relationships with primary caregivers are the means by which they begin to acquire values, beliefs, and attitudes that promote the formation of competencies and self-regard (Slaughter-DeFoe, 1995). As children mature and enter school, the relationships they form with educators are essential for continuing the socialization and developmental processes started at home (Garbarino, 1992; Pianta & Walsh, 1998). However, differences in ethnicity and socioeconomic

status between educators and students can impede the formation of these relationships (Comer, 1984). In the absence of positive relationships, students do not perceive educators as trustworthy and may not respond favorably to their teaching and guidance. Consequently, students may not reach their potential for academic achievement.

In addition to teacher–student relationships, teacher–family relationships significantly influence children’s academic performance (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Schools serving ethnically and economically diverse children often hold expectations for involvement that are not congruent with families’ expectations and resources (Brooks, 2009). This incongruence can lead to ineffective teacher–family relationships that are marked by misunderstanding and mistrust. Seeley (1989) maintained that the interface of schools and families is typically characterized as a process of delegation, whereby educators mandate the roles and responsibilities of families. Such unilateral decision-making does not account for family preferences and values. In addition, such an approach may not be responsive to the constraints and challenges experienced by many low-income families (Harrison, Mitylene, & Henderson, 1991). Consequently, families often become disconnected from school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Educators interpret families’ lack of participation as a failure to comply or to be supportive of children’s educational needs (Harrison et al., 1991). Furthermore, negative assumptions about the families (e.g., delinquency, substance abuse, and promiscuity) may be generated to account for their lack of involvement (Davies, 1988; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Among many ethnically diverse families, these experiences of prejudice are related to a strong sense of distrust in the educational system, which perpetuates their isolation from school and prevents the formation of productive relationships with school staff (Harrison et al., 1991). Additionally, many of these parents have had negative personal experiences as students and do not feel competent to collaborate with educators (Davies, 1988).

The inclusion of community paraeducators in schools provides adult mentors with whom students and family members can form important attachments for fostering students’ academic achievement (Chopra & French, 2004; Doll & Lyon, 1998; Werts et al., 2004). Community paraeducators share similar cultural backgrounds and social memberships as students and families. These similarities facilitate identification and relationship processes necessary for the development of competencies and self-regard in children (Slaughter-DeFoe, 1995). Moreover, the attachment with community paraeducators can encourage and enrich caregivers’ abilities to support children’s education. Through personal exchanges in the neighborhood, community paraeducators can share strategies that families can use to promote academic performance among their children and guide families to interact effectively with educators.

## Establishing a Community Partnership Model

Partnership among community paraeducators and school professionals, defined by mutual respect, honest communication, active collaboration, and shared responsibility (Christenson, 1995; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Comer & Haynes, 1991), is the essential feature of the community partnership model. However, in inner-city schools, achieving equal partnership between community paraeducators and school professionals can be challenging. Community residents are likely to have ethnic minority backgrounds and to be socioeconomically disadvantaged. In addition, they may not have completed high school or post-secondary training. Sadly, these background characteristics are commonly associated with unequal social status in our society (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Gorski, 2008), making it difficult for professionals to accept community residents as equal partners and for the residents to perceive themselves as equipped to function as equal partners with school professionals.

Empowering community paraeducators to view themselves as equal partners with professional school staff is a crucial and continuous process in the community partnership model. Empowerment is not a product that is permanently achieved. Rather, it is ongoing, marked by three recurrent advances in the development of self-perceptions of equity and social value (Cochran & Dean, 1991). The first involves a transformation from negative perceptions of self to the recognition of personal competencies and contributions. Second, an evolving personal sense of competence promotes increased involvement in interpersonal relationships and the formation of social networks. Third, with increased social support, community members actively seek opportunities for leadership and advocacy in promoting the well being of their community.

The ultimate challenge in preparing and supervising community residents to serve as community paraeducators is to maintain a dual focus on (a) empowerment and (b) effective training and supervision. Thus, skill development and monitoring activities are intertwined with efforts to promote the empowerment of the community paraeducators. For example, the simple invitation to have an important role within an intervention program can be a salient milestone in the empowerment process for community paraeducators. Implicit in the invitation are expectations that community paraeducators can make valuable contributions to the intervention program and children's learning. The community paraeducators' experience of these positive expectations may initiate the process of transforming negative self-perceptions to self-perceptions of efficacy and positive regard.

In the community partnership model, major components of skill training and program integration are conducted in a manner that concurrently fosters

the empowerment of community paraeducators. The four major components include: (a) definition of community paraeducator roles and responsibilities, (b) preparation and support of community paraeducators, (c) integration of community paraeducators with professional school staff, and (d) data-based decision making and accountability. Table 1 highlights the dual functions of each of these components by listing its contribution to general program development and to the empowerment processes for community paraeducators. The following explicates the unique function of these components in an empowerment context.

Table 1. Community Partnership Program Development in a Context of Empowerment

Key components in program development	Conceptualization of key components in the community partnership model	Contribution to empowerment of community paraeducators
Definition of community paraeducators roles and responsibilities	Co-construction of roles and responsibilities	Foster positive self-perceptions of efficacy and worth among community partners by engaging them as collaborators
Preparation and support of community paraeducators	Reciprocal training  Supportive supervision	Promote initiation of positive self-perceptions and formation of social networks among community paraeducators by training in a interactive, responsive context  Establish a safe and reliable context for the continuing development of self-efficacy, social networks, and active involvement among community paraeducators
Integration of community paraeducators with professional staff	Community paraeducator – teacher partnership	Support educators in formulating equal partnerships with community paraeducators
Data-based decision making and accountability	Collaborative data-based decision making and accountability	Position community paraeducators as leaders and advocates in determining program efficacy and suitability for children

### Definition of Community Paraeducator Roles and Responsibilities

Discrepancies between school professionals and paraeducators about the roles and responsibilities of community paraeducators is a common and often fatal flaw in employing them in schools (Blalock, 1991). For example, principals tend to view paraeducators as primarily providing clerical support to teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, may hold one of two different views of paraeducators' roles in the classroom: assistant to the student, or assistant to the teacher (French, 1998). Community paraeducators also identify confusion about their roles and responsibilities as a hindrance to effective delivery of services to children (Chopra et al., 2004). Of concern, school professionals' confusion about the roles and responsibilities of community paraeducators can be damaging, resulting in misunderstandings and negative perceptions of the potential benefits and competencies of community paraeducators. Therefore, it is crucial that all persons working in the school clearly understand community paraeducators' roles and responsibilities and how they are both complementary and distinct from other professionals in the school.

In a community partnership model, roles and responsibilities of community paraeducators are *co-constructed* (Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; McKenzie & Houk, 1986). Lewis (2004) showed that positive, working relationships among paraeducators and teachers emanated from effective communication that fosters teachers' acknowledgement of the paraeducators' experience and competence with regard to teaching children. Such communication and acknowledgement formulates the basis for collaboratively establishing job descriptions that delineate the nature of community paraeducator roles and responsibilities. Job descriptions should identify mutually defined roles and responsibilities, prerequisite skills, and evaluation criteria and processes. In addition, it is important that the roles and responsibilities of professional staff members who work collaboratively with community paraeducators are clearly delineated (French, 1998; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Lewis, 2004).

### Preparation and Support of Community Paraeducators

Effectively positioning community residents in paraeducator roles requires comprehensive preservice and inservice training programs to develop the competencies that they need to fulfill their responsibilities (Pickett, 1996). Typically, paraeducator training occurs in workshops and lectures and utilizes instructional materials such as handbooks and videotapes (Blalock, 1991). This didactic training approach is based upon an expert model, wherein there is a unidirectional flow of information from the expert trainer to the paraeducator. Although training in this conventional manner may achieve the goal of

teaching relevant competencies, it ignores the important objective of empowering community paraeducators.

In the community partnership model, training involves a reciprocal exchange of information between the trainer and community paraeducators. Referred to as *reciprocal training*, the aim is to provide sufficient education in intervention components while maintaining an ongoing dialogue with the community paraeducators that gives voice to their wisdom about the suitability of educational strategies and interventions for local children and families.

In addition to reciprocal training, supervision is a key activity in sustaining the effectiveness of community paraeducators (Lewis, 2004). Ongoing supervision is a means for overseeing community paraeducators' involvement in children's instruction and assisting them with problems that may arise. Sadly, the supervision of paraeducators is typically not addressed in school plans, and by default, it becomes the responsibility of the classroom teachers. Teachers, however, are hesitant to supervise paraeducators, as they feel unprepared for this role (French, 1998). One major challenge for teachers who are cast into supervisory roles is their lack of professional training in supervision methods. Teachers report that their supervision approach is based on professional intuition rather than a systematic approach (French, 2001).

The community partnership model entails a *collaborative supervision* approach, which strives to strategically establish a safe and reliable context for the development of paraeducators' self-efficacy, social networks, and active involvement in children's education. A combination of individual and group sessions provides varying opportunities to effectively monitor and support community paraeducators' ongoing development of effective instructional strategies. Individual supervision allows for a personal review of progress and training needs. Group supervision is beneficial for addressing global issues that arise and facilitating collaborative problem solving among community paraeducators. Regularly scheduled meetings promote the formation of caring and trusting relationships among community partners and professional staff that are important for understanding the personal experiences of community paraeducators and maintaining a proactive focus. Examples of community paraeducators' personal experiences that may emerge in supervision include feeling incompetent to assist a child, experiencing prejudice in an interaction with a school staff member, or coping with a parent's rejection of the paraeducator's services for a particular child.

### **Integration of Community Paraeducators and School Professionals**

Providing training and supervision to build community paraeducators' skills is necessary, but not sufficient, to ensure that they are effective. The success

of community paraeducators is also contingent upon the extent to which community paraeducators are accepted by educators and integrated into the professional network. Like all educational services, those provided by community paraeducators need to be incorporated within the school vision and services as to avoid redundancy, omission of needed services, and limited effectiveness due to poor communication with important personnel from the school (Dryfoos, 1996; Dupper & Poertner, 1997).

Recently, Giangreco and colleagues (2003) introduced a comprehensive framework for promoting schoolwide integration of paraeducators. This multi-step framework encompasses a systemic focus, involving school board members, staff, and families from the target school building in a comprehensive process, beginning with assessing and prioritizing needs for supporting paraeducators, developing an action plan, evaluating its effectiveness, and disseminating findings to school officials and the local community. Although an experimental test of this framework has not been published, schools that have used this framework report numerous outcomes for staff, families, and students.

A vital component of schoolwide planning for supporting community paraeducators is to establish a goal and means for achieving *equal partnerships between community paraeducators and educators*. Educators and other professional staff members generally need direction and support to form working relationships with community paraeducators. Teachers' perceptions that individuals from low-income neighborhoods have little to offer students with regard to academic remediation, social skill building, and behavior management may be a major barrier in forming community partnerships. These misperceptions lead to low expectations for achieving effective community involvement in educational planning and instructional activities (Christenson & Cleary, 1990; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987). For example, professional educators may be uncertain of the competence or reliability with which community paraeducators can provide educational services, or they may question the benefits of providing training and support to non-professional staff.

Changing educators' misperceptions about the competence and contributions community paraeducators offer to children and families is essential for creating a climate of equity. This can occur through professional development opportunities. In their study of parent involvement, Cochran and Dean (1991) identified three training needs of educators in working with parents that are also applicable to working with community paraeducators: (a) empathizing with and appreciating community paraeducators' positive contributions, (b) communicating effectively, and (c) creating meaningful roles for community paraeducators in schools. Educators can benefit from training in an ecological perspective of child development that underscores the significance of creating

positive relationships across school, family, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2006). With this understanding, educators can more readily recognize the value and positive contributions of community paraeducators. Further, educators can profit from ongoing training and support that promotes their understanding of differences in interpersonal styles and enables them to develop effective communication skills for working with community paraeducators (Ogbu, 1988). These skills are a prerequisite for dialoguing with community paraeducators to understand their strengths and interests, discerning meaningful roles for them, and developing partnerships which promote their successful participation.

### **Data-Based Decision Making and Accountability**

Data-based decision making and accountability is standard in best educational practices (Yesseldyke et al., 1997). Students' needs and response to intervention should be assessed in relation to measurable outcomes. In addition, empirically supported intervention strategies should be utilized and monitored for procedural integrity. Given school professionals' (e.g., school psychologists, special educators) extensive training in assessment and research methodologies, they are natural leaders in overseeing and conducting data-oriented activities, such as selecting measures, assessing children, and interpreting outcome data. However, attributing sole leadership to school professionals is consistent with an expert model rather than a partnership model and creates a dichotomy between the professional staff and community paraeducators. Moreover, operating within an expert model may restrict or exclude the unique and valuable contributions community paraeducators offer in evaluating culturally relevant intervention programs.

Alternatively, a *collaborative data-based decision making and accountability process* places community paraeducators in collaborative positions for evaluating intervention programs and making decisions about their continued development. In this process, data-oriented activities are viewed as shared responsibilities for the professional staff and community paraeducators (Fantuzzo, Coolahan, & Weiss, 1997). Whereas the professional staff may possess the technical assessment and research knowledge, community paraeducators have expert knowledge in the life circumstances and cultural values of the students and families. Community paraeducators can serve to ensure that assessment and evaluation activities present a balanced perspective of strengths and needs in addition to facilitating culturally meaningful interpretation of evaluation data (Fantuzzo et al., 1997).

The collaborative data-based decision making and accountability process is crucial for facilitating empowerment among community paraeducators (Nastasi

et al., 2000). This process strategically places community paraeducators in positions of leadership and advocacy. As active decision-makers in developing and evaluating interventions for children and families in their neighborhood, community paraeducators have opportunities to voice the needs within the community, direct resources to address these needs, and make recommendations for improving the effectiveness and cultural responsiveness of intervention programs.

### **Case Illustration of the Community Partnership Model: Reading Partners**

Reading Partners (Dowrick & Yuen, 2006; Power, Dowrick, Ginsburg-Block, & Manz, 2004) is a school-based intervention for remediating reading difficulties among kindergarten and first grade children by providing supplemental, individualized instruction in the context of positive and nurturing relationships with community paraeducators. In the Reading Partners program, community paraeducators provide 30-minute, individual tutoring sessions to children three times each week, focusing on phonemic awareness, letter/word recognition, and oral fluency. Prior to the start of intervention, children's instructional needs are identified using standardized achievement measures and curriculum-based measures of oral fluency. Ongoing curriculum-based measurement is conducted weekly throughout the intervention in order to monitor children's responsiveness to the Reading Partner program.

Reading Partners (Power et al., 2004) emerged from a shared vision among school administrators and professionals, community and family members, and university researchers to improve reading skill acquisition for young children attending two elementary schools located in low-income, predominantly African American, inner-city communities. The following case illustration is presented to highlight the process of preparing and supporting community paraeducators according to a community partnership model.

#### **Co-Construction of Roles and Responsibilities**

School personnel (primarily teachers), community paraeducators, and university researchers collaboratively crafted the specific roles and responsibilities associated with designing, implementing, and evaluating the Reading Partners program. The instructional protocol was based upon empirically supported strategies for improving reading abilities among young readers (Power et al., 2004). University researchers shared this literature and a preliminary proposal of the instructional protocol with teachers and community paraeducators. Based upon their knowledge and experience, the teachers complemented this

information by sharing the specific instructional strategies and materials that they used in the children's classrooms. For example, teachers incorporated the word lists required by the school district into the Reading Partner's protocol.

Community paraeducators assisted in determining that reading materials were culturally meaningful and that the instructional procedures permitted the formation of positive relationships with children. As an example, one component of the instructional protocol, a folding-in flashcard procedure (Shapiro, 1992) used to build letter and word recognition, was slightly modified to minimize student frustration, according to the recommendations of several community paraeducators.

In addition to co-constructing the intervention protocol and logistics, community paraeducator roles and responsibilities were collaboratively established and clearly communicated to school personnel. Although the primary role of community paraeducators was to provide tutoring to children, they made equally valuable contributions to progress-monitoring activities and to communication with the participating children's families. In each school, up to two community paraeducators were responsible for conducting ongoing curriculum-based measurement of oral fluency for all participants in Reading Partners. Community paraeducators also sustained regular contact with children's families, sharing progress information and inviting them in to observe tutoring sessions. Similarly, community paraeducators actively planned, with university researchers, periodic celebrations of the children's participation in Reading Partners, events that were well attended by the children's families.

Teachers fulfilled important roles, including ensuring children were available for tutoring and maintaining routine communication with community paraeducators and university researchers in order to monitor children's progress and the alignment of the instructional protocol with classroom curriculum. University researchers assumed primary responsibility for oversight of the operation of the Reading Partners program, support of community paraeducators, and facilitation of communication among teachers and community paraeducators. University staff also maintained the database and continuous processing of progress-monitoring data (e.g., data entry, graphing individual children's progress).

### **Reciprocal Training**

Community paraeducators underwent four hours of preservice training which addressed rapport building with young children, using positive reinforcement, implementing specific instructional strategies for improving word recognition and phonological processing, and monitoring adherence to the tutoring protocol. Consistent with the notion of reciprocal training, the context

was collaborative in that university researchers shared their expertise in reading instruction and managing children's learning, and the community paraeducators provided direction in effectively relating to and teaching the children with whom they had shared sociocultural experiences. As a result of the merging of perspectives from both community paraeducators and university researchers, many improvements were made to the Reading Partners instructional protocol. For instance, when tutoring young children with serious reading difficulties, community paraeducators tended to correct all student errors, resulting in frequent interruption and negative feedback to children who were struggling to read. In dialoging with community paraeducators, they expressed their concern that failure to correct errors as they arose could indirectly promote inaccurate reading. As a team, community paraeducators and university researchers discussed the importance of developing a strategy that provided error correction in a minimally intrusive manner within a highly reinforcing learning context. As a result, alternative strategies for responding to students' errors that were acceptable to all were developed.

### **Supportive Supervision**

Once tutoring began, community paraeducators attended weekly group supervision meetings and bi-weekly individual supervision meetings with university researchers to discuss their students' progress, instructional strategies, and working relationships with teachers and family members. Individual supervision typically focused on the community paraeducators' implementation of the instructional strategies and the children's progress. The group supervision meetings were an invaluable complement to individual supervision and offered the additional benefit of strengthening the social network among the community paraeducators.

Establishing a genuine and trusting climate for the supervision meetings required a shift in university staff members' expectations about the pace and degree of personal sharing that typically occurs in a professional meeting. The professional culture common to the university staff led to expectations that meetings strictly adhere to an agenda, minimize personal conversations, and are completed within a predetermined time period. However, in the supportive supervision meetings, the agenda was more flexible, often allowing personal stories and humor to intermix with the professional discussion.

Although a staff member from the university research team (who was trained in school psychology) served as the supervisor for the community paraeducators, the context of group supervision allowed for peer supervision among the community paraeducators. In many instances, the shared cultural and professional experiences among the community paraeducators were a rich resource

for supervision and an invaluable complement to the direction provided by university researchers. Some issues, including experiences of racism in the school setting and difficulty attaining professional recognition from families and school staff, were best handled through peer supervision by fellow community paraeducators.

### **Community Paraeducator–Teacher Partnership**

The most challenging aspect of this component of the community partnership model was reducing the involvement of university researchers in shaping working partnerships between community paraeducators and teachers. Throughout the Reading Partners program, the propensity for university researchers to serve pivotal roles in community paraeducator–teacher communication was difficult to resist. Similarities in professional expertise and experience among teachers and university researchers created a tendency to discuss children’s progress in professional jargon and to quickly formulate impressions about children’s reading abilities; this resulted in minimizing or excluding community paraeducator involvement.

Establishing routine meetings in which the roles and responsibilities of all were clearly delineated was a crucial activity in fostering teacher–community paraeducator partnerships. Inherent in the Reading Partners program were routine progress meetings (about every 6 weeks) involving the teacher, community paraeducator, and university researcher. The objectives of the meeting were to (a) review children’s progress monitoring data, (b) discuss instructional concerns, and (c) address any logistical issues. Community paraeducators and teachers were expected to assume leadership roles in these meetings, with the university researchers serving to support the communication process.

A key step for ensuring that community paraeducators assumed a leadership role in these meetings was to assist them in preparing their contributions. Prior to the meeting, community paraeducators reviewed the impressions and concerns they wished to share and the children’s progress monitoring data with university researchers. During the meeting, university researchers facilitated direct communication between community paraeducators and teachers by affirming community paraeducators’ contributions and deflecting questions or comments addressed to the researchers to the other party.

### **Collaborative Data-Based Decision Making and Accountability**

Consistent with the community partnership model, collaborative planning with school professionals and community paraeducators shaped the evaluation of the Reading Partners program. Initially, school professionals and community paraeducators were skeptical of the outcome assessment process (which

involved bi-weekly progress monitoring of oral fluency and pre/post-testing with standardized reading achievement measures), voicing concerns that children were being tested excessively. Responding to their concerns, university researchers engaged the community paraeducators and school professionals in an ongoing dialogue about the benefits of the data for illuminating the effectiveness of the Reading Partners program and guiding the development of the program according to its evidenced-based strengths or weaknesses. As a result of these discussions, a mutually acceptable evaluation plan was maintained. In the end, the comprehensive evaluation of Reading Partners yielded favorable outcomes, underscoring its promise as an effective community-based early literacy program for urban schools (Power et al., 2004).

Community paraeducators participated in every aspect of program evaluation. Although most community paraeducators served in tutoring roles, some served as assessors, administering weekly progress monitoring probes in oral fluency. Those serving as tutors were important partners in interpreting students' outcome data. Given the close relationship that community paraeducators shared with the students and their familiarity with school and neighborhood events, they provided insights into students' progress that we would not have otherwise been able to readily access. For example, one student was showing expected improvements in his oral fluency (e.g., gradual increase in words read per minute on curriculum-based monitoring probes). Suddenly, his progress dropped. His community paraeducator informed us that the onset of his decline corresponded with the child witnessing a shooting in the corner store, offering the plausible explanation that the emotional impact of this event was interfering with his academic performance.

In addition to examining children's literacy outcomes, the evaluation of Reading Partners involved a thorough plan for integrity monitoring, which was potentially alarming to community paraeducators. Integrity monitoring procedures required that community paraeducators audiotape each tutoring session and complete a checklist indicating their adherence with major intervention components. University staff randomly selected 15% of the recorded sessions and corresponding checklists to assess adherence to intervention components. In order to offset the potential for these strict procedures to undermine the partnership and empowerment processes (e.g., convey doubt as to community paraeducators' abilities to deliver proper tutoring), university researchers invited the involvement of community paraeducators in integrity monitoring processes. To begin, we had discussions about the value of integrity monitoring for the enhancement and dissemination of the Reading Partners program. In this dialogue we repeatedly assured them that integrity monitoring procedures were not in place because of our doubt in their competencies.

Community paraeducators were engaged in routine reviews of integrity data and problem-solving discussions, which lead to refining intervention procedures and directing ongoing training (Power et al., 2005). Consistent with prior research, the opportunities for performance feedback in these ongoing discussions were likely to contribute to the high rates of compliance obtained (Bolton & Mayer, 2008; Burns, Peters, & Noell, 2008). As reported in Power et al. (2005), adherence to intervention procedures exceeded 93%.

## **Future Directions**

A community partnership model is a promising approach to build the capacity of educational services within inner-city school systems. The foundation for the development of effective and culturally meaningful educational programs is the formation of equal and productive partnerships among community residents and school professionals. To further develop the community partnership model, research investigating the fundamental processes inherent in establishing and sustaining this model in schools is needed. Achieving an empirically based understanding of the community partnership model requires a comprehensive evaluation approach involving the use of ethnographic and quantitative research methods (Miller, 1997) and examining multiple domains of child, school, and family functioning. Identifying the underlying processes and essential components of a community partnership model of intervention is essential to delineating a well defined, replicable approach. Ethnographic research methods can yield a rich examination of the salient intrapersonal and interpersonal processes associated with developing community partnership interventions. An intrapersonal process of primary importance to the community partnership model is the empowerment of community paraeducators. Understanding the environmental and programmatic influences that facilitate or inhibit the empowerment of community paraeducators in school settings can inform the development and evaluation of specific, generalizable strategies for enlisting and supporting community members to serve a paraeducators. The formation of partnerships among community paraeducators and school professional staff is a crucial interpersonal process to examine. Identification of the factors that foster or impede community paraeducator–teacher collaborations is necessary for designing a replicable approach for forming working relationships between them.

An ethnographic examination of these intrapersonal and interpersonal processes can direct the development of quantitative methods for formulating and testing strategies to implement programs based upon a community partnership model (Gaskins, 1994; Hitchcock et al., 2005). For example, psychometrically

sound assessment methods are needed for measuring community paraeducators' self-perceptions of efficacy to improve student and family outcomes; teachers' perceptions of community paraeducators' competencies to assist students and families; and important components of the relationship between community paraeducators and teachers, such as satisfaction and effectiveness. With the availability of these assessment methods, strategies for promoting empowerment and working partnerships can be developed and evaluated.

In addition, evidence of the community partnership model's impact on the effectiveness of schools serving low-income, diverse children and families is needed. The evaluation plan should include measures that reflect outcomes that are related to the theoretical principles of the community partnership model. Relevant student outcome variables include academic and social skills, personal sense of academic efficacy (Bandura, 1997), achievement motivation (Gottfried, 1990), and racial identity and socialization (Stevenson, 1998). Improving the involvement of families in schools is also an important outcome of a partnership-based program, because a fundamental principle of the model is that community paraeducators provide points of attachment for families in schools and can facilitate families' involvement in their children's education. Further, the impact of the community partnership model on the cultural climate of the school can be evaluated by examining curricular and environmental changes, such as assessing the incorporation of significant cultural events into the classroom curriculum, recording the presence of culturally appropriate artwork in the classrooms and hallways, documenting school visits by community residents and leaders, and noting the frequency of school announcements about community events.

School professionals in urban settings face the challenge of educating a disproportionately high number of vulnerable children who experience poverty and associated risks for academic failure. Schools serving these children are in need of an empirically validated, culturally responsive model of intervention that cultivates and supplements natural resources within the school. Interventions must bring schools and communities into partnership so that children profit from mentoring relationships with community members and school staff and to ensure that the cultural heritage of the students is valued and celebrated in schools. A community partnership model offers the advantages of expanding school capacity to provide educational interventions for students and the formation of developmentally salient linkages among children, members from families and communities, and educators. Although this model presents significant systemic and institutional challenges, our efforts to continue its development and examine its effectiveness are justified, given the potential benefits to the children, families, and communities served by under-resourced, inner-city schools.

## References

- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: W. H. Freeman.
- Bempechat, J. (1998). *Against the odds: How at-risk students exceed expectations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Blalock, G. (1991). Paraprofessionals: Critical team members in our special education programs. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 36, 200-214.
- Bolton, J., & Mayer, M. D. (2008). Promoting the generalization of paraprofessional discrete trial teaching skills. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 23(2), 103-111.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In R. M. Lerner & W. Damon (Eds.), *The handbook of child psychology* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.; pp. 793-828). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Brooks, S. M. (2009). A case study of school-community alliances that rebuilt a community. *School Community Journal*, 19(2), 59-80. Retrieved from <http://www.adi.org/journal/fw09/BrooksFall2009.pdf>
- Burns, M. K., Peters, R., & Noell, G. H. (2008). Using performance feedback to enhance implementation fidelity of the problem-solving team process. *Journal of School Psychology*, 46(5), 537-550.
- Charvis, D. M. (1995). Building community capacity to prevent violence through coalitions and partnerships. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 6(2), 234-245.
- Children's Defense Fund. (2000). *Poverty matters: The costs of child poverty in America*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Chopra, R. V., & French, N. K. (2004). Paraeducator relationships with parents of students with significant disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 25(4), 240-251.
- Chopra, R. V., Sandoval-Lucero, E., Aragon, L., Bernal, C., De Balderas, H. B., & Carroll, D. (2004). The paraprofessional role of connector. *Remedial and Special Education*, 25(4), 219-231.
- Christenson, S. L. (1995). Families and schools: What is the role of the school psychologist? *School Psychology Quarterly*, 10(2), 118-132.
- Christenson, S. L., & Cleary, M. (1990). Consultation and the parent-education partnership: A perspective. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 1(3), 219-241.
- Christenson, S. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2001). *Schools and families: Creating essential connections for learning*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Cochran, M., & Dean, C. (1991). Home-school relations and the empowerment process. *The Elementary School Journal*, 9(3), 271-277.
- Comer, J. P. (1984). Home-school relationships as they affect the academic success of children. *Education and Urban Society*, 16(3), 323-337.
- Comer, J. P., & Haynes, N. M. (1991). Parent involvement in the schools: An ecological approach. *The Elementary School Journal*, 91(3), 271-277.
- Davies, D. (1988, Spring). Low-income parents and the schools: A research report and a plan for action. *Equity and Choice*.
- Davies, D. (1991). Schools reaching out: Family, school, and community partnerships for student success. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 72, 376-382.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1991). Involving parents in the schools: A process of empowerment. *American Journal of Education*, 20-47.

- Doll, B., & Lyon, M. A. (1998). Risk and resilience: Implications for the delivery of educational and mental health services in schools. *School Psychology Review, 27*, 348-363.
- Dowrick, P. W., & Yuen, J. W. L. (2006). Literacy for the community, by the community. *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community, 32*(1-2), 81-96.
- Dryfoos, J. G. (1996). *Full-service schools: A revolution in health and social services for children, youth, and families*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Duncan, D. J., & Magnuson, K. A. (2005). Can family socioeconomic resources account for test score gain? *The Future of Children, 15*(1), 15-34.
- Dupper, D. R., & Poertner, J. (1997). Public schools and the revitalization of impoverished communities: School-linked, family resource centers. *Social Work, 42*(5), 415-422.
- Epstein, J. L., & Dauber, S. L. (1991). School programs and teacher practices of parent involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. *The Elementary School Journal, 91*(3), 289-305.
- Fantuzzo, J. W., Coolahan, K., & Weiss, A. (1997). Resiliency partnership-directed research: Enhancing the social competencies of preschool victims of physical abuse by developing peer resources and community strengths. In D. Cicchetti & S. Toth (Eds.), *Developmental perspective on trauma: Theory, research, and intervention*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- French, N. K. (1998). Working together: Resource teachers and paraprofessionals. *Remedial and Special Education, 19*(6), 357-368.
- French, N. K. (2001). Supervising paraprofessionals: A survey of teacher practices. *The Journal of Special Education, 35*(1), 41-53.
- Garbarino, J. (1989). An ecological perspective on the role of play in child development. In M. N. Bloch & A. D. Pellegrini (Eds.), *The ecological context of children's play* (pp. 16-34). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Garbarino, J. (1992). *Children and families in the social environment*. New York, NY: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Gaskins, S. (1994). Integrating interpretive and quantitative methods in socialization research. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 40*(3), 313-333.
- Giancreco, M. F., Edelman, S. W., & Broer, S. M. (2003). Schoolwide planning to improve paraeducator supports. *Exceptional Children, 70*(1), 63-79.
- Gorski, P. (2008). The myth of the "culture of poverty." *Educational Leadership, 65*(7), 32-36.
- Gottfried, A. E. (1990). Academic intrinsic motivation in young elementary school children. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 82*(3), 525-538.
- Harrison, L. H., Mitylene, B. A., & Henderson, D. (1991). Strategies for increasing African-American parental participation in the special education process. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 22*(3).
- Hilton, A., & Gerlach, K. (1997). Employment, preparation, and management of paraeducators: Challenges to appropriate service for students with developmental disabilities. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation, 32*(2), 71-76.
- Hitchcock, J. H., Natasi, B. K., Dai, D. Y., Newman, J., Jayasena, A., Bernstein-Moore, R., Sarkar, S., & Varjas, K. (2005). Illustrating a mixed-methods approach for validating culturally specific constructs. *Journal of School Psychology, 43*(3), 259-278.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Bassler, O. C., & Brissie, J. S. (1987). Parent involvement: Contributions of teacher efficacy, school socioeconomic status, and other school characteristics. *American Educational Research Journal, 24*(3), 417-435.
- Kubiszyn, T., & Oddone, A. (1998). IDEA update. *The School Psychologist, 52*(1).

- Lewis, K. C. (2004). Instructional aides: Colleagues or cultural brokers? *School Community Journal*, 14(1), 91-112. Retrieved from <http://www.adi.org/journal/ss04/Lewis.pdf>
- McKenzie, R. G., & Houk, C. S. (1986). The paraprofessional in special education. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 27, 246-252.
- McLaughlin, J. M., Leone, P. E., Meisel, S., & Henderson, K. (1997). Strengthen school and community capacity. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 5(1), 15-23.
- Miller, J. (1997). The interdependence of interpretive ethnographic and quantitative psychological methodologies in cultural psychology. *Ethos*, 25(2), 164-176.
- Miller, L. S., Andrews, A. S., Cuéllar, D., & Jensen, B. (2007). *Expanding and improving early education for Hispanics: Executive report*. Retrieved from National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics website: [http://www.ecehispanic.org/work/expand\\_MainReport.pdf](http://www.ecehispanic.org/work/expand_MainReport.pdf)
- Monzó, L. D., & Rueda, R. (2003). Shaping education through diverse funds of knowledge: A look at one Latina paraeducator's lived experiences, beliefs, and teaching practice. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 34(1), 72-95.
- Nastasi, B. K., Varjas, K., Schensul, S. L., Silva, K. T., Schensul, J. J., & Ratnayake, P. (2000). The participatory intervention model: A framework for conceptualizing and promoting intervention acceptability. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 15(2), 207-232.
- National Center for Children in Poverty. (2007). *Demographics of low-income children*. Retrieved March 25, 2008 from [http://www.nccp.org/profiles/US\\_profile\\_6.html](http://www.nccp.org/profiles/US_profile_6.html)
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2008). *Early childhood education fast facts*. Retrieved March 25, 2008 from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=90>
- Ogbu, J. (1988). Black education: A cultural-ecological perspective. In H. P. McAdoo (Ed.) *Black children* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; pp. 169-184). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pianta, R. C., & Walsh, D. J. (1998). Applying the construct of resilience: Cautions from a developmental systems perspective. *School Psychology Review*, 27(3), 407-417.
- Pickett, A. L. (1996). *A state of the art report on paraeducators in education and related services*. New York, NY: National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services, Center for Advanced Study in Education, City University of New York.
- Power, T. J., & Bartholomew, K. L. (1987). Family-school relationship patterns: An ecological assessment. *School Psychology Review*, 16(4), 498-512.
- Power, T. J., Blom-Hoffman, J., Clarke, A., Riley-Tillman, T. C., Kelleher, C., & Manz, P. H. (2005). Reconceptualizing intervention integrity: A partnership-based framework for linking research with practice. *Psychology in the Schools*, 42(5), 495-507.
- Power, T. J., Dowrick, P. W., Ginsburg-Block, M., & Manz, P. H. (2004). Partnership-based, community-assisted early intervention for literacy: An application of the participatory intervention model. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 13(2), 93-115.
- Reed, W. A. (2009). The bridge is built: The role of local teachers in an urban elementary school. *School Community Journal*, 19(1), 59-76. Retrieved from <http://www.adi.org/journal/ss09/ReedSpring2009.pdf>
- Seeley, D. S. (1989). A new paradigm for parent involvement. *Educational Leadership*, 47(2), 46-48.
- Shapiro, E. S. (1992). Use of Gickling's model of curriculum-based assessment to improve reading in elementary age students. *School Psychology Review*, 21(1), 168-176.
- Slaughter-DeFoe, D. T. (1995). Revisiting the concept of socialization: Caregiving and teaching in the 90s – a personal perspective. *American Psychologist*, 50(4), 276-286.

- Slaughter-DeFoe, D. T., Nakagawa, K., Takanishi, R., & Johnson, D. J. (1990). Toward cultural/ecological perspectives on schooling and achievement in African- and Asian-American children. *Child Development, 61*, 363-383.
- Smith, E. P., Connell, C. M., Wright, G., Sizer, M., Norman, J. M., Hurley, A., & Walker, S. N. (1997). An ecological model of home, school, and community. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 8*, 339-360.
- Stevenson, H. C. (1998). Theoretical considerations in measuring racial identity and socialization: Extending self further. In R. L. Jones (Ed.), *African American identity development*. Hampton, VA: Cobb & Henry.
- U. S. Department of Education. (2000). *22<sup>nd</sup> annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Vickers, H. S., & Minke, K. M. (1997). Family systems and the family-school connection. In G.G. Bear, K. M. Minke, & A. Thomas (Eds.), *Children's needs II: Development, problems, and alternatives*. Silver Spring, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Wall, S., Davis, K. L., Crowley, A. L. W., & White, L. L. (2005). The urban paraeducator goes to college. *Remedial and Special Education, 26*(3), 183-190.
- Werts, M. G., Harris, S., Tillery, C. Y., & Roark, R. (2004). What parents tell us about paraeducators. *Remedial and Special Education, 25*(4), 232-239.
- White, R. (2004). The recruitment of paraeducators into the special education profession: A review of progress, select evaluation outcomes, and new initiatives. *Remedial and Special Education, 25*(1), 214-218.
- Yesseldyke, J., Dawson, P., Lehr, C., Reschly, D., Reynolds, M., & Telzrow, C. (1997). *School psychology: A blueprint for training and practice II*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Zins, J. E., Bloodworth, M. R., Weissberg, R. P., & Walberg, H. J. (2004). The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success. In J. E. Zins, R. P. Weissberg, M. C. Wang, & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* (pp. 3-22). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

### Authors' Note:

Portions of the work described in this article were supported by grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts and U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (#H185A200211-95).

Patricia H. Manz is an associate professor of school psychology at Lehigh University. Her research focuses on family-school relationships in urban contexts, with an emphasis on young children. In particular, her studies involve examination of the effectiveness of programs that utilize community residents to deliver interventions to ethnic minority and low-income families. Correspondence concerning this article should be directed to Patricia H. Manz, Lehigh University, College of Education, 111 Research Drive, Bethlehem, PA, 18015.

Thomas J. Power, professor of school psychology in pediatrics and education at University of Pennsylvania, is director of the Community Schools

Program at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. His research focuses on developing family-school interventions for children with ADHD and promoting participant engagement in intervention. Dr. Power is currently editor of *School Psychology Review*.

Marika Ginsburg-Block is an assistant professor of school psychology at the University of Delaware. Her research interests include investigating school-based prevention and intervention programs for vulnerable urban youth with an emphasis on the efficacy of peer- and parent-mediated strategies. She currently serves as program coordinator for the Ed.S. and Ph.D. programs in school psychology.

Peter W. Dowrick is a professor at the Center on Disabilities Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. His research focuses on the innovative use of technology to promote self-modeling, particularly among individuals with disabilities. Further, Dr. Dowrick is dedicated to developing culturally responsive research for under-represented individuals.

# Connecting Worlds: Using Photo Narrations to Connect Immigrant Children, Preschool Teachers, and Immigrant Families

*Martha J. Strickland, Jane B. Keat, and Barbara A. Marinak*

## Abstract

Increases in immigrant children to U.S. preschools have introduced unique challenges to teachers. An awareness of disconnections between a homogeneous teaching population and the increasingly diverse student population calls for additional exploration of enhancing connections to facilitate the young immigrants' learning process in the classroom. The purpose of this study was to explore how photo narrations in which preschool teachers listened to immigrant children talk about their photos of their context outside of school would provide opportunities for enhanced connections between teachers and immigrant children. The findings revealed that by using the familiar tools of photos and stories, the immigrant children were given space for their voice to be heard, the teachers found their awareness of the cultural connections and disconnections they used during their interaction with the immigrant children heightened, and connection opportunities with immigrant parents were enhanced. In essence, the teachers were given the opportunity to enter the previously unfamiliar context of the child through the bridge the photo narrations constructed between the teachers' and immigrant children's worlds.

Key words: culturally responsive pedagogy, photos, narration, immigrants, children, early childhood education, photographs, home cultures, preschools, teachers, language learners, stories, parents, diversity, connections, English

## Introduction

Demographic trends around the world are changing schools. In both cities and suburbs the diversity within local preschools is increasing. Preschool teachers find their understanding of teaching and learning challenged as they are confronted with such discontinuities as English language limitations, low immigrant achievement, and seemingly low parent involvement in school (Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). The position statement of the National Association of Educators of Young Children (NAEYC), *On Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity* (2009), clarifies the importance of teachers developing knowledge and new skills that will support all children in their classrooms, including those with diverse cultures and languages. Existing literature suggests that teachers continue to struggle to connect with immigrant children in their classrooms (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). The current academic early childhood conversation includes strategies for teachers to enhance communication and connection with this increasingly diverse preschool population. This article describes how six preschool teachers and their immigrant students used disposable cameras as tools to enhance connections between them.

### Demographics

In the past decade the immigrant population entering the United States has been historically remarkable. In 2005, there were more than 10 million school-age children of immigrants (ages 5-17) in the United States, 1.3 million of whom were noted as foreign-born (Camarota, 2005). It is estimated that one out of every five children in school today are either children who have newly arrived in the U.S. or children with at least one parent who has recently immigrated (Camarota, 2005).

Likewise, the number of children in our schools who are Limited English Proficient (LEP) is on the rise. According to the U.S. State Education Agency Survey data, the number of LEP children in schools increased by 105% between 1990 and 2000, whereas the general school population grew by only 12% (Kindler, 2002). Of these children, it is estimated that in 2000, six out of seven enrolled in grades 1-5 lived in linguistically isolated households (Consentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005).

The teacher population, on the other hand, is generally homogeneous and tends to be reflective of the local mainstream population. In this study, the immigrant children represented 13 countries (see Table 1); in contrast, all the teachers were White females who lived most of their lives in Pennsylvania (see Table 2, p. 88).

Table 1. Demographics of Participating Immigrant Families

	Participant	Place of Birth	Age	Home Language(s)
1	Mother	India		Malayalam, English
	Father	USA		English
	Child (f)	USA	3	English
2	Mother	USA		English
	Father	USA		English
	Child (m)	Russia	3	Russian, English
3	Mother	Germany/Egypt		Arabic, German, English
	Father	Egypt		Arabic, English
	Child (f)	USA	3	Arabic, English
4	Mother	Japan		Japanese, Mandarin, English
	Father	Taiwan		Taiwanese, Mandarin, English
	Child (m)	Scotland	4	English, Mandarin
5	Mother	China		English, Mandarin
	Father	China		English, Mandarin
	Child (f)	USA	4	English, Mandarin
6	Mother	India		Hindi, Spanish, English
	Father	India		Hindi, Spanish, English, French
	Child (m)	USA	4	English
7	Mother	USA		English
	Father	India		Bengali, English
	Child (f)	USA	4	English
8	Mother	USA		English
	Father	USA		English
	Child (m)	Guatemala	4	Spanish, English
9	Mother	Mexico		Spanish, English
	Father	USA		English
	Child (f)	USA	4	English
10	Mother	Cambodia		Cambodian, Chinese, English
	Father	Cambodia		Cambodian, Chinese, English
	Child (f)	USA	4	Chinese, English
11	Mother	Turkey		Turkish, English
	Father	Turkey		Turkish, English
	Child (m)	USA	5	Turkish, English
12	Mother	Japan		Japanese, English
	Father	Japan		Japanese, English
	Child (m)	USA	5	Japanese, English
	(m)	USA	4	Japanese, English
13	Mother	India		Guajarati, English
	Father	India		Guajarati, English, Hindi
	Child (f)	USA	3	English
14	Mother	Germany		German, English
	Father	Germany		German, English
	Child (m)	Germany	4	German, English

As learning and achievement have been key goals of our schools and classroom teachers, the increasingly diverse student population in our suburban school classrooms has challenged the definition and pursuit of these goals. School dropout rates within the immigrant population are on the rise, and

teachers feel a disconnect or a “mismatch” between the immigrant student and the learning community of the school (González, 2001, p.168; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p.148). As a result, teachers are asking for more help in working with the immigrant children entering their classrooms (Trumbull et al., 2001). Framed by sociocultural learning theory, this article explores photos and stories as key tools to provide teachers with opportunities to connect with these students as the teachers seek to facilitate learning in their classrooms.

### **Learning as Connecting**

Existing literature suggests that learning takes place best where there is interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). In a classroom, interaction may be seen as occurring when the teacher and students communicate with each other for the purpose of constructing meaning, or in other words, negotiate to the point of mutually understanding something. For example, in our study, as the preschool teachers interacted with each child during circle time, they attempted to connect what the children were communicating verbally and nonverbally with the other children and their own experience to facilitate group understanding. Some have defined this necessary work of the teacher to be that of bridging or connecting individual worlds to create or construct the expected understanding (Bruner, 1996; Rogoff, 1995).

This goal of connecting is negotiated through the use of shared language, in this case English, as well as through shared cultural assumptions (Vygotsky, 1994; Wertsch, 1991). This suggests that intentional interaction between teachers and immigrant children includes not only English proficiency but also an awareness of the experiences students, their families, and teachers bring into each interaction within the classroom (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Trumbull et al., 2001). Therefore, arriving at understanding, or connecting in a classroom setting, is complex, and introducing limited English proficiency and cultural differences into the conversation increases the complexity of this endeavor.

The sense of impossibility to connect with immigrant families was expressed by the teachers in our study as they initially talked about the parents and children. Although the majority of the parents spoke English, the teachers blamed limited English language proficiency for this perceived disconnection. Without exception, each teacher in our study desired to know about the immigrant children in her classroom but expressed that the immigrant child’s and/or immigrant parents’ limited English language vocabulary did not make this feasible. This resulted in the teachers not talking to the parents but “guessing as to the origin of the children and their parents,” thus remaining unfamiliar with the child’s context outside of school. Their focus on English language

vocabulary without acknowledgement of the social and cultural construction of language (González, 2001) left the teachers disconnected from the immigrant children and their families.

### Teachers as Culturally Responsive

In early childhood education, cultural awareness in the bridging between teachers and children is considered to be appropriate practice and has been found to enhance teachers' connections and relationships with their students and families (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Wright, Stegelin, & Hartle, 2007). This connecting of contexts has been noted to be particularly important when working with ethnically diverse students (Copple, 2003; Trumbull et al., 2001). However, when the teachers in our study attempted to connect with these students' worlds, disconnections seemed to appear instead of connections. This was particularly noted during the classroom observation near Easter when a child from China arrived at the classroom with a seemingly new dress on. The teacher commented that she had a new dress and asked the child if this was her Easter dress. The child responded with a blank stare. During circle time the teacher again asked if this was the child's Easter dress. Again, the child did not reply. The teacher turned to the researchers and noted that this child probably did not understand her English then. In reality, the child probably had no cultural category for Easter, a Christian holiday. The child's later comment was, "This is just a new dress."

Recognizing the importance of interaction in learning, schools have sought to address this disconnection between teachers and immigrant children by providing training in strategies proposed to assist teachers to connect with students of cultural backgrounds different from their own. Unfortunately, what we saw in this study and what commonly appears within schools is what can be called "cultural tourism" (Drew, 1997, p. 297) or strategies which reduce a child's culture to celebrating national foods and festivals or a set of static characteristics which encourages stereotypes. It is suggested by the literature that cultural responsiveness is a better option (Gay, 2000). Therefore, a common goal found threaded throughout the current discourse is the search for culturally responsive strategies which effectively strengthen the linkages between families of all cultures, diverse communities, and school (González et al., 2005). González-Mena (2008) has found that teachers who are self-aware and able to honor the perspectives, beliefs, and values of another can be more culturally responsive teachers, thus creating an environment which encourages not a stereotyping of culture but of equity and social justice. Therefore, it has been suggested that when teachers make their own cultural perspective explicit, their ability to make connections with all students is enhanced. Such approaches as cultural

responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000), diversity pedagogy (Sheets, 2005), as well as multicultural education, have been the topics of many workshops and other professional development venues to reach this responsiveness. Even within this context, teachers continue to puzzle over how to best connect with children of cultures unfamiliar to them.

The preschool teachers in our study were eager to try something that would help them connect with the immigrant children; however, their hectic lives at school and home became obstacles to trying anything unfamiliar to them. The challenge, therefore, was to use what was familiar to the teachers to bridge the unfamiliar—the worlds of the immigrant children. This study sought to address this challenge by taking what is familiar to preschool teachers, photos and stories, to create a bridge to what is unfamiliar, the immigrant children's worlds outside of school.

### **Photos and Stories as Tools**

Photos and drawings have always played an important role in teaching and learning with young children. Early childhood settings typically include displays of picture books, photos of children, and autobiographical books of each child. These visuals are utilized to teach and create teachers' connections with children and their families. Additionally, photography has been found to be effective in enhancing a sense of community between people (Marquez-Zenkov & Harmon, 2007). Recently, effective linking between classroom and community has been done with English language learner (ELL) students using photography (Landay, Meehan, Newman, Wootton, & King, 2001). Therefore, this study proposed that photos—a familiar tool in the local preschool classroom—could be an effective tool to connect with the unfamiliar—in this case the families from cultures different from the teachers' culture.

Where there are pictures, there is a story. Stories are also familiar tools used by teachers to enhance understanding within their classrooms. Storyteller and researcher Paley (1990) identified listening to another's stories as key to listening in on the minds and hearts of young children. Historically, storytelling has been a powerful tool for passing along the meaning systems of a culture (Bruner, 1990; Miller, 1994). According to sociolinguists, personal stories are constructed using past personal experience based on culturally shared assumptions (Gee, 2005). These assumptions, during a conversation, are perceived to be shared by both the storyteller and the listeners. One's story, or storyline, reflects not just the storyteller's present thoughts but the storyteller's appeal to his or her background and previous experience reflecting culture and social class to tell his or her story as well as appeal to the listener to seek understanding (Bakhtin, 1986; Gee, 2005). Subsequently, the storyteller's thoughts and

assumptions, believed shared by the listeners, become culturally constructed storylines (Gee, 2005).

In light of this, it is possible to see how combining photos and personal stories (Cappello, 2005; Clark-Ibanez, 2004) could possibly be a powerful bridge between teachers and immigrant children. Therefore, we proposed that children's photos of their world outside of school, along with their photo narrations, or stories about their photos, could be appropriate tools for immigrant children to make meaningful connections with their teachers. The study further proposed that the children's narrations of their photos might facilitate the teachers making meaningful connections with their immigrant students. Also, the combination of photographs and narrations were proposed to provide the opportunity for the teachers to enter the child's world outside of school.

## Method

### Participants and Context

This case study took place in a longstanding private preschool nestled in an upper-middle class suburban neighborhood in Central Pennsylvania. This region had recently experienced an unprecedented increase in diversity. All the preschools in the area were surveyed, and the one with the greatest number of immigrant children and receptive teachers was chosen. The selected preschool, housed on one floor of an old brick church building, weekly served approximately 300 children, ages 2-5. Each classroom had 10-15 children. The teachers were White females, college educated, ranging from 35-55 years old (see Table 2). This preschool had a reputation of providing a non-threatening place in which children could grow in their social and language skills without focusing on academic achievement. This was a popular choice for immigrant families in the area who desired that their young children gain in their use and understanding of English without the pressure of academic responsibilities.

Six teachers who had immigrant children in their classrooms consented to participate in this study. The average preschool teaching experience of these teachers was 10 years. For the purpose of this study, immigrant parents were contacted and invited to consent to allow their children to participate and consent themselves to be a part of an interview within the study.

Fourteen families representing 13 countries and 16 languages consented to participate (see Table 1). Of these families, 9 had two foreign-born immigrant parents; 3 had one foreign-born parent and one U.S.-born parent. Two families had U.S.-born parents with adopted foreign-born children. Each family had at least one parent who was fluent in English.

Of these families, 15 immigrant children (8 males and 7 females) participated in this study: two 5-year-olds, nine 4-year-olds and four 3-year-olds. Of

these children, 11 were born in the United States of immigrant parents. Four children were foreign-born: one in Germany, one in Scotland, one in Russia, and one in Guatemala. The child from Russia and the child from Guatemala were adopted by U.S.-born citizens who had minimal connection with the home countries and languages of these children (see Table 1 for summary).

This sample is representative of the characteristics of immigrant families in the U.S. today in two respects. First, Census Bureau data reveal that 79% of the children from immigrant families living in the U.S. are native-born, and one in four has a parent who was born in the U.S. (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2007). In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 34% of immigrant children live with at least one U.S.-born parent. In this study, 25% lived with at least one U.S.-born parent. Second, the National Census Bureau data reveal that 58% of immigrant parents report that at least one of them is fluent in English (Hernandez et al., 2007). In Pennsylvania this number is closer to 80%, which is mirrored in this study with 24 of the 28 participating parents (86%) self-reporting English fluency (Hernandez et al., 2007).

The primary investigator of this study had unique qualifications which enabled her to communicate freely with immigrant families as she has worked in over 30 countries as an educational family consultant. Her extensive experience provided her with unique cross-cultural communication skills and heightened cultural awareness which became an asset during the interviews with the immigrant parents as well as during the data analysis.

Table 2. Demographics of Participating Teachers

Name	Ethnicity	Language	Preschool Teaching Experience	Overseas Experience	Academic Degree
Teacher A	Caucasian	English	7 yrs	Lived in UK (4 yrs) Bahamas (7 days)	BS ECE cert
Teacher B	Caucasian	English	6.5 yrs	Italy (10 days) Mexico (7 days)	MA ECE cert
Teacher C	Caucasian	English	2 yrs	Italy (8 days) Austria (9 days)	MA
Teacher D	Caucasian	English	9 yrs	Bermuda (7 days) Mexico (1 day) Jamaica (1 day) Canada (2 days) St Croix (7 days)	MA
Teacher E	Caucasian	English	18 yrs	Canada (2 wks) London (2 wks)	BA
Teacher F	Caucasian	English	18 yrs	Mexico (7 days)	BA

## Data Sources

To begin this study, the researchers sat in each classroom at least twice to observe a typical day. During these observations researchers noted context as well as the interactions the teacher had with students including the connections attempted by the teacher with each immigrant child. Subsequently, the researchers compared observations and noted any commonalities and/or differences in their notes. This process worked to minimize observer effect and maximize inter-rater reliability (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003).

Next, a focus group of all participating teachers was convened (Morgan, 1997). During this time they were asked to talk about their perceptions of the immigrant children in their classes. This session was digitally recorded and transcribed.

As photos taken by the preschool immigrant children were essential to this study, the teachers devoted one circle time to teach the children how to use a camera and take good photos by practicing with cardboard cameras and using storybooks. At the conclusion of the circle time, each child was issued a disposable camera. Upon return of the cameras, the photos were processed and ready for the children to participate in what is known as a photo narration (Cappello, 2005; Clark-Ibanez, 2004). In this process the children talked about their photos in the presence of their teachers while the researchers sat behind them recording observations. These teacher-child interactions were audio recorded and transcribed.

After the photo narrations, the teacher focus group was reconvened, at which time the teachers were again asked to talk about their perceptions of the immigrant children in their classes and describe their thoughts on the process they had just experienced (Morgan, 1997). Again, this session was audio recorded and transcribed.

Additionally, the primary investigator, who had extensive experience working with parents of ethnically diverse backgrounds, interviewed at least one parent of each participating immigrant child (see Table 1). The purpose of the interview was to gather information on family constellation, migration history, and home language(s) to inform the researchers of each child's home context and inform the analysis (Child Development in Context Program, n.d.).

## Analysis

The observation notes and focus group and photo narration transcripts were initially read by each researcher multiple times and coded for salient themes (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003). The resulting thematically organized data were further analyzed for recurring words or phrases, providing for the discovery of

the teachers' personal, culturally constructed storylines they brought into their interactions (Gee, 2005; Quinn, 2005). This analysis was done by each researcher and subsequently checked for compatible results (Creswell, 1994). Additionally, the photo narration transcripts were read multiple times and coded corresponding to the analysis of attempts at bridging understanding made by both the child and the teacher and the resulting connections and disconnections which emerged (Strauss, 2005). The researchers met periodically to check for agreement. Participants were not involved in any aspect of this analysis. All names used within quotations are pseudonyms.

## Findings

Three key connections between teachers, immigrant children, and their families emerged from our analysis. First, the interactions between teachers and immigrant children during the photo narrations revealed that these narrations effectively gave the children a way to communicate with their teachers, connecting the immigrant children with their teachers in a unique way. Also, the teachers expressed increased awareness of their disconnections or mismatches between their previous assumptions and children's stories. Third, the teachers noted their enhanced connection with the immigrant children's home context using this process or what they called a "virtual home visit."

### Connecting Immigrant Children With English Words

The immigrant children's photographs and opportunity to talk to their teacher about these photos seemed to connect their world with words in English. The majority of the children surprised their teacher by using more extensive vocabulary and dialogue than had been anticipated. The following is one teacher's account of what occurred during the photo narrations, which illustrates what was found throughout the teachers' focus group discussions:

For Hans, in particular, it was the first time, when I sat down with him to go over his pictures, it was the first time he initiated an English word to me ever besides just repeating a word that I had just said. Like the color green, I would say, "Can you say green?" and he would repeat it. But it was the first time when he showed his Chocolate World picture, he said, "Chocolate World," plain as day, and it was the first time I ever heard him speak English to me. So without the pictures, that would have never have occurred.

In addition to the number of words spoken by the children, the content of the children's photo narrations was also instructive. All identifiers and stories were spoken by each immigrant child in English. The children consistently

included information on family constellation, home context, and relationships. For example, the children talked about Grandma, Grandpa, Nana, Poppop. They also described relationships and roles within the home such as “Dada, that’s my grandpa” and “This is my mom’s kitchen....She is baking” and “Look at my daddy, he is crawling with my brother!”

Bedrooms, kitchen tables, and playrooms, as well as outside play areas, were also described. These included details such as favorite blankets, toys, foods, and activities. This is seen in the following indicative dialogue between an immigrant student (from Mexico) and her teacher:

S: That’s my bedroom. That is Bridgie’s bed and that’s our kids, and that’s Bridgie’s dresser and that’s my rug and the toys are inside.

T: So you and Bridgie share a room together?

S: Yes....And mom sleeps in a different room upstairs....That is where my bed is.

T: That is your bed?

S: Yes.

T: And whose bed is that?

S: That’s Bridgie’s.

T: Oh, ok and what is that on the wall?

S: My butterfly. I made it. I got it for my birthday.

The teachers, after hearing the children’s narratives, remarked at how much they learned about the children’s families and home life. This precipitated their desire to capture this information in thematic books for the class to enjoy at a future time.

### **Connecting Teachers and Their Cultural Mismatches**

The combination of the photos and narrations exposed the false assumptions or storylines the teachers had constructed through their travels and limited knowledge of the cultures each child represented. Throughout the focus group reflections, the teachers talked about the false assumptions they brought into this process, their surprise over this, and how these storylines had inhibited their ability to hear the children and effectively connect with them.

A salient example of this was how each teacher mistakenly identified the photo’s subject, only to be corrected by the child. For example, one teacher, looking at the child’s photo with the child, remarked, “Oh, there are your parents.” The child corrected the teacher by pointing to a small and seemingly insignificant truck on the floor in the foreground of the photo and talked about that as the focus of the picture. The teacher reflected on this experience in the subsequent focus group.

What they saw in the pictures versus what I saw in the pictures was another thing that was remarkable to me....I'm thinking it's a picture of your mother, but it wasn't to this child. It was this little teeny thing on the wall, and I had to like squelch the desire to say, "But who's that person?" because, you know, they tell me more is better.

Teachers' storylines or culturally constructed assumptions were also reflected upon during their focus group. For example, one teacher several times recounted the following interaction of how one girl (S), whose parents were from India, picked up a picture of her house and began telling the following story to her teacher (T):

S: Oh, I'm riding my bike. That's my dream house. Oh, that is my big, no that is my dream house.

T: Your which house?

S: Yep, it looks like, see now, this was, this was my dream home....

S: Yep, it is. Now this is my crib.

T: That's your crib?

S: Yep.

T: And it's turned into a bed, isn't it? So you can get out whenever you want?

In the subsequent focus group, the teacher remarked how throughout the year this immigrant child had talked during the class sharing times about being a baby and sleeping in a crib (in the present tense). This puzzled the teacher. She responded to this child's stories about the crib as if it was true when the child was younger but not true now. When the teacher saw the photos, she was surprised by the current pictures of this girl's high chair and crib. Subsequently, the teacher remarked that this insight into the role this child played in her family put into perspective the information the girl had shared during the class circle time and provided this teacher with a better understanding of how to communicate with the child. This type of reflection was mirrored by the rest of the teachers, as one after another recounted how they had been surprised by something the immigrant child had said and how it had changed their understanding of that child.

Also, it was noted by the researchers that in the majority of interactions during the photo narrations, each teacher had a moment in the child's story when she constructed her own connections and stated her connection. They did not check for shared understanding but moved on to a different topic, resulting in silencing the child.

For example, a common interaction during the photo narrations was the teacher (T) summarizing what she believed the child (S) was saying and then moving on to another topic. The following interaction between the teacher and

a child whose parents were from India illustrates that as the child was poised to tell a story about Beauty and the Beast, the teacher had understood the book and moved on.

S: I was reading my beastie book.

T: Your beach book?

S: Not my beach book. I don't have a beach book.

T: Okay, what kind of book?

S: My Beauty and the Beast.

T: Beast book. Gotcha. (turning to another photo) Now is this your room or your mommy's room?

S: Yep.

Additionally, the teachers' storylines exposed within their interactions with each immigrant child, although not negated by the children in these dialogues, were often disconnected from the child's storyline that he or she was attempting to introduce. This is illustrated in the following dialogue with a child whose parents are from China:

T: Is that a picture of something?

S: Um, a tree.

T: Oh, okay. Where did you get that from?

S: It's Chinese.

T: Oh, it's Chinese. Do you know someone that is from China?

S: My dad bought it.

T: Oh, your dad bought it. Was he there? Does he work there? Oh, he just went to visit. Oh, okay. What's that? (Teacher moves to another photo)

In the following dialogue, the teacher is talking with a child whose parents are from Egypt. She believes Egypt is the connection even though the child dismisses this topic.

S: Oh, those are my friends and this is me and this is my friend.

T: Are all your friends from Egypt?

S: No.

T: Where are they from?

S: I don't know... This is...

Each of these dialogues focused on a storyline the teacher brought into the dialogue, wanting the child from China to talk about something seemingly from China, and wanting the child from Egypt to talk about a connection to Egypt. Instead of enhancing the dialogue, this approach stopped the conversation and transformed the narrative into answering the teachers' questions that required one-word responses that were either right or wrong. This was observed throughout the photo narrations.

## Connecting Teachers and Immigrant Children's Home Context

After the photos were taken and the photo narrations were complete, both parents and teachers commented on their perceptions of strengthened connections between their worlds. As the immigrant parents talked during their interview, they related how when they realized that the photographs of home items valued by their children were shared and respected by the teacher, they felt more positive about the whole school experience. Each immigrant parent, without exception, stated during the interview process that he or she felt more "comfortable" in the school because of this experience and he or she felt assurance that the teachers desired to work with his or her child. They all expressed a sense of not fitting into the homogeneous environment of Central Pennsylvania. In contrast, the message of value gleaned from the camera project was a welcome, new feeling for them. Several immigrant mothers volunteered to help the researchers do this "camera study" every year to help all the immigrant families "feel welcomed" as much as they now did through doing this project. Most of those interviewed expressed a desire for continued dialogue with each other and the school at a later time. Several of the women gave the researchers their contact information, volunteering to encourage other teachers in other schools to do the photo narrations to assist other immigrant children and their families.

The teachers also expressed their sense of enhanced connections with the home context of these children. This is illustrated in the following teacher's reflection of how she thought about the photo narration process:

Well, I liked seeing his pictures. I mean, I did learn a lot about him. I learned that he loved helping his mom in the kitchen with baking like he had the apron. I mean, they had the whole set-up; he had all his miniature utensils, like they must do it often because they had all the stuff. Alright, and you know, and his playroom trains, I mean, I knew he liked to play trains here, but now that's why. He has a ton of trains, and his mom had it set up so elaborately for him. He even told me. I said, "Did you set up?" and he went "Mom," so I knew that meant mom set it up for him.

Additionally, throughout their focus group conversations, the teachers expressed their increased comfort with the immigrant parents subsequent to the photo narration event. One teacher expressed it this way, "I think that I definitely got insight.... The parents are interested, so that made it another bridge for us to even talk about something else; it definitely gave us something else to talk about."

## Discussion

Revisiting our original purpose, our findings provoke an exploration of how space for the immigrant child's voice was promoted through the photo narrations. Also, the impact of the preschool teachers' interaction with and response to the photos on their cultural awareness necessitates further exploration.

### Hearing the Immigrant Child's Voice

First, this study clearly demonstrated how immigrant children's photos of their context outside of school and their personal stories about these photos provided space for their voice to be both found and heard. As has been found in past research, providing space for a child to tell his or her stories provides the child with a sense of power as well as an opportunity to create an identity within that space (MacBeath, 2006; Rogoff, 1995). This is particularly important for those children crossing cultural borders in the classroom. In their work, *Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender in United States Schools*, Weis and Fine pointed out the necessity of listening to the voices of children and adolescents who were not "centered in our culture" (2005, p. 2) to promote social justice and equity. This present study provides a tool for soliciting and hearing the voices of the immigrant children in our preschools using a familiar venue—photos and stories.

Additionally, in personally constructed narratives such as this photo narration process, the interlocutors are given distinct roles; the teller is the narrator of personal experiences, and the listener seeks to understand what is being told. As has been noted by researchers, the verbal and nonverbal responses of the listener may either encourage the life of the narrative or silence the story (Ochs & Capps, 2001). As the teachers in this study interacted with the children, there were those teachers whose responses silenced the child and those whose responses opened the space for the child to voice words in English previously unheard in that setting.

Children's stories have been found to powerfully provide the hearer a glimpse into their world from their perspective (Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001). Researchers have found people's stories to be effective in bridging understanding between people of different roles, abilities, and cultures—promoting social equity and justice in schools (Weis & Fine, 2000). This study revealed the teachers' and parents' pleasure in seeing and hearing about the child's world, or cultural context, outside of school.

### Enhancing Teacher's Cultural Awareness

Second, the teachers' awareness of inappropriate assumptions or storylines they brought into their interactions with the immigrant children and their

parents was clearly heightened by this experience. The initial focus group data revealed that the teachers moved into this process with the culturally constructed storyline that defined immigrant children as those with limited English language skills whose key obstacle to connection in class with the teacher and students was language. This was revealed in the overwhelming number of statements referring to language and vocabulary, with the teachers' questions regarding the immigrant children centered solely on assisting the children and their parents with English. During the first focus group meeting, the teachers only called these students "English Language Learners" or "those with limited English." Their questions and concerns centered solely on the limitation of language. Their consistent insistence on increased language and vocabulary strategies was prevalent throughout all they said.

The later teacher focus group transcripts revealed a shift in the teachers' descriptions of these children. In the focus groups following the photo narrations the teachers' references to language were fewer as they talked about how they had found that there was something besides language which was inhibiting their connections with these children. Their references to language deficits were replaced by references to the insights they were gaining into the child's context, identity, and roles outside of school. For example, such phrases as "I didn't know" and "This surprised me," followed by references to the child's unique interests and cultural family relationships, were common during the follow-up focus group discussion.

This identification of the immigrant children in their classroom as children who bring a rich and meaningful context into the classroom, not just children with limited English language skills, illustrates a culturally responsive commitment to connecting with individuals who are culturally and socially embedded within learning communities (Gay, 2000). This personifies the NAEYC (2009) commitment to provide all children a welcoming environment that respects diversity. This was introduced to these teachers not in a diversity workshop training session but within the natural preschool teachers' familiar setting of photos and storytelling.

Furthermore, this renewed awareness also seemingly sensitized the teachers' recognition of how, as they appealed to their own background instead of the child's background, some of their attempts to connect with the immigrant children were more disconnections than connections. The teachers' driving need to bring understanding and teaching to the situation seemed to disconnect them from the child's storyline. Cazden (2001), in her careful study of classroom discourse, suggested that one obstacle to a child's sharing his or her story in a classroom was what was observed in this study, the teacher's agenda. She further remarked that the teacher may approach a conversation with the child:

as an opportunity to teach particular academic frames of reference, shifting children's discourse not only toward putting more of their experiences into words, but toward different aspects of that experience, thereby hoping to influence not only conventions of form but also conventions about meanings that are valued in school. (Cazden, 2001, p. 20)

During their second focus group, teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with some of their attempts to understand the immigrant children as they recounted surprise revelations within the photo narrations. In response to their reflective dialogue, they collectively vowed to listen and hear more from these children in the future. This verbalized frustration and strategic plan to listen more revealed an enhanced level of awareness of their cultural mismatches within interactions with immigrant children and the power inherent in offering the children time to talk about their lives. Villegas and Lucas (2002) labeled this necessary awareness as "sociocultural consciousness" as opposed to "sociocultural dysconsciousness" (p. 33), suggesting this to be the vital link in effective culturally responsive pedagogy.

### **Connecting With Immigrant Families**

Third, the teachers' dialogue concerning their intention to become better acquainted with the immigrant children's parents shifted noticeably from feeling fearful because of limited language to a strong desire to interact with the parents to find out more about their lives. This is illustrated by the following quote from one of the teachers as she talked during a spring focus group:

I found [at the beginning] that I felt intimidated sometimes because—there was one dad in particular, when he talks, I have to listen to every word because it's so hard. So I think that is part of the problem with the adults sometimes—we can't always understand each other...I think I definitely got insight [through the photos]. The parents are interested, so that made it another bridge for us to even talk about.

Additionally, there was a noticeable shift in the teachers' questions. In the first focus group they asked the researcher to find out about the families without initiating the pursuit of any answers themselves. In the second focus group the teachers explored ways to better communicate with the families and to find time to get together to listen to them.

The teachers' intense desire to become better acquainted with the parents was reflected in their appeal to the researchers to assist them in bridging the communication between themselves and the parents by facilitating a parents' night with these families. Whereas the efficacy of the home visit in early childhood arenas has been effectively utilized in such programs as Head Start,

recent discourse on the inconsistent results of this process suggests crafting new approaches that provide additional help for the increasingly diverse family population (Weikart, 2003). Also, it has been noted that immigrant populations introduce complexity of language and cultural nuances that limit the effectiveness of home visits by teachers (Ginsberg, 2007). The photo narrations in this study provided a glimpse into the home and family life of each child outside of school through the child's eyes. Through this process the teachers expressed an enhanced ability to connect with the parents after seeing the photos with the children. This home-school connection is an important component in facilitating the learning process of these immigrant children and therefore requires further investigation and pursuit.

## Conclusion

Many immigrant preschoolers struggle to learn and communicate in their classrooms, while preschool teachers are challenged to effectively facilitate the necessary responsiveness for learning to occur. In light of the recent focus on academic accountability and the value of early childhood education, it is important that research continue to explore ways to enhance understanding between immigrants and teachers and to strengthen connections between the immigrant child's home and school contexts (NAEYC, 2009). The present study addresses this need by introducing how six teachers in one preschool took familiar preschool tools of the classroom world—photos and stories—and effectively found connections with the unfamiliar—the world of the immigrant child.

The results suggest two key implications. First, this study introduces a novel approach that can be used as an effective tool for culturally responsive pedagogy professional development among preschool teachers. Photo narrations, with the use of the children's photos and voices, provide the opportunity for teachers to become aware of their assumptions or storylines they bring into their interactions with children from backgrounds different from their own by using two familiar tools: photos and stories. We suggest that this approach may provide a natural tool for enhancing self-awareness of cultural presupposition, a key component of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Second, using the camera in this way may provide teachers with a feasible way to get a glimpse into the child's world in such a way as to better connect with immigrant children and their families. The camera usage provided an out-of-school contextual record, as seen by the children. The photo narrations provided the teachers in this study with what they called "the virtual home visit." Thus, this process controlled for teacher observational bias by placing both the words and the perspective into the hands of the child and opened the child's world outside of school to the teacher.

As literature has suggested, schools and teachers who build relationships with each child and his or her family encourage learning (Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Therefore, as the camera and photo narrations may encourage learning, it may be suggested that the photo narration process explored in this study may facilitate at-risk learners as well as immigrant children's entrances and relationships into new schools and classrooms. This calls for further investigation.

In conclusion, one teacher, struggling to find a way to express her surprise and overall wonder at how much she had gleaned throughout this study, appealed to her experience with the Narnia story (Lewis, 1950/2002). As she looked around the room searching for the right words, she finally concluded that this study had given her, for the first time, the opportunity to "walk through the closet, feel the fur, and enter into the child's world." For that, she said she was eternally grateful.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. (1986). Toward a methodology for the human sciences (V. McGee, Trans.). In C. Emerson & M. Holquist (Eds.), *Speech genres and other late essays* (pp. 159-173). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklin, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Camarota, S. A. (2005). *Immigrants at mid-decade: A snapshot of America's foreign-born population in 2005*. Washington, DC: Center for Immigration Studies. Retrieved from <http://www.cis.org/ForeignBornPopulation2005>
- Cappello, M. (2005). Photo interviews: Eliciting data through conversations with children. *Field Methods*, 17, 170-182. doi: 10.1177/1525822X05274553
- Cazden, C. (2001). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Child Development in Context Research Program. (n.d.). *Immigrant parent questionnaire*. Providence, RI: Brown University.
- Clark-Ibanez, M. (2004). Framing the social world with photo elicitation interviews. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47(12), 1507-1527.
- Cosentino de Cohen, C., Deterding, N., & Clewell, B. C. (2005). *Who's left behind? Immigrant children in high and low LEP schools*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- Copple, C. (Ed.). (2003). *A world of difference: Readings on teaching young children in a diverse society*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Copple, C., & Bredekamp, S. (Eds.). (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood programs* (Rev. ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Researcher design: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Drew, J. (1997). Cultural tourism and the commodified other: Reclaiming difference in the multicultural classroom. *The Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies*, 19(2/3), 297-309.
- Epstein, J. L., & Sanders, M. G. (2000). Connecting home, school, and community: New direction for social research. In M. T. Hallinan (Ed.), *Handbook of the sociology of education* (pp. 285-306). New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ginsberg, M. (2007). Lessons at the kitchen table. *Educational Leadership*, 64(6), 56-61.
- González, N. (2001). *I am my language: Discourses of women and children in the borderlands*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- González, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- González-Mena, J. (2008). *Diversity in early care and education: Honoring differences*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Hernandez, D. J., Denton, N. A., & Macartney, S. E. (2007, April). *Children in immigrant families—The U.S. and 50 states: National origins, language, and early education* (Publication #2007-11). Child Trends & the Center for Social Demographic Analysis, University of Albany, SUNY.
- Kindler, A. L. (2002). *Survey of the states' limited English proficient students and available educational programs and services, 2000-2001 summary report*. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs.
- Landay, E., Meehan, M., Newman, A., Wootton, K., & King, D. (2001). Postcards from America: Linking classroom and community in an ESL class. *The English Journal*, 90(5), 66-74.
- Lewis, C. S. (2002). *The Narnia Chronicles: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. New York, NY: HarperCollins. (Original work published 1950)
- MacBeath, J. (2006). Finding a voice, finding self. *Educational Review*, 58(2), 195-207.
- Marquez-Zenkov, K., & Harmon, J. S. (2007, July). Seeing English in the city: Using photography to understand students' literacy relationships [Electronic version]. *English Journal*, 96(6), 24-30. Retrieved from [http://www.throughstudentseyes.org/TSE/Resources\\_files/English%20Journal.pdf](http://www.throughstudentseyes.org/TSE/Resources_files/English%20Journal.pdf)
- Miller, P. J. (1994). Narrative practices: Their role in socialization and self-construction. In U. Neisser & R. Rivush (Eds.), *The remembering of self: Construction and accuracy in the self-narrative* (pp. 158-179). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2009). *Where we stand: On responding to linguistic and cultural diversity*. Retrieved from <http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/diversity.pdf>
- Ochs, E., & Capps, L. (2001). *Living narrative: Creating lives in everyday storytelling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Paley, V. G. (1990). *The boy who would be a helicopter: The uses of storytelling in kindergarten*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Quinn, N. (2005). How to reconstruct schemas people share, from what they say. In N. Quinn (Ed.), *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods* (pp. 35-81). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rogoff, B. (1995). Observing sociocultural activity on three planes: Participatory appropriation, guided participation, and apprenticeship. In J. Wertsch, P. Del Río, & A. Alvarez (Eds.), *Sociocultural studies of mind* (pp. 139-164). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Rumbaut, R. (2001). Ties that bind: Immigration and immigrant families in the United States. In R. Rumbaut & A. Portes (Eds.), *Ethnicities: Children of immigrants in America* (pp. 181-223). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sheets, R. H. (2005). *Diversity pedagogy: Examining the role of culture in the teacher-learning process*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Shultz, J., & Cook-Sather, A. (2001). *In our own words: Students' perspectives on school*. New York, NY: Rowan & Littlefield.
- Strauss, C. (2005). Analyzing for cultural complexity. In N. Quinn (Ed.), *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods* (pp. 203-242). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Suárez-Orozco, M., & Suárez-Orozco, C. (2001). *Children of immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Trumbull, E., Rothstein-Fisch, C., Greenfield, P. M., & Quiroz, B. (2001). *Bridging cultures between home and school: A guide for teachers*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). *Educating culturally responsive teachers: A coherent approach*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. (1994). The development of academic concepts in school aged children. In R. van der Verr & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *The Vygotsky reader* (pp. 255-270). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Weikart, D. P. (2003). Head Start and evidence-based educational models. In E. Zigler & S. Styfco (Eds.), *The Head Start debates* (pp. 143-159). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Weis, L., & Fine, M. (Eds.). (2000). *Construction sites: Excavating race, class, and gender among urban youth*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Weis, L., & Fine, M. (2005). *Beyond silenced voices: Class, race and gender in United States schools*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Wertsch, J. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wright, K., Stegelin, D., & Hartle, L. (2007). *Building family, school, and community partnerships*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

### Authors' Note:

This study was funded by a Pennsylvania State University Research Council Grant.

Martha J. Strickland is an assistant professor of education at Pennsylvania State University with a focus in educational psychology. Her research interests include the impact of culture on learning, immigrant children's school

transitions, and immigrant families–school–community partnerships. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Martha Strickland, Pennsylvania State University, 777 W. Harrisburg Pike, Middletown, PA 17057 or e-mail [mjs51@psu.edu](mailto:mjs51@psu.edu)

Jane B. Keat is an associate professor of education at Pennsylvania State University with a focus in early childhood education. Her research interests include the relationship between teacher inquiry and child development and learning in areas such as self-regulation, social skill, and mathematical literacy.

Barbara A. Marinak is an assistant professor of reading at Pennsylvania State University. Her research interests include literacy motivation, the use of informational text, and response to intervention.

# A Review of Research on Effective Community Programs for English Language Learners

*Kip Téllez and Hersh C. Waxman*

## Abstract

This article synthesized current research on effective communities for English Language Learners (ELLs). The findings are discussed under the following categories: parents, community resources, and peers. The results of the review indicate that parenting programs are effective, but they must be carefully developed and often require specific resources that challenge a typical school. Furthermore, there is no single effective method to assist ELL families. Whereas the positive effects of well designed community programs are unequivocal, it is uncertain how such programs transfer to different communities or how participation directly affects school achievement. The benefits of peer interaction have been promoted as an especially effective tool for assisting ELLs, however, adequate preparation for such interaction is necessary. Finally, the paper addresses the role of the community in a historical context, inviting readers to consider the work of Jane Addams and other progressive educators whose efforts helped an earlier generation of immigrant children adjust to life in the United States.

Key Words: English learners, languages, teaching, after-school, programs, limited, proficient, effective, community, communities, ELLs, LEP, afterschool

## Overview

In 1996, Hilary Rodham-Clinton touched off a surprisingly heated debate when she published her book, *It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Teach*

*Us.* While many progressive educators praised the book for drawing attention to the importance of communities in preparing children for school—and helping them to excel once there—more conservative voices attacked her work as “anti-family.” For example, Fox-Genovese (1996) agreed with the book’s premise but argued that “It takes a family—ideally a mother and a father—to raise a child, and the village’s first responsibility is not to hamper them in doing so” (p. 63). Commentators such as Fox-Genovese suggested that the publication of Rodham-Clinton’s book was both a political strategy designed to re-elect her husband and an attempt to increase the role—and budget—of the federal government, both goals that set her at odds with a more conservative agenda.

The political battle over the roles of the community and parents faded as the nation’s policymakers turned their attention to international concerns, but educational researchers have continued to ask questions about the relative importance of community and family effects on school achievement (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Fan, 2001; Jeynes, 2003). Whereas the political debate on this issue may have muted, educators agree that the community must play a primary role in order to maximize a child’s achievement in school. For instance, we have strong evidence that the children and youth of parents who hold high expectations for academic achievement will experience greater success in school than those students whose parents have poorly defined expectations (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001). This finding, not surprisingly, mirrors the conclusions drawn by research on teacher expectations (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Good & Nichols, 2001). Similarly, parents who provide their children with the materials needed for school and an environment conducive to study will also realize higher achieving students (Downey, 1995). Healthy communities provide the parks, youth organizations, and law enforcement needed so that children and youth have places to play and learn and to feel safe while doing so (Coley & Hoffman, 1996).

The present research synthesis seeks to apply the body of research on effective communities for those children and youth who are English Language Learners (ELLs). Working to find ways to help ELLs be more successful in school is now paramount. The academic achievement scores of the 4.5 million “Limited English Proficient” students in U.S. K-12 schools—a figure that grows at an annual rate of about three percent (Kindler, 2002)—show that ELLs are struggling. Although the data supporting this differential achievement is less than complete (state and federal agencies tend to report on racial/ethnic differences rather than language status), studies show that ELLs are well below their native English-speaking counterparts on tests of literacy (Gándara, & Contreras, 2009; Kindler, 2002). Mexican American ELLs, who comprise

the largest group of ELLs, fare worst of all (Schmid, 2001), with dropout rates as high 40% in some regions (Gándara, & Contreras, 2009; Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998; Velez & Saenz, 2001).

In the present article, we focus on compiling research studies addressing the effects of the community on ELL academic achievement. As the children of immigrants or immigrants themselves, ELLs must learn English, whether in school or in the community. They must also learn a new culture and customs. Given that they have so much to learn, we might imagine that ELLs would gain the most from a free public education, and it is true that the success of many immigrant children is largely owing to their participation in the public school system. Yet in 1922, the progressive educator George Counts found that immigrant children, those who stand to gain the most from what schooling has to offer, were failing in great numbers. Counts found schools to be rigid institutions unwilling to compromise for the benefit of immigrant children, and he reported that a great many immigrant students simply dropped out of school. Sadly, Counts' finding sounds all too familiar (Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, & Doumbia, 2003). Given the alarming data on school achievement and dropouts, it is no surprise that educators and policymakers are in search of the most effective and efficient practices for ELLs (Télliez & Waxman, 2006b).

Before beginning the synthesis portion of the paper, it is important to provide some provisional definitions. First, we must consider the scope, limits, and misinterpretations of the term "community." One immediate objection to the term comes from educators who argue that to consider schools and the community as separate features in the educational process creates a false distinction (Morris, 2002). Schools, they argue, are a *part* of the community. Further, Strike (2004) argues that it is the job of a school to become a community within a community. Whereas we recognize various objections to the term, and agree that most are entirely justifiable, we wish to suggest that educators can define community not as something distinct from schools, but rather those features of a child's life not directly associated with the school; that is, those organizations and institutions whose choice of policies and activities do not reside under the administrative umbrella of the school or school district. For instance, an after-school program may be linked in many ways to a school or school district but is likely to be operated by an organization governed by a board not associated with the school district (e.g., a YWCA program). The community organization and the school may share board members or a long history of collaboration, but they are separate in mission and often rely on different sources of funding.

Similarly, law enforcement efforts, clearly related to the health of the school and community, are typically governed by a city or county charter. The mention

of law enforcement as an entity separate from school oversight immediately threatens our definition, because many large school districts operate their own police departments (Eriksen, 2005). If we were to find a case in which law enforcement were found to be a useful community resource, we would draw a distinction between municipal and school district police and include only the former in our research synthesis.

Parents, in our definition, are part of the community, a view likely shared by readers of this journal. Like many educators, we suggest that effective schools encourage parents to consider themselves part of the “school community.” But parents are not strictly an extension of the school. Parents make decisions regarding their child’s education and welfare independent of the school’s oversight (with the possible exception of school attendance, which is mandated by law). For instance, if a school offers effective parent training, how can it be said that parents are part of the community rather than part of the “school community”? We might suggest that although the school’s efforts here may have a clear impact on parents, the school is not in direct control of how and when parents use the information they have received (or even if they attend the program at all). Regardless of the category we use, the general research on parent involvement makes clear that they play a fundamental role in academic achievement, and schools and school systems are advised to do all they can to involve them.

Our definition of community is admittedly faulty, but our desire for conceptual clarity, as well as the need to synthesize research in areas not already covered by our earlier efforts (Télez & Waxman, 2006a; Télez & Waxman, 2006b) suggests that effective communities for ELLs is a legitimate topic of a research synthesis, capable of distilling dozens of studies for educators and others who wish to improve the academic performance of our nation’s ELLs.

### **Search Strategies**

We relied on five primary search source indexes or databases in preparing this metasyntesis: (a) Education Abstracts (used to find articles published in refereed journals), (b) Educational Resources Information Center (used for locating papers presented at conferences), (c) Google Scholar (for locating a wide range of research articles), (d) Social Science Citation Index-Web of Science (for locating works of a specific author and cited by common authors), and (e) Dissertation Abstracts (used for locating dissertations). Search terms used in the research synthesis were all combinations of the following terms: English, English Language Learner(s), ELL, ESL, ELD, second language learners, community, parents, after-school, programs, and several others designed to locate specific studies. We limited our search to research articles published between 1990 and 2005, but cited older papers to inform our theoretical framework.

## Parents

The study of the role of parents and the community in the academic success of school-aged children and youth has its roots in the work of Johann Hiernich Pestalozzi (1726-1847), the Swiss educator and essayist whose educational reforms can still be seen in contemporary schools. His insistence on the cultivation of critical thinking skills, as well as an enduring attention to the emotional well-being of the child, foreshadowed the goals of American public schools. Whereas his work is most typically associated with the conduct of the schools, much of his writing is focused on the importance of the family in the development of a child's intellect and morality (Berger, 1995). In his most widely read book, *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, Pestalozzi underscores the importance of parents in the preparation of children for school (Pestalozzi, 1898). Among the then-innovative methods he encouraged were the use of manipulatives to teach mathematical concepts and the development of interactive lessons, each sounding a familiar, modern tone.

Our contemporary culture is even more convinced that parents should play a major role in their child's schooling. Determining the specifics of that role, however, leads to open and often contested questions (Lightfoot, 1978). For some educators, the proper role for parents is to support the activities and programs of the school and classroom. This role does not necessarily require parents to go beyond making sure that their child is ready to learn and has a place to do their homework. This traditional model of parental involvement has been described as insufficient. With the rise of site-based management in schools, a model often legislated at the state-level (e.g., Stevenson & Schiller, 1999), parents have become a structural part of the school administration. Indeed, in some school reform models such as Comer's School Development Program (a model designed for use in urban schools but now also widely implemented in many suburban and rural schools), parents are required to join in the everyday operations of the school (Comer, 1993). Somewhere between the traditional model and Comer's design is where most schools seek to locate their parents' involvement.

The general studies on parents and achievement uniformly reveal that parents, regardless of income, who have the time and energy to assist their children with school assignments and encourage their general effort in school make a fundamental difference in academic achievement (Englund et al., 2004). The comprehensive review of the literature on parent involvement conducted by Henderson and Mapp (2002) also provides evidence of the important role of parents in the academic success of their children. When parents take an active role in their child's education, homework completion rates improve (Balli,

Wedman, & Demo, 1997), school behavior problems decrease (Hill et al., 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), students are more motivated to do well in school (Ratelle, Guay, Larose, & Senecal, 2004) and miss less school (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). The effects of parent expectations and assistance are found even as students complete high school (Fehrmann, Keith, & Reimers, 1987). Based on the research of the past 15 years or so, it seems there is almost no desirable school outcome that cannot be enhanced by parent involvement.

With this unequivocal finding in mind, we began our review of parental participation to discover if parents of ELLs would play as large a role in the academic achievement of their children. The good news with respect to studies of parent participation for ELLs is that the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Affairs (OBEMLA), for at least two decades, made available grants to implement schoolwide bilingual education programs or special alternative instruction programs for reforming, restructuring, and upgrading language teaching programs within an individual school. A primary component of many schoolwide projects was a parent education component; consequently, there are thousands of evaluation reports assessing the effects of these parent programs. The bad news is that few of these reports used any kind of comparison group. Because they were projects unique to a single school, they were at best single group, single assessment studies. At worst, they included only anecdotal findings. Nevertheless, the distinguishing feature of the majority of these reports is the attention to the parents' need to learn English.

McCollum and Russo (1993) made an effort to synthesize the results of high quality OBEMLA reports in their review of effective parent education programs in bilingual schools. They argue that four key components must be in place to create a high quality parent involvement program. First, the program must address the parents' need and desire to gain proficiency in English. And in contrast to typical adult English language course models, they found that quality parent literacy programs create opportunities to develop reading and writing skills in a natural context; that is, they provide genuine instructional tasks for both parent and child. Second, they attempt to address the long-term needs of the child by serving the short-term needs of the whole family. For instance, if parents were struggling with a rental contract or taxes, the program provided English exercises that addressed these pressing concerns. Third, these programs help parents understand the demands of U.S. schools and equip them with the skills to be their child's teacher and advocate. Fourth, they provide English language instruction and other services to the parents to enable them to participate more actively in their communities.

This research raises an important issue regarding English language instruction for ELL parents. Many educators believe that the most efficient way for ELL parents to help their children at school is to learn English. Learning a second language when one is already working many hours per week in a semi-skilled job with no opportunities to practice is very difficult (Gonzalez, 2000). Acquiring competency in a second language takes years of directed study, requiring time and resources most immigrant parents do not have.

Maruca's (2002) research aimed directly at improving ELLs academic achievement vis-à-vis parent involvement. This study invited parents to volunteer for a parent-training program based on the principles suggested by the Parent Institute for Quality Education (see Ochoa & Mardirosian, 1990 for a review). The results indicated no statistically significant gains in academic achievement or parenting skills (as measured by pre- and post-test surveys). However, Maruca did find gains in student attendance for those children whose parents attended the training. Furthermore, parents spoke highly of the program, especially the opportunity to share ideas and concerns with other parents, and many noted that discipline problems at home were reduced as a result of the program.

In addition to these studies, programs designed to assist migrant families uniformly attend to issues of language and parent involvement. Lopez (2004) found that effective initiatives in migrant parent involvement are not defined as a set of practices or activities for parents to do, but rather as a form of outreach. Schools successful in promoting migrant parent education offered a parent education program that served its own purposes and improved migrant families' lives. Attention to developing English skills emerged as an important component.

In a paper based largely on anecdotal findings, Osterling, Violand-Sánchez, and von Vacano (1999) share the results of a parent program designed primarily to teach English to parents of ELLs. The goals for the program were ambitious: establish a collaborative partnership among parents, schools, and community organizations that acknowledges and respects parents' cultural values and fosters initiative and leadership. The program led to enhanced English skills and greater involvement, which led to improvements in reading, writing, and mathematics skills among the students.

Finally, in a study that assessed the effectiveness of a program designed to increase the involvement of parents of Latino students, Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, and Hernandez (2003) found that in place of helping teachers and other school personnel learn any specific strategy, they suggest, "Success with parents from these Latino immigrant communities is predicated on cross-cultural understanding and openness to hearing how parents want to participate" (p. 68).

This advice should be heeded whenever schools are engaging in parent partnering programs.

But parents are not the only resource beyond the school that can significantly enhance the academic opportunities of ELLs. As we mentioned, the line that divides parents as something distinct from the community is lightly drawn, but we have argued that they be considered different categories. We now explore the strategies the community can take to improve the achievement of ELLs.

## Community Resources

All children and youth live within a social network designed to protect and educate them. In fact, no culture on earth is remiss in providing either formal organizations (e.g., schools) or social norms (e.g., parenting to a minimum age) that work to shelter children from the adult world. Every culture understands the need for children and youth to be organized by age into cohorts as they grow and learn their responsibilities as adults. Every culture has norms that guide the wider responsibility of child-rearing, that is, the role that adults other than the child's parents will play in raising children.

In spite of cultural norms that demand the care and development of children (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), specific societies can sometimes fail in providing basic needs for its children and youth. War, disease, or other disasters can temporarily allow norms and other traditions to fail. In addition, families displaced from their traditional culture can face incongruities between their home culture and a new one. More specifically, immigrant parents may not have the means or the proper understanding to provide their children with opportunities to become socialized in the customs of their new home. They may not understand the child-rearing strategies of their new culture and perhaps not offer their children an opportunity to take part in the community practices designed for socializing its youth.

This section of our synthesis shares research studies that address the features of effective communities and community programs for ELLs. Our review attempts to answer several questions regarding effective community programs for ELLs, among these: What community programs exist for low-income Latino children and youth? What programs specifically target ELLs, and why do they maintain such a focus? And which programs are effective, and why?

As we begin this section, we draw attention to those traditions in U.S. history that have provided community programs for assisting immigrant families. From land grants in the western U.S. to free ESL programs in large cities, during the period from about 1850-1929, the nation not only accepted many immigrants but also provided opportunities for more complete membership in

the country's social and economic life. This is not to say that immigrants did not face overwhelming economic hardships and brutal ethnic discrimination, but that with the vast numbers of immigrants arriving, policies and programs designed to integrate immigrant families into life in the U.S. were, in some ways, more common than they are today. In any case, immigration to the U.S., both sanctioned and unsanctioned, will remain a bitterly contested political issue (Suarez-Orozco, 2001), filled with myth and misinformation.

As we began our search for community programs, we found only a handful of studies focused directly on ELLs. A study of particular interest assessed the effects of community programs, especially after-school programs (Riggs & Greenberg, 2004), on Latino ELLs. The results suggest that academic improvements resulting from the after-school program were most pronounced for those students who already spoke English well and whose families were poorly functioning. These results make sense if the after-school program did not engage in developmentally appropriate English language teaching (i.e., did adjust the language to the level of the learners) or failed to conduct activities in Spanish.

However, other studies have found positive effects for after-school programs to be particularly effective for ELLs, especially those that had specific English Language Development (ELD) components (Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001). Cosden et al. (2001) found that after-school homework assistance programs serve a "protective" function for children at-risk for school failure (i.e., students who might normally do poorly in school are aided most by the program). These researchers also found that ELLs who lack structured after-school activities or whose parents do not speak English at home reported the highest gain scores.

Taken together, these studies suggest that after-school clubs that focus on the teaching of English can benefit ELLs most. Whereas this finding may seem quite obvious, it is complicated by several factors. First, programs designed for Latino students may choose to offer their programs in Spanish. Such a strategy may encourage native Spanish speaking students to attend the program. Second, there may be important cultural reasons for using Spanish. Third, in some parts of the country, it may be difficult to find after-school counselors who speak both English and Spanish well.

However, the research on second language learning is clear: the more time one spends hearing and speaking a second language, the better one learns it (Collier, 1989; Holm & Dodd, 1996). It is therefore not surprising that ELLs who are learning English at both school and in community programs will learn it more quickly. Of course, the benefits of English in after-school programs will be most beneficial to those also enrolled in ELD programs in school.

The results of the research on community programs for ELLs are roughly similar to the research in the general population. Regardless of one's native language, positive neighborhood environments have a dramatic impact on educational achievement (Ainsworth, 2002; Crowder & South, 2003; Fischer & Kmec, 2004). The research also suggests that collective socialization, in which many members of a community feel a responsibility towards the children and youth, encourages academic achievement. Simply put, healthy communities support learning.

The research suggests that community programs from Boys and Girls' clubs to sports teams enhance academic performance, although it is not always clear how such participation directly affects school achievement. For students who lack resources at home, community programs can deliver great benefits. For minority students from low-income households, community programs may make the difference between staying in school and dropping out. The few studies examining directly the effects of community programs on ELLs find that those engaging in teaching English, or at least those that conduct their programs in English, stand to help ELLs the most.

### **Peers**

Children and youth rarely learn in isolation from a clearly defined peer group. Whether a group is defined by age (e.g., grouping students by grade level), academic preparation (e.g., grouping strategies in a secondary mathematics class), or English language achievement (e.g., a beginning English Language Development class), a student's peers constitute an important part of any learning experience.

Peer interaction has been promoted as an especially effective tool for assisting ELLs (Kagan, 1995). In a particularly applicable study, Klingner and Vaughn (2000) found that fourth grade bilingual (Spanish/English) students provided crucial assistance to their ELL counterparts in learning to understand word meanings, getting the main idea, asking and answering questions, and relating what they were learning to previous knowledge. They found that the ELL students' scores on English vocabulary tests improved significantly from pre- to post-testing. However, their results revealed that students' academic assistance was most effective when they were given specific instructions on how and when to help their peers. This tightly controlled research study suggests that more advanced peers can assist ELLs on a wide variety of learning tasks, but that adequate preparation is necessary.

Klingner and Vaughn (2000) underscore the role that peers can play in assisting ELLs, as well as offering the caveat that such assistance does not happen

without preparation. This important point is worth exploring. For many years, the general findings on cooperative learning suggested that the academic performance of less able students in heterogeneous groups would rise on the natural effects of the cooperative setting (Leighton, 1989). This study suggests that in order to realize gains in language learning, higher achieving peers must be prepared in the most effective ways to provide assistance. The results found in this study were corroborated results of an earlier study by the same authors (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999).

Other studies found that interaction with peers increased ELLs' capacity for oral language skills (Kobayashi, 2003). Even ELLs with learning disabilities benefit from peer assistance (Saenz, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005). Further evidence for the important role that peers play in helping ELLs acquire English comes from the studies of two-way bilingual immersion programs (TWBI). Students in TWBI programs are placed in classes in which half their peers speak their native language and the other half speaks the target language (Christian, 1994). In this increasingly popular model of language education, peers are considered a central and critical feature of the instructional program. Teachers group students so that they are required to teach one another language. In fact, some research evidence suggests that students enrolled in such programs learn the target language as a result of more contact with peers outside of the school setting (Télez, Flinspach, & Waxman, 2005).

## Conclusions

It may not "take" a village to raise a child, but the village can certainly play an important role, especially when the child is an immigrant and learning English. Similarly, we know that parents are likely the most significant influence on a child's academic achievement, but how might their role interact with other community resources or programs? A student's peers play an increasingly important role in academic and social development, but how adults organize peer interactions holds great importance. As we have demonstrated, social science research has confirmed the importance of community, parents, and peers in the social, emotional, and the academic success of children and youth.

In a wide-ranging paper on building a school community, Redding (2001) suggests that educators seek to develop "a cohesive, unified curriculum and to employ teaching methods that are conducive to common experience" (p. 20). In our view, this would be the goal of any community program designed for ELLs. Learning a new language and culture requires deep connections between what is to be learned and what is already known, and the connection between the two may determine the success of any community program.

The question, therefore, is not whether communities make a difference, but rather who might benefit most from strategic and systematic interventions; how we can best design, implement, and assess such interventions; and, perhaps most important of all, who will pay for them?

We began our review by noting the academic underperformance of ELL students and can now suggest with some certainty that community resources, if properly leveraged, will improve their academic success. In spite of several studies that provide a clear direction for community programs who wish to serve Latinos, we were struck by how few studies addressed ELLs directly, making it difficult to distinguish between programs designed for Latino students and those specifically for ELLs. In any event, we were disappointed to find no studies of the community designed to improve the academic performance of ELLs whose native language was not Spanish (e.g., Vietnamese ELLs). We need additional studies of community programs for ELLs whose language is less commonly spoken.

Our synthesis also suggested other topics for future research. First, community programs that seek to develop English language skills should be assessed for their effectiveness. For instance, in states such as California and Arizona where bilingual education programs have been eliminated or severely curtailed, could an after-school Spanish language program augment or “bootstrap” English learning? The prevailing theory in support of bilingual education suggests that learning to read in one’s native language will result in higher achievement in the target language. Could community programs take on the task of developing native language literacy for ELLs?

Second, can community programs influence a young person’s socialization to their new country? As immigrants or the children of immigrants, most ELLs must contend with living in a country where no one in their family has the right to vote. Can community programs foster a sense of political agency when ELLs have no legal ties to the nation in which they now live? We are not advocating for the study of programs that would indoctrinate and uncritically encourage a blind patriotism, but nearly all immigrant families, especially those from Mexico and Vietnam, the two largest ELL groups, intend to stay once they arrive in the U.S. It is often shocking to those whose families have lived in the U.S. for generations to learn of Mexican American youth who choose to serve in the armed forces, risking their lives for a country in which their parents lack the basic rights of citizenship and may even be fearful of deportation. We wonder if community programs play a role in such a devotion to country.

Third, with the popularity of “informal” learning research growing, we need more research on effects of out-of-school learning. A claim among some researchers in psychology, anthropology, and other fields suggest that “formal”

learning (i.e., learning in schools) is secondary to “informal” learning (i.e., learning in homes, communities, or museums). A key paper in this tradition seems to argue that formal schooling actually reduces a child’s capacity for logical and divergent thinking (Scribner & Cole, 1973). More recent writers in this area have suggested that learning outside of school is more genuine, long-lasting, and enjoyable. If such claims are true, are the effects the same for ELLs? Might it be advisable for communities to take on the education of the ELL? We are dubious about the claims of the advocates of informal learning, but we are interested in the prospects of how such learning might differentially influence the achievement of ELLs.

With policymakers now firmly positioned in the debate over the role of the community in raising academic achievement (e.g., Eccles, 1999), sound research will become even more important in deciding what programs are needed, how comprehensive such programs should be, and how we might fund them. As George Counts (1922) suggested, immigrant students should have the most to gain from public schooling. As Jane Addams proved, strong community programs can help to ease the transition to U.S. life for immigrant, ELL children and youth (Addams, 1899). These and other progressive thinkers were working at a time when the percentage of immigrant students in the U.S. was much greater than it is today, and yet the generations of Italian and Polish immigrants they served are now full participants in the economic, social, and political life in the U.S. Will the current wave of immigrant students, now largely from Mexico and Central America, fare as well? As our review suggests, the quality of community programs may make a difference.

## References

- Addams, J. (1899). A function of the social settlement. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 13(3), 33.
- Ainsworth, J. W. (2002). Why does it take a village? The mediation of neighborhood effects on educational achievement. *Social Forces*, 81, 117-152.
- Balli, S. J., Wedman, J. F., & Demo, D. H. (1997). Family involvement with middle-grades homework: Effects of differential prompting. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 66, 31-48.
- Berger, E. H. (1995). *Parents as partners in education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Ecology of the family as a context for human development: Research perspectives. *Developmental Psychology*, 22, 723-742.
- Christian, D. (1994). *Two-way bilingual education: Students learning through two languages* (Education Practice Rep. No. 12). Santa Cruz, CA & Washington, DC: National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.
- Coley, R. L., & Hoffman, L. W. (1996). Relations of parental supervision and monitoring to children’s functioning in various contexts: Moderating effects of families and neighborhoods. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 17, 51-68.

- Collier, V. P. (1989). How long? A synthesis of research on academic achievement in a second language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 23, 509-531.
- Comer, J. P. (1993). *School power: Implications of an intervention project*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Cosden, M., Morrison, G., Albanese, A. L., & Macias, S. (2001). When homework is not home work: After-school programs for homework assistance. *Educational Psychologist*, 36, 211-221.
- Counts, G. (1922). *The selective character of secondary education*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Crowder, K., & South, S. J. (2003). Neighborhood distress and school dropout: The variable significance of community context. *Social Science Research*, 32, 659-698.
- Diamond, J. B., Randolph, A., & Spillane, J. P. (2004). Teachers' expectations and sense of responsibility for student learning: The importance of race, class, and organizational habitus. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 35, 75-98.
- Downey, D. B. (1995). When bigger is not better: Family size, parental resources, and children's educational performance. *American Sociological Review*, 60, 746-761.
- Eccles, J. S. (1999). The development of children ages 6 to 14. *Future of Children*, 9(2), 30-44.
- Englund, M. M., Luckner, A. E., Whaley, G. J. L., & Egeland, B. (2004). Children's achievement in early elementary school: Longitudinal effects of parental involvement, expectations, and quality of assistance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 96, 723-730.
- Epstein, J. L., & Sheldon, S. B. (2002). Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement. *Journal of Educational Research*, 95, 308-318.
- Eriksen, H. (2005, February 17). School discipline in the spotlight: Groups find common ground on state issue. *The Houston Chronicle*, p. 1.
- Fan, X. T. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A growth modeling analysis. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 70, 27-61.
- Fehrmann, P. G., Keith, T. Z., & Reimers, T. M. (1987). Home influence on school learning—Direct and indirect effects of parental involvement on high-school grades. *Journal of Educational Research*, 80, 330-337.
- Fischer, M. J., & Kmec, J. A. (2004). Neighborhood socioeconomic conditions as moderators of family resource transmission: High school completion among at-risk youth. *Sociological Perspectives*, 47, 507-527.
- Fox-Genovese, E. (1996). It takes a village and other lessons children teach us: Book review. *National Review*, 48(4), 62-63.
- Gándara, P., & Contreras, F. (2009). *The Latino education crisis: The consequences of failed social policies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gitlin, A., Buendia, E., Crosland, K., & Doumbia, F. (2003). The production of margin and center: Welcoming-unwelcoming of immigrant students. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40, 91-122.
- Goldenberg, C., Gallimore, R., Reese, L., & Garnier, H. (2001). Cause or effect? A longitudinal study of immigrant Latino parents' aspirations and expectations and their children's school performance. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38, 547-582.
- Gonzalez, A. (2000). The acquisition and labor market value of four English skills: New evidence from NALS. *Contemporary Economic Policy*, 18, 259-269.
- Good, T. L., & Nichols, S. L. (2001). Expectancy effects in the classroom: A special focus on improving the reading performance of minority students in first-grade classrooms. *Educational Psychologist*, 36, 113-126.

- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: the impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Hill, N. E., Castellino, D. R., Lansford, J. E., Nowlin, P., Dodge, K. A., Bates, J. E., et al. (2004). Parent academic involvement as related to school behavior, achievement, and aspirations: Demographic variations across adolescence. *Child Development*, *75*, 1491-1509.
- Hispanic Dropout Project. (1998). *No more excuses: The final report of the Hispanic dropout project*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary.
- Holm, A., & Dodd, B. (1996). The effect of first written language on the acquisition of English literacy. *Cognition*, *59*, 119-147.
- Jeynes, W. H. (2003). A meta-analysis: The effects of parental involvement on minority children's academic achievement. *Education and Urban Society*, *35*, 202-218.
- Kagan, S. (1995). We can talk: Cooperative learning in the elementary ESL classroom. *ERIC Digest*. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED382035)
- Kindler, A. L. (2002). *Survey of the state's limited English proficient students and available educational programs and services: 2000-2001 summary report*. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs.
- Klingner, J. K., & Vaughn, S. (1999). Promoting reading comprehension, content learning, and English acquisition through Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR). *Reading Teacher*, *52*, 738-747.
- Klingner, J. K., & Vaughn, S. (2000). The helping behaviors of fifth graders while using collaborative strategic reading during ESL content classes. *TESOL Quarterly*, *34*, 69-98.
- Kobayashi, M. (2003). The role of peer support in ESL students' accomplishment of oral academic tasks. *Canadian Modern Language Review/Revue Canadienne Des Langues Vivantes*, *59*, 337-368.
- Leighton, M. S. (1989). *Achievement effects of individual, small group, and cooperative learning strategies on math problem-solving* (Report No. 40). Baltimore, MD: Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, OERI.
- Lightfoot, S. H. (1978). *Worlds apart: Relationships between families and schools*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Lopez, G. R. (2004). Bringing the mountain to Mohammed: Parent involvement in migrant-impacted schools. In C. Salinas & M. E. Franquiz (Eds.), *Scholars in the field: The challenges of migrant education* (pp. 135-146). Charleston, WV: AEL. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED481644)
- Maruca, P. M. (2002). *Impact of parent involvement on Hispanic, limited English proficient students and their parents* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff.
- McCullum, H., & Russo, A. W. W. (1993). *Model strategies in bilingual education: Family literacy and parent involvement*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED365168)
- Morris, J. E. (2002). A "communally bonded" school for African American students, families, and a community. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *84*, 230-234.
- Ochoa, A. M., & Mardirosian, V. (1990, April). *Parents as equal collaborators of their children's education: Towards transformational empowerment*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, MA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED323614)

- Osterling, J. P., Violand-Sánchez, E., & von Vacano, M. (1999). Latino families learning together. *Educational Leadership*, 57(2), 64-68.
- Pestalozzi, J. H. (1898). *How Gertrude teaches her children* (L. E. Holland & F. C. Turner, Trans.). Syracuse, NY: CW Bardeen.
- Ratelle, C. F., Guay, F., Larose, S., & Senecal, C. (2004). Family correlates of trajectories of academic motivation during a school transition: A semiparametric group-based approach. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 96, 743-754.
- Redding, S. (2001). The community of the school. In S. Redding & L. G. Thomas (Eds.), *The community of the school* (pp. 1-25). Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute.
- Riggs, N. R., & Greenberg, M. T. (2004). Moderators in the academic development of migrant Latino children attending after-school programs. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 25, 349-367.
- Rodham-Clinton, H. (1996). *It takes a village and other lessons children teach us*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Saenz, L. M., Fuchs, L. S., & Fuchs, D. (2005). Peer-assisted learning strategies for English language learners with learning disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 71, 231-247.
- Schmid, C. L. (2001). Educational achievement, language-minority students, and the new second generation. *Sociology of Education*, 74, 71-87.
- Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1973). Cognitive consequences of formal and informal education: New accommodations are needed between school-based learning and learning experiences of everyday life. *Science*, 182, 553-559.
- Sheldon, S. B., & Epstein, J. L. (2002). Improving student behavior and school discipline with family and community involvement. *Education and Urban Society*, 35, 4-26.
- Stevenson, D. L., & Schiller, K. S. (1999). State education policies and changing school practices: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Schools, 1980-1993. *American Journal of Education*, 107, 261-288.
- Strike, K. A. (2004). Community, the missing element of school reform: Why schools should be more like congregations than banks. *American Journal of Education*, 110, 215-232.
- Suarez-Orozco, M. M. (2001). Globalization, immigration, and education: The research agenda. *Harvard Educational Review*, 71, 345-365.
- Téllez, K., Flinspach, S. L., & Waxman, H. C. (2005). Resistance to scientific evidence: Program evaluation and its lack of influence on policies related to language education programs. In R. Hoosain & F. Salili (Eds.), *Language in multicultural education* (pp. 57-76). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Téllez, K., & Waxman, H. C. (Eds.) (2006a). *Preparing quality educators for English language learners: Research, policies and practices*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Téllez, K., & Waxman, H. C. (2006b). A metasynthesis of qualitative research on effective teaching practices for English Language Learners. In J. M. Norris & L. Ortega (Eds.), *Synthesizing research on language learning and teaching* (pp. 245-277). Amsterdam: Johns Benjamin.
- Trumbull, E., Rothstein-Fisch, C., & Hernandez, E. (2003). Parent involvement in schooling: According to whose values? *School Community Journal*, 13(2), 45-72.
- Velez, W., & Saenz, R. (2001). Toward a comprehensive model of the school leaving process among Latinos. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 16, 445-467.

### Authors' Note:

This research was supported in part by a Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement grant from the Mid-Atlantic

Regional Laboratory for Student Success. The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the position, policy, or endorsement of the granting agency.

Kip Téllez is department chair and associate professor of education at the University of California at Santa Cruz. His research areas of interest include: teacher education, preparation of teachers for linguistic and cultural diversity, second language learning, studies of the school curriculum, and educational assessment. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Kip Tellez, UC Santa Cruz, Education Department, 1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA, 95064, or e-mail [ktellez@ucsc.edu](mailto:ktellez@ucsc.edu)

Hersh C. Waxman is director of the State of Texas Education Research Center at Texas A&M University and a professor in the College of Education and Human Development at A&M. His research areas of interest include: effective school-based programs, quality teachers and instruction, and classroom practices that close the achievement gap and improve the education of students at risk of failure.



# Meetings Without Dialogue: A Study of ESL Parent–Teacher Interactions at Secondary School Parents’ Nights

*Yan Guo*

## Abstract

Research in home–school communication has incorporated little, to date, about participation by English as a second language (ESL) parents. This article examines the communication processes between recent Chinese immigrant parents and Canadian teachers at secondary school Parents’ Nights. Drawing from observations of three annual Parents’ Nights, interviews with teachers and bilingual assistants who acted as interpreters for parents, and focus groups, this study revealed that teachers and parents held conflicting expectations of Parents’ Night. Such a mismatch of expectations could make their communications difficult even before meeting at Parents’ Night. The organization and delivery of Parents’ Nights made it clear that parent participation was strongly limited by a structure of power often faced by marginalized parents within the school space. The study suggested that it is important to move beyond cultural differences to understand actual ESL parent–teacher interactions and that using bilingual assistants or liaisons may help parents participate fully in Parents’ Nights or similar school events. Implications for the future development of ESL parent–teacher communication are considered.

**Key Words:** parents, participation, teachers, ESL, parent–teacher, interactions, communication, Chinese, immigrants, intermediaries, students, families, secondary schools, Parents’ Nights, dialogue, bilingual, liaisons, English as a second language, learners, assistants, cultural brokers, expectations

## Introduction

The results of the 2006 Census of Canada showed that almost 6,293,000 people, or about one out of every five in the country, spoke languages other than English or French as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada, 2008a). Furthermore, the Canadian K-12 English as a Second Language (ESL) population included considerable numbers of students who were at risk of educational failure. Watt and Roessingh's (2001) Calgary study reported a 74% dropout rate for the ESL high school population, and Gunderson (2004) found that 61% of the ESL high school students in Vancouver disappeared from their academic courses.

There are many reasons why ESL students may experience such a high rate of school failure. One reason is poor home-school communication (Ogbu, 1982; Osborne, 1996). Some research has suggested that whereas White, English-speaking parents are increasing their participation in their children's education, ESL parents' contacts with their children's schools are actually decreasing (Moles, 1993). Over the years, research has also repeatedly revealed that limited communication between ESL parents and teachers has been a serious problem confronting educators (Gougeon, 1993; Guo, 2006; Jones, 2003; Naylor, 1994); in fact, the Alberta Beginning Teachers' Survey (Malatest & Associates, 2003) indicated that the difficulties beginning teachers have in communicating with ESL parents are also shared by many experienced teachers (Faltis & Coulter, 2007).

## Theoretical Background

### Home-School Relations

The issue of communication between schools and ESL parents has moved to the foreground in British Columbia. The Vancouver and Richmond school boards have both been approached with proposals for the establishment of more traditional schools. Most of the parents supporting these proposals are recent Chinese immigrants who are unhappy with the work their children are doing in Vancouver and Richmond public schools. These parents asked for "teacher-led instruction, a homework policy, dress code or uniform, regular study and conduct reports, frequent meetings between parents and teachers, and additional extra-curricular activities" (Sullivan, 1998, p. 15). Some local parent groups and members of the media presented these parent-teacher differences as the familiar "traditional" versus "progressive" views of education, a contrast that does not always fit local conditions. The traditional versus progressive debate may have highlighted cultural differences between educational

views, but it overshadowed the importance of communication between teachers and ESL parents.

Teacher–parent communication is fraught with complexity for a variety of reasons. Communicating with parents whose first language is not English and whose children are struggling academically adds another dimension to the interaction between home and school because of linguistic and cultural differences. In addition, many other barriers work against effective home–school communication, such as teacher attitudes and institutional racism. Many teachers often do not have sufficiently high expectations of ESL parents’ capacities to support their children’s education (Jones, 2003). Class and race may also play a role in parent–school interactions. As Cline and Necochea (2001) suggested,

the quest for parental involvement comes with a caveat—only parental involvement that is supportive of school policies and instructional practices are welcome here...parents whose culture, ethnicity, [socioeconomic status], and language background differ drastically from the white middle class norms are usually kept at a distance, for their views, values, and behaviors seem “foreign” and strange to traditional school personnel. (p. 23)

Probing further, Lareau (2003) found that White and Black middle class parents were more strategic in intervening in school than parents of Black working class students. Parents of both Black middle class and working class students were continually concerned with schools’ racial discrimination. It is worth noting that parent involvement in North America has focused on values and concerns that are more middle class than working class and on experiences that are more relevant to parents of Anglo-Celtic descent than those from non-English-speaking backgrounds or those of Native American or Aboriginal descent. **As a result, the significance of the non-dominant forms of parent involvement of different races and social classes has been overlooked** (Jackson & Remillard, 2005).

### **Culturally Contested Pedagogy on ESL Learning**

Another major obstacle to developing educational partnerships with ESL parents can be teachers’ and parents’ differing views of ESL education. At issue is whether a language is best learned before or within mainstream classrooms. Many teachers regard learning English as a second language as crucial for ESL students before they move to mainstream classes. Liang and Mohan’s (2003) study of an ESL program in a Canadian school showed that teachers believed that ESL programs helped ESL students acquire **proficiency in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing**. Teachers also believed

that ESL classes helped students to acquire basic **study skills and to be socialized** into North American school culture, two things teachers believed are fundamental to students' continuing education in Canada.

Nonetheless, studies of ESL parents and teachers reveal very different, **negative views of each other**. A **study of eight Taiwanese ESL families in Vancouver**, British Columbia, revealed that parents were anxious to mainstream their children, as they believed English learning was delayed through separate ESL classes (Salzberg, 1998). Parents tended to prefer more intensive written homework and more exams indicative of measurable improvement. Another study of 27 teachers in Calgary, Alberta, suggested that Chinese immigrant parents were distrustful of the Canadian school system and confused about the significance of credentials **and the Canadian style of teaching and learning** (Gougeon, 1993). According to one teacher, "I think [ESL parents] may feel very disappointed with the Canadian system. They do not view this as real learning" (Gougeon, 1993, p. 265).

### **Cultural Differences in Home–School Interactions**

A further barrier to ESL parent involvement in schools is cultural differences concerning home–school communication. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss each cultural group; however, the numbers of Chinese immigrants in Canada—the largest visible minority group, reaching 1,029,400 in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008b)—warrant a closer examination of their assumptions about home–school interactions. Communicating with schools as one type of parent involvement is the norm in North America. Parents are expected to come to routine parent–teacher conferences before or after they receive their child's report card. They are also expected to volunteer at school functions, help their children with their homework, and initiate **parent–teacher meetings** if they have any particular concerns (Epstein, 2001). However, parent involvement is mainly a North American concept; it is neither expected nor practiced in China (Ogbu, 1995). ESL **parents from a focus group discussion** conducted by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation reported that "the notion of helping in schools is a 'western idea,' so they need more outreach to involve them" (Naylor, 1993a, p. 2). In fact, parents' presence in schools may have negative associations; **Wan (1994) explains that in Hong Kong**, Chinese parents seldom attend school functions because if the school asks to see parents, it means their **children have gotten into trouble**. This **social stigma** associated with communicating with teachers might prevent some Chinese ESL parents from interacting with schools when they come to Canada.

Other researchers find that Chinese parents are reluctant to challenge a teacher's authority because in their culture teachers are held in high esteem

(Dyson, 2001; Li, 2006). Many Chinese parents see teachers as professionals with authority over their children's schooling; they believe that parents should not interfere with school processes. Yao (1988) explains that Asian parents usually do not initiate contact with schools, as they see communication with teachers as a culturally disrespectful way of monitoring them.

Because of these language and cultural barriers, a third person, known as an intermediary, can be used as a support for ESL parent–school communication (Buchanan, 2000; Constantino, Cui, & Faltis, 1995; Hiatt-Michael & Purrington, 2007; Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006). An intermediary is a bilingual staff member or parent liaison who is sensitive to community needs and may act as an ambassador for relations between the home, community, and school. Clark and Dorris (2006) found that bilingual liaisons can increase the involvement of families with low English proficiency. In their study of Chinese parental involvement in the schooling process, Constantino, Cui, and Faltis (1995) reported that a Chinese bilingual resource teacher, serving as a bridge between teachers and parents, determined the success of parent–teacher communication. Their study indicated that parents and teachers placed different weight on parent–teacher meetings. Teachers believed that all parents should attend the meetings. In contrast, parents chose not to attend parent–teacher meetings because, in addition to language barriers, they did not understand the significance placed on the meetings. As a response to this problem, the Chinese bilingual resource teacher attached Chinese translations to all the signs in the school area and translated many school forms and the monthly school newsletter. The resource teacher also provided in-services for teachers, educating them about Chinese cultural values and the myriad roles members play in that culture, and even offering a crash course in conversational Chinese. Because of these active interventions, teachers and Chinese immigrant parents were more at ease when they communicated with each other, and more Chinese parents attended meetings with teachers.

Most studies on ESL home–school relations have focused on general, structural barriers and few on beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of ESL parents themselves (Heredia & Hiatt-Michael, 2009). Although there are some notable exceptions, the limited accounts of interaction between Canadian teachers and ESL parents are often based on anecdotal evidence. Investigations often focus on the perceptions of teachers rather than parents or are based on interview data rather than observations of actual ESL parent–teacher interactions. Addressing such gaps, this article explores conditions that may have hindered or promoted participation by Chinese parents **through observations and interviews** within the context of ESL Parents' Nights.

Generally, the term Parents' Night refers to "Meet the Teachers Nights" held at the beginning of a new school year. Teachers may use these events as opportunities to develop a quick rapport with the parents and to explain course syllabi and class rules. Parents' Nights also refer to periodic evening events where parents, teachers, and sometimes students meet to discuss a student's progress. Research suggests that secondary school Parents' Nights are often unsatisfactory events for all concerned; teachers' may approach the experience with negativity or trepidation (Bellace, 2003). The purpose of Parents' Nights at this level are often unclear to participants (Walker, 1998), and teachers and parents may be reduced to blaming each other for a student's difficulties (MacLure & Walker, 2000).

In this study, the term "ESL Parents' Night" refers to a special annual teacher-parent conference organized by an ESL Department of a secondary school in Vancouver, British Columbia. In contrast with routine parent-teacher conferences, which usually deal with the concerns of a specific parent about a specific student, Parents' Night provides an opportunity for teachers to address the concerns that ESL parents share. Two research questions guided my study: First, what factors hinder parental participation at ESL Parents' Night? Second, what factors help parental participation at ESL Parents' Night?

## Methodology

### Research Site

A purposeful sampling procedure was adopted for the study<sup>1</sup> (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The study was conducted at Milton Secondary School (a pseudonym) located on the west side of Vancouver, British Columbia. Milton was chosen for three reasons: diversity in student population, its ESL program, and its ESL Parents' Night. A secondary school with about 1,700 students from Grades 8 to 12, Milton is situated in a quiet, middle- to **upper-middle-** class neighborhood. Sixty-two percent of the students spoke a language other than English at home. The approximate number of students studying in the ESL program in the first year of the study was 200, in the second year, 160 students, and in the final year, 120 students. Many of the students were recent immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. The ESL-program consisted of a number of non-credit content-based courses such as ESL science which integrated the instruction of the **English language and subject matter** simultaneously. The exceptions were physical education and math which were mainstream classes. The students at Milton generally stayed in the ESL program for two years. The program had organized an ESL Parents' Night for more than 10 years. These nights allowed teachers to inform parents about

the philosophy of the ESL program and to explain the differences in educational systems between Canada and their native societies.

The investigator was introduced to the teachers and parents as a researcher from a Canadian university who studied the processes of home–school communication. She played the role of participant observer (Spradley, 1980), seeking to “maintain a balance between being an insider and an outsider, between participation and observation” (p. 60). As requested by teachers, she explained Parents’ Night to the parents on the phone, presented information gathered from the parents at the teachers’ planning meetings, interpreted for Chinese parents at Parents’ Night, and reported parents’ feedback to the teachers after Parents’ Night.

### Participants

Nine ESL teachers and six bilingual assistants participated in the study. All of the teachers participated in the planning, delivery, and feedback sessions for the Parents’ Night. They also involved their students in the entire process. The bilingual assistants were trained graduate research assistants who were also experienced ESL teachers. Before the Parents’ Night, teachers sent home invitations in English to parents, explaining that the purpose of the event was to inform parents about the ESL program. The assistants followed up the invitations to parents in Mandarin, Cantonese, or English. Many Chinese parents were postsecondary educated entrepreneurs, investors, or professionals from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China.<sup>2</sup> In the parent questionnaires, parents stated that the major reason they immigrated to Canada was for their children’s education. The parents had been in Canada from a few months to four years. The bilingual assistants served as interpreters at Parents’ Night.

### Data Collection

Three research methods—interviews, naturalistic observations, and focus groups—were used for data collection over a three-year period. The researcher observed 12 ESL department planning meetings regarding Parents’ Night, four for each event. At these meetings, teachers discussed their purposes and educational philosophies for Parents’ Night. Three annual ESL Parents’ Nights were observed. Observations focused on how teachers and students made their presentations, how parents asked their questions, and how teachers responded. With the consent of the teachers and parents, the 12 planning meetings and three Parents’ Nights were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The researcher interviewed six bilingual assistants individually. Each interview ranged from 30 to 50 minutes. Before Parents’ Night, bilingual assistants telephoned 257 parents/guardians to explain the purpose of the event in

Mandarin or Cantonese. On referral from the assistants, the researcher made a further 105 follow-up calls with parents/guardians to clarify the nature of parents' concerns. **After Parents' Night, the assistants also talked to the parents informally to get their feedback on the event, particularly about their reactions to teachers' and students' presentations and whether their concerns were addressed.** Parents' feedback was recorded in bilingual assistants' and the researcher's field notes.<sup>3</sup> The parents did not provide consent for formal face-to-face interviews, but allowed the bilingual assistants and the researcher to take notes during telephone conversations. The bilingual assistants listened to and recorded parents' questions and comments. The interviews with the assistants focused on parents' **interpretations of the ESL program, parents' major concerns, and their strategies for working on these concerns.**

After Parents' Night, the researcher also interviewed nine ESL teachers individually. Each interview ranged from 30 to 80 minutes. Three teachers were interviewed twice because of their active involvement in Parents' Night. These interviews allowed teachers to reflect on their experience with the event and to articulate their beliefs about ESL education.

A focus group with eight ESL teachers and four bilingual assistants was also conducted after individual interviews were completed. **The summary of the interviews was duly reported, and the group also reviewed data about the parents' feedback conveyed by six bilingual assistants.** The focus group generated more information about teachers' **and parents' perspectives of ESL learning and parents' concerns, valuable data used for purposes of triangulation.**

### Data Analysis

The process of qualitative data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic, as suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2001). Data analysis in this study was ongoing throughout the data collection period. The ongoing analysis helped to identify emerging themes. The inductive **analysis strategy was applied to the interview data in order to understand how participants approached Parents' Night.** Observation data of the teachers' planning meetings were also analyzed inductively **to identify teachers' goals for Parents' Night. This was accomplished by searching for patterns that emerged from the data rather than being imposed on data prior to collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).** More systematic analysis was conducted after the data collection was **completed and the interviews were transcribed.**

## Findings and Analysis

### Conflicting Goals for Parents' Night

The parents expressed two kinds of expectations about Parents' Night, which included opportunities to: (a) talk to teachers about their individual child's progress; and (b) ask specific questions about the ESL program and voice additional concerns. The following examples illustrated these two kinds of expectations:

I would like to meet the teacher individually to discuss how well my child is doing in ESL. I don't feel I should go to Parents' Night unless I can talk to the teacher.

I wanted to know why there is no credit in the ESL program.

I have a lot of concerns. I want to know why there is no test and no adequate amount of homework, and why our kids are still in ESL, and when they can move out of ESL.

While the parents expressed a number of concerns, perhaps the most central was with the length of time their children spent in the ESL program. In their return invitation tear-off sheets, parents expressed:

- Why do they (students) have to waste so much time studying in ESL?
- We understand the program, but it's useless.
- My daughter was in ESL in elementary. Why is she still in ESL at high school? I don't think she needs to be in the ESL program.

Parents believed that two years spent in the ESL program was too long for their children and this seriously hampered ESL students' possibility of high school graduation before reaching the age limit of 19. Parents also perceived that the curriculum in the ESL program was watered down and that, as a result, their children received inferior education.

Aware of the parents' concerns, the teachers reported that their purpose with Parents' Night was to inform parents and students about the ESL program and the Canadian education system. Such purpose was illustrated in the following teacher interview excerpt:

Our students are primarily Chinese from either Hong Kong or Taiwan, where the predominant mode of instruction is rote learning. Students are motivated by demanding and strict teachers who give tests regularly and expect students to memorize what is said in the classroom. Our more lenient approach, based on developing thinking skills and creativity, is already a huge shift for parents to grasp. When we throw in non-graded ESL classes where Grade 8s are mixed with Grade 12s and

where beginners are grouped with advanced English speakers, parents are sometimes bewildered....As professional educators, teachers in the ESL department recognize the need to educate our parents, as well as our students, to the goals and philosophy behind our system....As they (parents) continually “push” their children to “work hard” and get out of ESL, we feel it essential to organize a Parents’ Night every year to introduce our parents to these new ideas.

Seeing an urgent professional responsibility to inform all parents about how Canadian programs were different from those of the families’ emigrating countries, the teacher described Parents’ Night mainly as a mass educational information event. Yet, as was clear from parents’ input, parents wanted to talk to the teachers individually about their own children and voice their concerns about the perceived negative outcomes of the ESL stream. The data therefore indicated that there were mismatched expectations between the teachers and the parents about Parents’ Night.

### **Organization and Delivery of Parents’ Night**

Parent’s Night<sup>4</sup> was a multipart event, and its first part typically began in the school auditorium, where the school principal welcomed ESL parents and students. Next, a school area superintendent outlined provincial and school district ESL policy. Then others reviewed services such as counseling and the multicultural liaison. In the second part of the evening, teachers and others spoke about the ESL program. In the third part, teachers, parents, and students moved to seven individual homerooms for breakout sessions.

In one of the classrooms that the researcher observed, the vice principal and ESL counselor, three ESL students, and the teacher sat in a panel format. Facing them, parents sat in small groups surrounded by students. The teacher asked the parents to brainstorm the question: “What motivates students to work?” and the bilingual assistants were asked to join the groups to assist with translation. The teacher addressed the importance of student self-motivation. Three former ESL students made oral presentations<sup>5</sup> about the difficulties ESL students have in mainstream classrooms and how parents can help their children. The vice principal talked about the school rules, and the ESL counselor advised parents about how families could assist their children in learning. The teacher then discussed additional ESL program-related topics, including why students generally stayed in ESL for two years, how students moved from ESL to mainstream classes, the importance of field trips, students’ motivation, and homework habits.

Specifically, in contrast to parents’ desire to move their children as quickly as possible out of the ESL stream, teachers expressed that two years in ESL was

the minimum required for students to acquire academic English. For example, one ESL teacher used basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language skills (CALP; Cummins, 1991) to explain to parents why students generally stayed in the ESL program for two years. Cummins (1991) maintained that it takes less than two years for immigrant students to acquire BICS, **whereas it takes as long as five to seven years to acquire CALP.** Teachers thus emphasized that learning academic language is a complex and lengthy process.

Parents' Night in other classrooms took similar approaches as teachers explained the value of the ESL program, and the students showcased their presentation skills. **Parents were the audience for these presentations, and interaction was minimal.** This observation was supported by the comments made by two bilingual assistants in two separate classrooms:

In the classroom, there were basically the presentations. The teacher did a very short introduction about what they were going to do that night, and then the students made their presentations...At the end, the teacher ran out of time. In fact, no parents asked questions or made a comment in her room.

During the night, there were two questions from the parents. Most of the time, the parents were quiet. I was wondering why parents did not ask their questions because in our telephone conversations they asked me many questions regarding the ESL program and Canadian education system.

The above excerpts suggested that neither the large group presentations nor the breakout sessions were conducive to dialogue between parents and teachers. The structured presentations left parents with limited time to voice their concerns at Parents' Night.

### **Bilingual Assistants Facilitated Parent Participation**

In contrast to the dynamics of the large group, the researcher noticed that the Chinese parents in a small group<sup>6</sup> asked the bilingual assistant **many questions**, including:

- How many levels are there in ESL? Why don't they (the ESL program) have a clear level?
- Why don't they (teachers) give grades in ESL?
- Did you go to school here? How long did you stay in ESL? What do you think of the ESL program? Do you think the ESL program slowed you down in the process of going to university?

The parents were asking these questions of the bilingual assistant during the classroom sessions instead of directing their questions to the teacher. These questions were interesting, because the parents would have regarded the bilingual assistants as having some expertise based on their Canadian school experiences. So they were looking to the “voice of expertise” here instead of trusting the teachers’ positioning themselves on the basis of expert/codified knowledge about second language acquisition. The parents who were silent most of the time in the evening suddenly became vocal. Why was there little dialogue in the big group but much in the small group?

The bilingual assistants reported playing a range of roles in helping parents participate in Parents’ Night, such as “helper,” “language interpreter,” “cultural interpreter,” and “intermediary.” The more specific functions within each role that bilingual assistants played are discussed below.

In the role of “helper,” the bilingual assistants followed up the teachers’ written invitations to parents and guardians with telephone calls explaining the agenda of Parents’ Night and emphasizing the importance of their attendance. Some of the parents who had initially refused to come to Parents’ Night changed their minds when they had the opportunity to talk with the bilingual assistants in their home language. This was evident, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Agreement to Attend ESL Parent Night: Contrast Before and After Telephone Follow-ups

Core Class	Assistant	Before Telephone Calls	After Telephone Calls
ESL 7	Yingying	Yes 3 No 16	Yes 15 No 4
ESL 2	Mei	Yes 12 No 4	Yes 15 No 1
ESL 5	Amy	Yes 15 No 3	Yes 17 No 1

As Table 1 illustrates, in ESL 7 class, before the telephone call, only 3 parents agreed to attend Parents’ Night; after the telephone call, 15 parents agreed to attend Parents’ Night. The bilingual assistants’ interventions had a significant, positive impact on attendance at Parents’ Night. A number of parents directly attributed the successful attendance to the bilingual assistants:

I wouldn’t have come if you hadn’t explained what Parents’ Night was about. I thought this was another walk-about information night.

When I received the telephone call, I was very surprised to hear about the upcoming event, because my son did not give me the invitation from the teacher. I would definitely come to the Parents' Night.

This result shed light on the findings of Constantino (1994), who observed that ESL teachers' outreach overtures often prompted little response from parents. This finding of the present study was consistent with a previous study by Buchanan (2000) who proposed that parent liaisons following up important written communication with telephone calls in the home language was one strategy to encourage greater school involvement among ESL families.

In the role of "language interpreter," the bilingual assistants served as translators for those Chinese parents who had low English proficiency. One bilingual assistant reported:

Parents have limited proficiency in English. I think they had a lot of questions, but because of the large group setting, they couldn't ask these questions. As soon as I sat down in the small group and told them I could speak Mandarin, they were asking me all sorts of questions.

The parents said:

I don't usually come to school's meetings because I don't understand what they (teachers) are talking about. But if there are translators, I will be there.

I didn't look at my son's folder. I don't understand what it is anyway. With the help of the interpreter, I can understand it.

The above excerpts seemed to suggest that the parents were unable to discuss their concerns because they felt their language abilities and educational knowledge were insufficient to express themselves clearly. This finding was consistent with a British Columbia teachers' report that found many ESL parents attempted to communicate with schools but were hampered by limited English ability and a lack of available translation services (Naylor, 1993b).

In the role of "language interpreter," the bilingual assistants also explained to the parents some of the jargon that teachers used, such as Core class, A Block, and B Block. Jargon often leads to the exclusion of those not familiar with a field (Gaskell, 2001). The linguistic interpretation by the bilingual assistants helped the Chinese immigrant parents to become more familiar with the educational field.

In the role of "cultural interpreter," the bilingual assistants went beyond literal translation to explain the Canadian school culture. The bilingual assistants commented:

I did more than translating. I explained to parents some of the educational terms, for example, what science and social studies mean here,

because it is different from what students learned in their home countries. Social studies could include history, geography, political studies, law, and current events. Parents found it very helpful because school languages are quite different.

I explained the differences between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS refers to daily conversation skills such as the type of language children will learn on the playground. CALP refers to the specialized subject terminology such as biology or social studies at school.

I think because they did not have the Core class in Taiwan, and they didn't know what the students were doing in the course. It looks like it was quite an important course. I not only translated the Core class, but also explained what the students were learning in the course.

I felt parents **may not understand me if I literally translated ELC** [English Learning Centre]. Actually the district is not even consistent with what ELC is...in this school reading comprehension and vocabulary development are a large part of ELC. In addition, students learn grammar, paragraph writing, organization, outlines, and basic essay writing. Parents said, "Oh, I know now what they are doing in ELC."

These accounts provided clear evidence that the bilingual assistants went well beyond language interpretation by providing assistance to parents in interpreting and navigating the features and cultural contexts of the ESL program and the Canadian education system in general.

In the role of "intermediary," the bilingual assistants acted as a go-between for parents and teachers. For example, some Chinese parents said:

I would like to meet the teacher individually and more frequently to discuss how well my child is doing in ESL. But I don't feel like that I should go to the teacher because back in Hong Kong it is usually the teacher who comes to us if our children have some problems at school.

I have been waiting for the teacher to call me and come to talk to me. I didn't know I should go to the teacher.

The bilingual assistants explained to the teachers that teachers usually take the initiative to communicate with parents in Chinese culture. One teacher reflected in his interview:

I know that traditionally in Hong Kong, or in Asia, the teachers contact the home, but in Canada, generally we don't do that; we are always dependent on the parents to contact the school—unless you've got a real concern about a student, we will contact the home. Unfortunately, the parents assume we will contact home.

The bilingual assistants, after talking to the teachers, went back to explain to the parents that, unlike cultural practices in China, in Canada it is usually parents who take the initiative to contact the school if they have any concerns regarding their children. Such explanation enabled teachers and parents to raise their awareness of cultural differences that hinder parent–teacher communication.

In the role of “intermediary,” the bilingual assistants also notified the teachers that Chinese parents do not want to make critical comments in public—an observation also made in previous studies (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Ma, 1992):

Even if parents have many concerns—I know they do because they told me on the phone—nobody made any comments about the ESL program or the educational system. Probably it is not in the Chinese culture. They are not supposed to criticize the ESL program in public.

The parents seemed to perceive the bilingual assistant as being on their side (Lee, 2002). For example, one parent reported initially that she blamed her child, who spent two years in the ESL program, for not working hard. After she heard the teacher’s explanation at Parents’ Night, the parent realized that it was the school’s policy that required students to stay in the program for two years. The parent told the bilingual assistant that “it is the school’s fault.” Yet the parent said she would not complain directly to the teachers. This example demonstrated that Chinese people usually convey their concerns to an intermediary in order to avoid conflicts (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Ma, 1992). This was also, as suggested above, because in China teachers have high status (Dyson, 2001; Li, 2006). Parents in the study seemed to feel more comfortable expressing their dissatisfaction to the bilingual assistants than to the teachers.

## Limitations and Discussion

One recommendation for schools is to create school-level ESL parent committees that include bilingual members who are knowledgeable about the schools and their programs and are willing to act as intermediaries between parents and school staff (Boethel, 2003; Hiatt-Michael & Purrington, 2007). The ESL committee as a whole can also play a mediating role, communicating information, examining conflicts, developing ways that parents and teachers can cooperate more, and exploring possible, educationally responsible changes to ESL programs that are within the ESL teachers’ control. The evidence suggests that intermediaries were very valuable for the Chinese parents, but other groups of immigrant parents may also have difficulty expressing their concerns directly in public. Further research should consider exploring intermediaries with parents from other cultural backgrounds.

Other areas for future research have to do with the range of considerations which have not been discussed here, such as parents' psychological difficulties, including the lack of confidence and feeling of embarrassment in the presence of their children because of the parents' lack of English proficiency (Tung, 2000), or power relations between teachers and parents in which teacher resistance to parent-framed questions can leave parents voiceless (MacLure & Walker, 2000; Wine, 2001). These possible lines of exploration would be important to investigate in future research on communication between ESL teachers and parents. Furthermore, this study was limited in that the sample was drawn from a single immigrant group in a single school in Vancouver. The particular community characteristics may contribute to the findings and thus limit the generalizability to other communities as well as to other immigrant groups. Future research should explore ESL teacher-parent communication processes with larger samples of different immigrant groups in many schools.

### **Implications for School Practice**

The lack of ESL parents' visible involvement in schools is often attributed to cultural differences (Dyson, 2001; Ogbu, 1995; Wan, 1994; Yao, 1988). The results of this study suggest that we need to go beyond blaming cultural differences to understand the difficulty of ESL parent-teacher communication. The findings of the study reveal that there were conflicting expectations of Parents' Night between teachers and parents. The teachers perceived the Parents' Night as an educational event to provide general information about the ESL program, whereas the parents viewed it as a venue to voice their concerns. Such a mismatch of expectations could make their communication difficult even before meeting at Parents' Night.

More importantly, simply attributing communication problems to cultural differences or to ESL parents being reluctant to participate in their children's education (Wan, 1994; Yao, 1988) is to sweep over the importance of examining actual ESL parent-teacher interactions. As indicated by this study, it is important to recognize that the conditions for full dialogue were neither aimed at nor present at the mass meeting of Parents' Night. The ESL teachers maintained knowledge and authority through their use of specialist vocabularies and professional registers, while placing the parents in a position of receivers of educational information (MacLure & Walker, 2000). Parents' Night was, in fact, a Teachers' Night. The organization and delivery of Parents' Night made it clear how parent participation was strongly limited by the structure of power marginalized parents faced within the school space (Cline & Necochea, 2001; Lareau, 2003). Schools need to consider whether events are structured in ways that foster cross-communication instead of one-way transmission to open up opportunities to listen to ESL parents' voices.

However, when the bilingual assistants were available to play their roles as interpreters and cultural brokers of the educational context, parents participated much more actively. It is important to use bilingual assistants or liaisons to help parents participate fully in school events and to communicate their questions and concerns about their children's education (Constantino et al., 1995). In this study, Parent's Night was a highly appropriate forum for discussing the aims of an ESL program with new parents, but not for addressing the concerns of parents who want their children to exit the program. In this case, Parent's Night as an ESL parent–teacher communication process was problematic and was not able to accommodate the negotiation of differences between the ESL parents and Milton's teachers.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>I have received the ethical approval for the protection of human subjects from a Canadian university for this study.

<sup>2</sup>This is not to say that the Chinese are a homogeneous cultural group. In fact, there are significant differences in the political, economic, social, and educational systems between China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, thus caution in generalizations about Chinese parents is needed.

<sup>3</sup>The parents did not give consent to the audio recording, but they allowed me and the bilingual assistants to take notes while we telephoned them. I attempted to conduct formal face-to-face interviews with the parents, but they did not wish to be interviewed, something that was not unexpected. Siu also found it difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews with Chinese American parents. See Siu, S.-F. (2003). Towards building home–school partnerships: The case of Chinese American families and public school. In E. H. Tamura, V. Chattergy, & R. Endo (Eds.), *Asian and Pacific American education: Social, cultural, and historical context* (pp. 59-84). South El Monte, CA: Pacific Asia Press.

<sup>4</sup>The description of the event focused on one Parents' Night. The parents had changed from one year to another, but they seemed to share **similar concerns. In response to the parents' concerns**, the teachers seemed to be consistent across the years with their goal for Parents' Night: to inform parents about the philosophy of the ESL program.

<sup>5</sup>Having children present to their parents was in some ways culturally inappropriate. This topic is addressed further in Guo & Mohan (in press).

<sup>6</sup>Not all of the bilingual assistants had such interactions. These sessions did not eventually become a planned part of the evening.

### References

- Bellace, A. (1980). Teachers should be positive on parents' night. *Educational Leadership*, 38(1), 73.
- Boethel, M. (2003). *Diversity: School, family, and community connections*. Austin, TX: National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, SEDL.
- Buchanan, K. (2000). *Parent involvement improves secondary students' academic success*. Paper presented at the Annual International Convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Vancouver, BC.

- Clark, A. A., & Dorris, A. (2006). Welcoming Latino parents as partners. *Principal Leadership*, 7(3), 22-25.
- Cline, Z., & Necochea, J. (2001). ¡Basta Ya! Latino parents fighting entrenched racism. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25, 1-26.
- Constantino, R. (1994). A study concerning instruction of ESL students comparing all-English classroom teacher knowledge and English as a second language teacher knowledge. *Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students*, 13, 37-57.
- Constantino, R., Cui, L., & Faltis, C. (1995). Chinese parental involvement: Reaching new levels. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 28(2), 46-50.
- Cummins, J. (1991). Conversational and academic language proficiency in bilingual contexts. *AILA Review*, 8, 75-89.
- Dyson, L. (2001). Home-school communication and expectations of recent Chinese immigrants. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 26, 455-476.
- Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnership: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Faltis, C., & Coulter, C. (2007). *Teaching English learners and immigrant students in secondary school settings*. New York, NY: Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Gao, G., & Ting-Toomey, S. (1998). *Communicating effectively with the Chinese*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gaskell, J. (2001). The “public” in public schools: A school board debate. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 26, 19-36.
- Gougeon, T. (1993). Urban schools and immigrant families: Teacher perspectives. *Urban Review*, 25, 251-287.
- Gunderson, L. (2004). The language, literacy, achievement, and social consequences of English-only programs for immigrant students. In J. Hoffman, D. Schallert, B. Maloch, J. Worth, & C. Fairbanks (Eds.), *The 53<sup>rd</sup> yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 1-33). Milwaukee, MI: National Reading Conference.
- Guo, Y. (2006). “Why didn’t they show up?” Rethinking ESL parent involvement in K-12 education. *TESL Canada Journal*, 24(1), 80-95.
- Guo, Y., & Mohan, B. (in press). Beyond cultural differences: Understanding and negotiating the conflict between Chinese immigrant parents and Canadian teachers. In Z. Bekerman & T. Geisen (Eds.), *International handbook of migration, minorities, and education: Understanding cultural and social differences in process of learning*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Heredia, R. C., & Hiatt-Michael, D. B. (2009, April 13-17). *Perspectives of Latino parents: Empowered voices*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.
- Hiatt-Michael, D. B., & Purrington, L. (2007). Reaching out from the classroom to the families. In D. B. Hiatt-Michael (Ed.), *Promising practices for teachers to engage families of English language learners* (pp. 43-60). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Howland, A., Anderson, J. A., Smiley, A. Z., & Abbott, D. J. (2006). School liaisons: Bridging the gap between home and school. *School Community Journal*, 12(2), 47-68.
- Jackson, K., & Remillard, J. T. (2005). Rethinking parent involvement: African American mothers construct their roles in the mathematics education of their children. *School Community Journal*, 15(1), 51-74. Retrieved from <http://www.adi.org/journal/ss05/Jackson%20&%20Remillard.pdf>
- Jones, T. G. (2003). Contributions of Hispanic parents’ perspectives to teacher preparation. *School Community Journal*, 13(2), 73-96.

- Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lee, B. K. (2002). When East meets West: Acculturation, socio-emotional adjustments, and parental influence in Chinese-Canadian immigrant adolescents. *Human Communication*, 5, 73-90.
- Li, G. (2006). *Culturally contested pedagogy: Battles of literacy and schooling between mainstream teachers and Asian immigrant parents*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Liang, X., & Mohan, B. A. (2003). Dilemmas of cooperative learning and academic proficiency in two languages. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 2, 35-51.
- Ma, R. (1992). The role of unofficial intermediaries in interpersonal conflicts in the Chinese culture. *Communication Quarterly*, 40, 269-278.
- MacLure, M., & Walker, B. (2000). Disenchanted evenings: The social organization of talk in parent–teacher consultations in UK secondary schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21(1), 5-25.
- Malatest, R. A., & Associates. (2003). *Efficacy of Alberta teacher preparation programs and beginning teachers' professional development opportunities, 2002 survey report*. Unpublished manuscript. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning.
- McMillan, J., & Schumacher, S. (2001). *Research in education: A conceptual introduction* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Longman.
- Moles, O. C. (1993). Collaboration between schools and disadvantaged parents: Obstacles and openings. In N. F. Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and schools in a pluralist society* (pp. 21-49). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Naylor, C. (1993a). *The views of parents of ESL students concerning the B.C. education system*. Vancouver, Canada: British Columbia Teachers' Federation.
- Naylor, C. (1993b). *ESL/ESD teachers' focus group responses*. Vancouver, Canada: British Columbia Teachers' Federation.
- Naylor, C. (1994). *A report of the BCTF ESL colloquium*. Vancouver, Canada: British Columbia Teachers' Federation.
- Ogbu, J. (1982). Cultural discontinuities and schooling. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 13, 290-307.
- Ogbu, J. (1995). Cultural problems in minority education: Their interpretations and consequences-Part two: Case studies. *Urban Review*, 27, 271-297.
- Osborne, A. B. (1996). Practice into theory into practice: Culturally relevant pedagogy for students we have marginalized and normalized. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 27, 285-314.
- Salzberg, J. (1998). *Taiwanese immigrant parents' perceptions of their adolescent children's ESL learning and academic achievement* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
- Spradley, J. (1980). *Participant observation*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Statistics Canada. (2008a). *The evolving linguistic portrait, 2006 Census*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/analysis/language/pdf/97-555-XIE2006001.pdf>
- Statistics Canada. (2008b). *Canada's ethnocultural mosaic, 2006 census*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Retrieved February 8, 2010 from <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-562/index-eng.cfm>
- Sullivan, A. (1998). Chinese lead traditional school drive. *Vancouver Courier*, p. 15.
- Tung, M. (2000). *Chinese Americans and their immigrant parents: Conflict, identity, and values*. New York, NY: The Haworth Clinical Practice Press.

- Walker, B. (1998). Meetings without communication: A study of parents' evenings in secondary schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 24(2), 163-178.
- Wan, Y. (1994). *Immigrant Chinese mothers' involvement in K-6 United States schools: A participatory study* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of San Francisco, CA.
- Watt, D., & Roessingh, H. (2001). The dynamics of ESL dropout: Plus Ça change.... *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 58, 203-222. Retrieved from <http://tesl.tcnj.edu/PDF%20Resources/EJ639316%20%20Mainstreaming%20ESL%20Learners.Dynamics%20of%20ESL%20Dropout.pdf>
- Wine, L. (2001, February). *Issues of alignment in parent-teacher conferences*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, St Louis, MO.
- Yao, E. (1988). Working effectively with Asian immigrant parents. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 70, 223-225.

Yan Guo is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education of the University of Calgary. Her research interests include immigrant parent knowledge, intercultural communication, content-based ESL, discourse analysis, second language writing, and diversity in teaching and learning. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Yan Guo, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2N 1N4, or e-mail [yanguo@ucalgary.ca](mailto:yanguo@ucalgary.ca)

# **In(Formal) Conversation with Minority Parents and Communities of a Canadian Junior School: Findings and Cautions from the Field**

*John Ippolito*

## **Abstract**

This paper reports on a university/school board collaborative outreach program hosted by a linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse junior school in Toronto, Canada. The program facilitates a forum where the school's families—in conversation with in-service and pre-service teachers, the school's administration, a local university's Faculty of Education, and community agencies—discuss issues the families deem important to their experience of public schooling. In addition to a detailed program overview, I present two tiers of participant feedback on the program, the first tier gleaned from parent surveys and the second tier derived from a series of interviews conducted by parent-researchers. Based on a consideration of the qualitative data emerging from this feedback, I offer three readings of the program: the first reading tells a story of how the program is empowering parents and caregivers and bringing them closer to their children's schooling; the second reading draws four implications that complicate the apparent successes of the program; and the third reading takes shape as a broader epistemic and ethical caution for action-oriented research of this sort.

**Key Words:** minorities, families, parents, languages, cultures, public education, diversity, communities, discussion, Canada, elementary, schools, action research, linguistically, culturally, racially minority, community, conversations

## Introduction

In the fall of 2004, a large metropolitan school board (similar to a U.S. district) in the Greater Toronto Area in the province of Ontario, Canada, set out to identify the geographic areas of its jurisdiction confronted with significant socioeconomic challenges. The purpose for doing so was to select a number of inner city schools to serve as exemplars for their respective cluster of high needs schools, that is, schools with families facing pronounced social and economic challenges in their experience of public schooling. The selection panel was drawn from school board staff, parents, trustees, community agencies, two local universities, and the provincial Ministry of Education.

In the first phase of the initiative in 2006-2007, the committee selected three such schools based on their demonstrated potential for exploring innovative teaching and learning practices; for supporting the social, emotional, and physical well being of students; for offering their school as the heart of a community; and for committing to research, review, and evaluation of educational practices. The program which I will discuss in this paper is part of a response by one of these schools to its new role as exemplar. I have chosen to call this school Northfield Public School (pseudonym).

Northfield Public School is culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse. The school has a student population of 532 and offers Kindergarten to Grade 5. While some of the school's families have lived in the surrounding neighborhood for as long as 10-15 years, most of its families are recent immigrants to Canada, having lived in government-subsidized high rise apartments near the school for less than five years. In some cases, recent arrivals use the community as a transition point before moving on to another part of the city or province. In this sense, the school has to deal with a transient school population.

The school's diverse population shares a common set of experiences shaped by recent immigration, poverty, and the challenges of linguistic and cultural minority status. However, the population is also marked by stark differences. Linguistically, as many as 20 languages other than English are spoken by children at home. In the 1970's, Northfield consisted primarily of Italian and Spanish speaking families. Today, some of the predominant minority languages spoken by families at home include Vietnamese, Somali, Punjabi, Urdu, Tamil, and Spanish. Tracing these languages back to their geographic and national origins, one finds many of the school's families are originally from Vietnam, Somalia, Pakistan, Northern India, Sri Lanka, or Central or South America.

These linguistic differences mirror other profound distinctions, among them religion and ethnicity. In the case of religion, the main groups represented include Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists. As for ethnicity, the school

paints a very complex picture. For example, even within the same country of origin, for example, Vietnam, one finds subgroups of ethnic Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer. These ethnic differences can also be further mirrored in levels of education. For instance, some parents and caregivers coming from rural, farming backgrounds have limited elementary level education (in some cases to the point of being functionally illiterate in their first language), while others, often from urban areas, have completed university degrees and have worked in professional fields such as law and corporate administration.

By way of preview, the program I will address in this paper facilitates a forum where participating parents and caregivers discuss issues they consider important to their families' experience of public schooling. In addition to the parents, the discussions also involve in-service and pre-service teachers, the school's administration, York University's Faculty of Education, local community agencies, and, as I will explain in a moment, the children. But before moving on to give a more detailed sense of how this extracurricular program works, I will situate it in a wider research-based context.

### **Research-Based Context**

The program at Northfield, which I will refer to as *Learning in Schools and Homes*, is part of a broader response to the increasingly diverse demographic of North American society, in particular its urban centers. Within this response, educational critics have called for an elaboration of pedagogies, programs, and thinking in relation to linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse students. The key role played by families and communities in the education of such students is central to this proposed elaboration. For instance, in the area of classroom practices, it has been suggested that in matching students' background knowledge with lessons, teachers need to expand their *own* knowledge of their students' cultural and class-based experiences (McIntyre, Rosebery, & González, 2001); in the area of teacher education, there is a call for culturally responsive teachers who know about the lives of their students and design instruction that builds on what students already know (Villegas & Lucas, 2002); and in the area of language and literacy acquisition and situated learning, educational researchers have urged schools to pursue pedagogies where multilingual families can be community partners in their children's education (Abrams & Taylor Gibbs, 2000; Blackledge, 2001; Klingner et al., 2005; Lawson, 2003; McCaleb, 1994; Schecter & Cummins, 2003; Williams & Gregory, 2001). Among the benefits identified in such approaches are the overcoming of barriers to communication and increased parent confidence when offering input to educators and supplementary educational support to their children. Teachers,

too, it is argued, begin to change as they move closer to their students' lived experience of society and community (Melnick & Zeichner, 1998) and recognize the multiple benefits of parent participation, developing an image of parents as effective participants in their children's education (Sherri, 2006).

*Learning in Schools and Homes* is grounded conceptually in this *discourse of diversity*. Indeed, not only does this discourse ground the program conceptually, but it also informs its programmatic context. In this regard, the starting point and direction for the program is derived from two of the core concerns which define the literature on education in the context of diversity, that is, a focus on improved student achievement (Cooper, Chavira, & Mena, 2005; Nieto, 2000; Peck, Sears, & Donaldson, 2008) *and* a focus on more equitable relationships between families and schools (Axelrod, 2005; Kainz & Aikens, 2007; Poplin & Rivera, 2005).

## Preparing for the Program

In setting the groundwork for the program, the research team—which included a lead teacher from Northfield, two graduate student research assistants from the Faculty of Education at York University, and myself (the university-based researcher)—generated ideas on logistics and arrangements, for example, how we would advertise the program to the parents, how many weeks it would run, and which grade levels we would target. We further speculated on what issues or ideas parents might be interested in discussing. On this last point, we were cognizant of our role as facilitators and, for that reason, did not presume to know what the parents would want to discuss. As a research team, we took our role to be that of providing a forum for parent-driven conversations, a forum where parents would feel comfortable in discussing issues regarding their children's school or the provincial school system or, if parents were newcomers to Canada, in discussing information that we could provide to help make their transition into Canadian society easier.

During the 2006-2007 academic year, *Learning in Schools and Homes* took place from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. on one afternoon per week. For parents picking up their children after school, this time slot became an important issue since parents wanted their children to eat and rest at the end of the school day. In response to this, and also to provide a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, each of the sessions began with a full, hot meal, respecting dietary needs such as Halal or vegetarian, during which all the research participants of all ages sat at the same table and ate and talked.

The research team's behind-the-scenes preparation meetings took place every week and involved finding printed or audio-visual materials which were

related to the weekly focus *and* available in parents' home languages—languages which were identified in the first session. For example, serving as a primary resource and as an outline for many of our discussions, we used documents from *The Newcomers Guide to Elementary School* (Settlement Workers in Schools, 2009), which are available online in 18 different languages. A key advantage of using documents from the *Newcomer's Guide* was that by distributing reading materials in the families' home languages, we sent the message that first languages are *resources*, following Ruiz's (1984) notion of *resource* as outlined in his taxonomy of perspectives on linguistic diversity. These materials typically triggered other discussions within our sessions and, in keeping with our role as facilitators, the research team let these discussions take their course. For example, one particular session began with a discussion of a document explaining the process by which students were to be registered in their local schools. However, in response to the parents' concerns, it evolved into a conversation on the potentially problematic nature of mandatory child immunization in contexts of religious diversity.

Another key aspect of the team's preparation meetings involved setting up activities for the children. Parents were encouraged to bring any or all of their children to the sessions. Childcare was provided for younger children, and the older children worked with one of Northfield's teachers on activities that complemented the adults' activities. Toward the end of each session the children joined their parents and shared the activity they had been working on. It is also worth noting that, as in the adult sessions, the teacher working with the children made efforts to incorporate students' first languages into the activities.

### Initiating the Program

The first block of six sessions was held in the Fall term of 2006 and was geared toward Junior and Senior Kindergarten and Grade 1, while the second block of five sessions was held in the Winter term of 2007 and aimed at Grades 2 and 3. A further block of four sessions for families of Grade 4 and 5 students was held in late Spring. Topics addressed in the sessions included the following: a discussion of the broad contours of *the education system in Ontario*, which, as explained above, evolved into a conversation on the potentially problematic nature of mandatory child immunization; *parent–teacher interviews*, which included the screening and discussion of a multilingual DVD modeling what a typical parent–teacher interview (or conference) can look like; *equity policies and practice*, which included a frank exchange of perspectives between school and families on what *equity* can mean; *getting involved with the school*, which included a sharing of views among parents who do and do not take

part in school activities; *community academic supports*, during which we invited representatives from the local library and homework clubs to share resources with parents; *why is Northfield not K-8?*, which took shape as a conversation around the institutional history connected to particular grade distributions in the school board and the parents' concerns around risks students face in transitioning from junior to middle school; *the importance of arts education*, which involved the art and music teachers visiting to share with parents some of their classroom practices and also to hear from the parents their thoughts on the arts in education; and, finally, a session focused on *authority and learning*.

Recognizing the potentially controversial nature of this last topic, and being in a position to draw on the culture of discussion we had begun to establish with the parents, we used this particular session to share information and views with parents and to learn about their concerns regarding discipline. On this last point, we learned that while these parents agreed that discipline and rules are important at an early time in children's development, they also felt that the kind of discipline they expected from teachers was different from discipline at home because the classroom is a public forum, and they felt every effort should be made not to embarrass children in front of their peers. The parents also pointed out that since parents know their children better than teachers, teachers need to know what is going on at home and vice versa.

Notwithstanding the research team's facilitative role, we did allow ourselves to take part in the discussions by contributing ideas and views and, in the discussion on *authority and learning*, a member of the research team talked about his own experience as a parent and teacher and his concerns when first moving to Canada at a young age. He discussed variations in how discipline can be viewed and posed the question, "How can we discipline respectfully?" Part of the parent response was the suggestion that new teachers should have teacher mentors who guide them through issues such as discipline.

At this particular session, the children's activities consisted of creating a role play in which the children simulated a situation where one child is left out of playing with their peers and hence "behaves badly." The children performed this role play for the adults and then talked about alternative responses to the situation, why the other kids were being mean, and what they would do if it happened to them.

These sessions with Northfield's families have been highly suggestive of the potential impact of this type of community engagement in education. For example, while the positive response of parents to our program is visible in their written end-of-year feedback (discussed below), there is also a multiplicity of areas where such an initiative can increase interaction in the school and community. For instance, for participating parents who are already active in the

community, *Learning in Schools and Homes* is a vehicle for dialogue with the greater parent community. Such parent leaders encouraged their fellow parents not only to take part in the *Learning in Schools and Homes* program, but also to take an active role in shaping the school culture.

As a former English as a second language (ESL) student, one of our research team members recalled some of the difficulties for both himself and his parents in adjusting to a new schooling and cultural environment, but he also noted the progress that has been made to accommodate the sociocultural, linguistic, and religious needs of families. In particular, the session on community academic supports (when we invited representatives from the local library and homework clubs to share resources with parents) offered a reminder of some of the barriers that may yet be in place for parents—such as not being able to participate meaningfully in report card conferences because of the absence of interpreters and the eventual communication gap between the school and home. Our research team member who had himself been an ESL student explained to parents that, by contrast, there are now useful resources available to the program parents and, indeed, to parents of the school more generally, resources such as a translated DVD on parent–teacher interviews or interpreters made available for report card conferences. Situated as it is within these more recent practices, the *Learning in Schools and Homes* program has the potential for furthering collaborative partnerships between the home and school.

### **First-Tier Feedback: The Year-End Survey**

At the end of each block of sessions we invited parents to complete, anonymously, a written questionnaire which asked them to comment on various aspects of the program. Parents provided feedback in the language of their choice, and the research team translated these responses into English. The parent responses give us a sense of (1) the relevance of material provided to parents in their home languages; (2) the parents' view of the children's activities; and (3) the parents' overall impression of the program.

We begin with the importance parents place on the materials provided in their home languages, since this was something they seemed keen to highlight. One of the parents in the Fall block wrote, “yes, it's important to provide the information translated in home languages because with this parents who have problems with English in reading can involve themselves in school activities.” Another parent from the Fall block writes, in Spanish, “the translated documents helped us to grasp the true meaning of the topic being delivered. I was happy to know you have translated copies of the material for discussion.” A third parent, from the Winter block, adds, “it's important to translate informa-

tion in some home languages because with this most of the parents who have problems with English can understand easily and give their views.”

The second area in which we solicited parent views—that is, on the activities their children took part in while they, the parents, took part in the adult discussions—provided us with the following feedback: “I was very impressed with the activities that the children engaged in while we were in session. I was impressed when children from different backgrounds sang in Spanish.” A second parent, this one from the Winter block, remarked, “I like the activities very much, especially the ones for the children because they develop their creativity and imagination. I like to hear the children sing or recite, because when they do, one can enjoy the quality of the work they do.”

Finally, when asked about their overall impression of the program, a parent from the Winter block writes, in Spanish, “all the topics seemed interesting; they helped in informing us of all the kinds of support provided for kids and their parents.” A parent from the Fall block writes, “it was helpful to have the interaction with other parents. The facilitators did quite well at making the sessions feel like the parents were leading the discussions. It truly was a discussion, not a presentation or workshop.”

A last point of consideration in both planning for and trying to understand the dynamics of our program deals with parents’ different ways of learning or expressing their views. This is the case of silences in some of our sessions, where some parents simply did not speak out or express an opinion. I am reminded here of Pon, Goldstein, and Schecter’s (2003) point that “modes of silences can be enabling or debilitating depending on individuals’ situations and circumstances” (p. 117). In this article, Pon and his colleagues point to the lack of research on the role and significance of silence and silences (2003, p. 116). Although their study focuses on students, we may be able to extrapolate the significance and legitimacy for parents, too, of all modes of communication as well as ways of knowing and learning when designing and implementing programs such as *Learning in Schools and Homes*.

At the outset of the program, our planning team was unanimous in its desire *not* to facilitate a program premised on a deficit view of minority languages, minority cultures, and minority families. Our starting premise was that the minority families in the school were *already* inscribed in complex social ways and that these inscriptions—ways of being, ways of thinking, ways of interacting, ways of worshipping—are of enormous potential value to their children’s experience of public schooling, provided these differences are understood *as* resources by the school, by the school board, and, indeed, by the very community agencies set up to assist them. In order for us to use the after-school sessions as an incubator for the view that the families’ differences are

in fact resources, we deliberately avoided a unidirectional, top down presentation format and encouraged a conversational, dialogic format. Logistically, it has proven workable; interpersonally, it has proven to be an effective means of fostering meaningful conversation with parents; and conceptually, it holds the promise of furthering notions of community involvement in education.

## **Second-Tier Feedback: Peer-Research**

In addition to the parent surveys at the end of the first year of *Learning in Schools and Homes*, I was keen to augment this feedback with a second, retrospective look at the program. As for how to access participants' perspectives on the first year of the program, I thought it appropriate that the method reiterate the community-referenced ethos of the program itself. With this in mind, in 2007-2008 I drew upon parents and caregivers from the school community as peer-researchers. My assumption was that linguistic and cultural minority parents and caregivers would be more at ease and more forthcoming if they were interviewed by other linguistic and cultural minority parents and caregivers, people with whom they shared some of the same challenges—linguistically, culturally, socially, and socioeconomically.

Toward this end, I invited three parents and caregivers (two of whom were new to the school) to interview seven parents and caregivers who had taken part in the program the previous year. One of the parent researchers, who speaks Spanish and English, conducted her three interviews entirely in Spanish with three Spanish-speaking parents who had been given the option of Spanish or English or both. A second parent researcher, who speaks Somali and English, conducted two interviews entirely in English, one with an interviewee who speaks English as a primary language and another who speaks Somali as a primary language. (Note: I have only recently discovered that this parent-researcher chose to avoid the use of Somali, her home language, because she did not feel confident in her first language literacy skills for the purposes of translation.) The third researcher speaks Vietnamese and Chinese and English and interviewed a pair of women who chose to be interviewed as a pair and in Vietnamese. As it turned out, this third cluster of interviews became very difficult, and I will address this in some detail.

As for the selection of participants, I deferred in large part to the recommendations of my on-site research project coordinator who is also the school's Adult Education teacher. She was instrumental in recommending three potential peer researchers and in recruiting potential interviewees. As for the interviewers, the coordinator and I opted for three women who we thought met the following four criteria: one, they were interested in talking about the

after-school program; two, they had the language skills to conduct interviews in a minority home language and English; three, we thought they would stand to benefit from taking part, that is, they would potentially strengthen their own interpersonal and language skills; and four, they were willing to consider a longer-term role as researchers in future peer research at the school. (As it turned out, two of the three parent-researchers joined the parent-research team for 2008-2009.)

As for the interviewees, we opted for seven parents and caregivers who, first and foremost, we were able to contact—this is always a challenge in schools with high mobility. We also looked for parents who had taken part in most of the previous year's after-school discussions.

The interviews were conducted in a small office adjacent to other administrative offices in the school. They were guided by a set of open-ended questions focused around the previous year's program (see the Appendix for the Spanish version of the interview protocol). The interviews varied from 15 to 45 minutes in length, and they were audiotaped. The recordings were translated (when required) and transcribed in their entirety. All of the participants, both interviewers and interviewees, were paid through a Faculty of Education minor research grant.

As I read and reflected on the transcripts, I knew it would not be difficult to use the findings to tell a story of how the program is empowering parents and caregivers and bringing them closer to their children's schooling. For example, as a general response to the program, one of the parents offered the following: "I can more effectively express myself, and also I can participate in the education of the children...like any parent I want that the situations are good, that there is security, and that the children are put in first priority." Another Spanish speaker remarked, "the sessions were good because all the topics that they proposed were excellent...I have liked what I've heard, and they have all been good." A third minority language parent explained, "I liked the fact that I could practice and listen to others speaking English, which motivated me to put in an effort to understand what they were saying. So to a certain extent, I was able to practice my English as well as at the same time learn about how the system works in this country."

And in response to a question which asked them to describe what *they* thought the program was about, a mother who is herself a student in the school's Adult Education class claimed that "the purpose was to make the education better, to make the programs better, and so the parents can develop a better relationship with the children and their teachers." One of her classmates in the Adult Education class added, "I wanted to learn more about the school. I wanted to meet more people, and I also wanted to know more about the programs." Another

mother, a native speaker of English and Bengali who went on to complete a teacher education program, reflected, “partly to get parents more involved in the school, to understand how the school system works so that they would feel more comfortable coming to the school and being involved with the school. Um, yeah, I think that was sort of the purpose.”

On the issue of relationships with other parents and caregivers, a young Spanish-speaking woman said, “I did not know anyone who attended those meetings, and so it was good that we compared our ways of life and exchanged ideas and stories of our experiences as well as suggestions for improvements.” She added, “well, yes, I did see that the relationships were closer between attendees. For example, there was a Vietnamese girl that came over to my house whose name I can’t remember right now, but since we were both attendees of the program we were able to converse and talk more.” These sentiments were echoed by another young woman who pointed out, “it was helpful. There were a lot of things that I learned and that the parents I think learned, and it was nice to be with each other and, you know, have a stronger sense of the parental community at the school.”

The program’s successes can also be evidenced by instances in the interviews where the participants showed signs of taking ownership of it. For example, in response to a request for suggestions for future sessions, two of the participants made specific suggestions. The first participant, highlighting her own ongoing challenges, explained, “I am currently going through a difficult situation due to immigration. Things have happened to me that because of not knowing...I would like that we would touch upon this topic so that people don’t go through the same problems that I am currently going through.” The second participant made specific recommendations for the program’s method:

so the main thing is that there maintains this continuity so that no topic is forgotten, every two weeks or, rather, every week is too close, maybe the meetings could happen once every twenty days or once a month or something like that so that the continuity is maintained and so that one does not miss the “line” of what is being discussed.

In contrast to this first set of remarks, it is also important to identify two further strands in the interviews that complicate the apparent successes of the program. The first of these two countercurrents may suggest parent and caregiver dependency rather than agency—that is, parents and caregivers as passive, or at least not fully empowered, recipients of information or direction. A Tamil-speaking participant confided, “the true purpose [of the program] I think was bringing information to let us know where we can go, how we should educate our children and (long pause) how we can integrate ourselves to the Canadian

community.” A further sampling of views representing a cross-section of linguistic and cultural backgrounds on this issue reiterates what may be a passive ingesting of information and instruction: “[the purpose of the program] is to see where they [the program facilitators] could help us and know more about how we can educate our children;” “I know that with this type of class, one feels more oriented and knowledgeable on how to raise their kids on the right path;” “[the program is about] the help it offers us and the information it provides us.”

At this juncture, it is very much worth considering the question of whether every parent seeks *agency* vis-à-vis their child’s school in the ways Western educators might envision. In other words, it is important to think carefully about the motivations and rationales and ways of life within which the parents in this study may not have assumed the opportunity to increase their own agency. Some of the parents’ responses may reflect culturally influenced attitudes toward teachers and schools, that is, that one learns from them rather than negotiates mutual relationships with them. Clearly, institutional relationships are construed differently, depending on one’s own history, culture, personal experiences, socioeconomics, and so forth.

In this regard, the point of weighing the findings on this issue is not only to explore potential parent and caregiver dependency—rather than agency—but to draw into question the very research perspective which deems this parent preference as *dependency* in the first place. This double-edged caution is directed, then, both at the parents’ responses and the researcher’s interpretation of those responses. It is also in the spirit of a co-evolving of how *all* the participants think about family–school relations. I will return to this sentiment in the concluding section.

The second of these two currents that complicate the apparent successes of the program are expressed as a dissatisfaction or concern. I will touch on three of these instances. In the first case, one of the participants, after she had praised the program for pulling the parents closer to the school, shared a suggestion for the kind of topic that the program might address in the future—a topic emerging from a difficult incident. She relates,

Some [topics] are very difficult to discuss.... Like the other day, my nephew from Mexico came to visit and went to go play at the park, and a few other children of color spit on him, to which the mother asked, “what exactly can I do about this even though I don’t speak the language?” Also, the child is already starting to feel a sense of resentment towards children of color due to their attitudes. As a result, this may spark the development of something bad. So, one topic of discussion could be how to integrate children of different cultures.

The same participant, in commenting about an incident at one of the sessions, explained,

There was one instance in which something happened that I did not like. It was related to the food that was brought...I think they said that there was chicken for the Muslims since they weren't allowed to eat any meat. So, practically, it was like this food was unable to be touched since it was only allowed for these types of people. These little types of differences *are not right*...for some people it will not matter if they eat Halal meat so they should just buy Halal for everyone or simply just buy everyone the same thing.

This aspect of how the participants related to the program and to each other received a more pronounced expression in the case of the Vietnamese-speaking peer-researcher and the pair of Vietnamese-speaking parents—two mothers of children attending the school. According to my on-site coordinator, who was helping to facilitate the interviews, the interview never really took place since the conversation between interviewer and interviewees began and ended with a heated exchange around preliminaries.

In an attempt to understand what actually happened, I spoke with my on-site coordinator privately and then with the Vietnamese-speaking peer-researcher. In private, my on-site coordinator suggested that the interviewees felt the woman who had been chosen had no right to be asking them questions. This was even after the interviewees had been given the relevant background details in preparation for the interview. My coordinator further claimed that interviewer and interviewees spoke different varieties of Vietnamese, had very differing levels of education, and that the interviewer came from an urban background while the interviewees were from a rural area. When I spoke to the interviewer, she was reticent and chose only to tell me that the interviewees did not speak Vietnamese very well, nor did they speak Chinese very well. (I later established that all three Vietnamese-speaking participants were ethnic Chinese.)

This second-tier feedback, accessed via parent-researchers, provides further insights into the program. I extract, suggestively rather than definitively, the four following implications for programs of this kind:

- One cannot underestimate the extent to which minority parents are concerned with their children's experience of public schooling, with their own learning and sense of agency as adults, and with their relationships with other adults in the school community.
- One cannot assume that programs or initiatives which are meant to foster agency among minority parents and caregivers will actually do so. In fact, some parents and caregivers may respond to such initiatives in passive and receptive ways.

- Difficult issues around intra- and inter-racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic relations should not be ignored in school-based programs with benign titles such as our own *Learning in Schools and Homes*.
- The assumption that adults feel more comfortable interacting with other adults with whom they share linguistic and/or cultural experiences is not necessarily the case. While in some cases a rapport can be enabled by this matching, in other cases it can be a source of friction.

## Conclusion and Conceptual Caution

All told, the discussion forum at Northfield proved to be a worthwhile space for parents to connect with their children's school. The parents found it useful in a number of areas: it allowed them to hear and to be heard by teachers and administrators; it provided them with opportunities for linking with other parents; and it introduced them to broader educational practices which shape their children's experience of public education. Analysis of feedback on the program, from both the year-end surveys and the follow-up parent-driven interviews, also revealed that the interactions facilitated by the program are not insulated from the broader social and interpersonal dynamics at play between and among parents. In this sense, the program must be prepared to take up, discuss, and learn from these dynamics—dynamics that are not immune from the tensions that also characterize the community within which the program is situated.

In this vein, I will conclude with a conceptual caution that lends some sense of the broader epistemic and ethical concerns that can be read into this program. In commenting on the place of reform efforts in curriculum studies, Smits (2008) cautions against a preoccupation with *improving methods*. This caution is equally valid in applied research programs such as *Learning in Schools and Homes*. This work, focused as it is on *improving* school–family relations—particularly in the case of minority families—does run the risk, as Smits (2008) points out in reference to the French philosopher Alain Badiou, of improving the methods of existence without considering the conditions of existence. Glossed in the context of *Learning in Schools and Homes*, the risk can be read as one where the *improving* of school–family relations carries on without considering the conditions of possibility for those relations in the first place. In this scenario, applied work can indeed turn instrumentalist and normative: an instrument for pulling school practices toward a normative point, that may, admittedly, be more democratic and responsive.

But the concern I am raising here doesn't devalue the importance of either democracy or responsibility. It does signal that the conditions of possibility for

democracy and responsibility (not to mention authoritarianism and irresponsibility) have to be integral to the discussion forums and to the research around it. This is not to say the only alternative to democracy and responsibility is authoritarianism and irresponsibility. Taking responsibility, for instance, may look very different in different cultural contexts. Following this caution, both the discussion forums and attendant research need to be open to nuanced, complex, and perhaps counterintuitive (to a Western perspective) understandings of self and society, particularly as they manifest themselves in educational contexts.

It is for this reason in particular that I insist, both in my reports to funding agencies and in my strategizing with the school-based research teams and their wider school communities, that *Learning in Schools and Homes* and the research tied to it is meant not only to effect changes in how families and schools interact, but also to effect changes in how all the participants think about family engagement with schools. In a nutshell, I insist on allowing the research to surprise us about family–school relations, certainly, but also to surprise us about ourselves: how we experience the world and how we think about it.

## References

- Abrams, L. S., & Taylor Gibbs, J. (2000). Planning for school change. *Urban Education, 35*(1), 79-103.
- Axelrod, P. (2005). Public money for private schools? Revisiting an old debate. *Education Canada, 45*(1), 17-19.
- Blackledge, A. (2001). Literacy, schooling, and ideology in a multilingual state. *Curriculum Journal, 12*(3), 291-312.
- Cooper, C. R., Chavira, G., & Mena, D. D. (2005). From pipelines to partnerships: A synthesis of research on how diverse families, schools, and communities support children's pathways through school. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 10*(4), 407-432.
- Kainz, K., & Aikens, N. L. (2007). Governing the family through education: A genealogy on the home/school relation. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 40*(4), 301-310.
- Klingner, J. K., Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E., Harry, B., Zion, S., Tate, W., Durán, G., & Riley, D. (2005). Addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education through culturally responsive educational systems. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 13*(38). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v13n38/>
- Lawson, M. A. (2003). School-family relations in context. *Urban Education, 38*(1), 77-133.
- McCaleb, S. P. (1994). *Building communities of learners: A collaboration among teachers, students, families, and community*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- McIntyre, E., Rosebery, A., & González, N. (Eds.). (2001). *Classroom diversity: Connecting curriculum to students' lives*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Books.
- Melnick, S. L., & Zeichner, K. M. (1998). Teacher education's responsibility to address diversity issues: Enhancing institutional capacity. *Theory into Practice, 37*(2), 88-95.
- Nieto, S. (2000). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. New York, NY: Longman.

- Peck, C. L., Sears, A., & Donaldson, S. (2008). Unreached and unreasonable: Curriculum standards and children's understanding of ethnic diversity in Canada. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 38(1), 63-92.
- Pon, G., Goldstein, T., & Schecter, S. R. (2003). Interrupted by silences: The contemporary education of Hong Kong-born Chinese Canadians. In R. Bayley & S. R. Schecter (Eds.), *Language socialization in bilingual and multilingual societies* (pp. 114-127). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Poplin, M., & Rivera, J. (2005). Merging social justice and accountability: Educating qualified and effective teachers. *Theory into Practice*, 44(1), 27-37.
- Ruiz, R. (1984). Orientations in language planning. *NABE Journal*, 8(2), 15-34.
- Schecter, S. R., & Cummins, J. (Eds.). (2003). *Multilingual education in practice: Using diversity as a resource*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Books.
- Settlement Workers in Schools. (2009). *The newcomers' guide to elementary school (Public School Board)*. Retrieved from [http://www.settlement.org/sys/library\\_detail.asp?k=EASS\\_EDGUIDE&doc\\_id=1004937](http://www.settlement.org/sys/library_detail.asp?k=EASS_EDGUIDE&doc_id=1004937)
- Sherr, D. (2006). "Value added"? *Teachers' investments in and orientations toward parent involvement in education* (Unpublished master's thesis). York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- Smits, H. (2008). Is a Canadian curriculum studies possible? (what are the conditions of possibility?): Some preliminary notes for further inquiry. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 6(2), 97-112.
- Villegas, A., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1), 20-32.
- Williams, A., & Gregory, E. (2001, October). Siblings bridging literacies in multilingual contexts. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 24(3), 248-265.

John Ippolito's research interests center on teacher education in contexts of linguistic and cultural diversity. This focus takes shape along three strands of inquiry. The first strand examines publicly funded educational practices for linguistically and culturally diverse students, families, and communities. The second strand explicates programmatic and conceptual possibilities for collaborative partnerships between school board-based and university-based educators. The third strand explores the interface of minority languages and mainstream, dominant language schools. Underpinning these three lines of inquiry is a motivating concern around the ethics of teacher education and teacher practices. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. John Ippolito, York University, Faculty of Education, Winters College 251, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, Ontario, M3J 1P3, Canada, or e-mail [jippolito@edu.yorku.ca](mailto:jippolito@edu.yorku.ca)

## Appendix. Questionario de Preguntas (Interview Questions)

1. Si usted asistió al “Programa de Aprendizaje en Casa y Escuela,” podría decirnos cuantas veces tuvo la oportunidad de participar en el? (How many times did you attend the *Learning in Schools and Homes* program last year?)
2. Son sus hijos alumnos es esta escuela? Si es así, participaron ellos junto a usted en el programa? (Did your children attend this school last year? If so, did they attend the program with you?)
3. Que le animo a usted a participar en este programa? (Why did you attend the program?)
4. Podría decirnos cual fue el propósito de este programa? (What did you think the purpose of this program was?)
5. Tuvo la oportunidad de aprender algo nuevo en este programa? (Did you learn anything from the program?)
6. Piensa usted que este programa le ayudo a ver como se desarrolla la educación de sus hijos, y como se desenvuelve la escuela a que ellos asisten? (Did the program change anything about how you think about your children’s education or the school they attend?)
7. Piensa usted que la participación de los padres en el programa, pueda haber producido un efecto positivo entre ellos? (Did the program have any effect on your relationship with other parents in the school?)
8. Que piensa usted que se debería hacer o cambiar para mejorar el programa? (What could be done to improve the program?)
9. Desearía asistir a otras reuniones como estas posteriormente? Si o No? (Will you be attending the program this year? Why or why not?)
10. Hay algo mas que usted desearía agregar o preguntar? (Is there anything else we haven’t talked about that you would like to add?)



# Challenges Balancing Collaboration and Independence in Home–School Relationships: Analysis of Parents’ Perceptions in One District

*Carolyn L. Wanat*

## **Abstract**

Research has documented the important role that parental involvement plays in children’s learning. Yet, it can be challenging for schools to establish appropriate relationships with parents. Is there an optimal balance of collaborative and separate relationships between parents and schools? Twenty parents in one K-12 public school district in the U.S. participated in semi-structured interviews to share their perceptions of ways in which their children’s schools encouraged their involvement or created barriers that discouraged them from taking an active role through communication, volunteering, and other school-sponsored activities. Parents who had both positive and negative experiences with schools shared their opinions. This study is organized around themes from parents’ comments: types of involvement that parents found meaningful; ability of all parents to contribute to schools; parents’ involvement in decisions about student learning, curriculum, and classroom policies; and home–school relationships. Epstein’s (2001) six types of parental involvement and the theories of social networking and influence provide a framework to explain the different experiences of parents who were satisfied and those who were dissatisfied. Satisfied parents’ involvement focused on school activities and policy decisions, and they tended to have networks that led to greater influence of school practices, while parents who were dissatisfied with home–school communications valued involvement with their children at home. Implications for greater involvement of parents is discussed.

Key Words: parental involvement, home–school relationships, communication, social, influence, parents, networking, collaboration, schools, perceptions

## Introduction

Parents' collaborative relationships with schools have a positive impact on academic achievement. Extensive research has documented parents' critical role in children's school success (Epstein, 2001; Henderson, 1987; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Establishing relationships between families and schools is an ambiguous process. Lightfoot (1978) labeled parents and teachers as "worlds apart" because they had different, often conflicting feelings and responsibilities for children. Ogawa (1996) noted that schools "bridge and buffer" themselves from "uncertainties that parents might introduce" (p. 3). Yet, Comer (1980) advocated for parental involvement in decision-making and advisory roles to bring parents and teachers together. Epstein (1990) described interactive relationships between home, school, and community as having "overlapping spheres of influence" (p. 100) on children. Other researchers have identified challenges establishing collaborative home–school relationships, among them parents' balancing work lives and school involvement (Smrekar, 1996), teachers' sharing power with parents (Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997), and schools' overcoming bureaucratic structures that hinder collaboration (Henry, 1996). Educators acknowledge the importance of reconceptualizing home–school collaboration (Crowson, 2003) to recognize and include heterogeneous characteristics and abilities of parents (Goldring, 1990).

A qualitative discussion of parents' influence on other parents' involvement complements quantitative studies of parent groups (Griffith, 1998; Sheldon, 2002). Studies of parent–school partnerships that use parent groups as the unit of analysis show improved student attendance (Sheldon, 2007), greater parental involvement (Sheldon, 2005), and more parent participation on decision-making committees (Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004).

This paper describes parents' perspectives about their involvement in school-related activities and participation in policy decisions in one K-12 school district. The specific research question that guided this study was: Is there an optimal balance of collaborative and separate relationships between parents and schools? I defined an optimal balance as occurring when parents and school professionals respect one another's knowledge, identify areas for collaboration, and recognize their unique roles to help children. Due to different characteristics, talents, and areas needing improvement, optimal balance is dependent upon each school's circumstances. I was interested in discovering what parents perceived as incentives and barriers to their involvement. I interviewed parents,

conducted a focus group of Parent Teacher Association (PTA) officers, and observed activities that involved parents. In this paper, I describe types of parental involvement; parents' perceptions of their ability to contribute; participation in decisions about student learning, curriculum, and classroom policies; and home-school relationships. I conclude with a discussion of parents' relationships with one another that influenced involvement.

## Theoretical Framework

Three theories provided perspectives to explain parental involvement in this district: Epstein's (2001) framework of six types of involvement, social networking theory, and social influence theory.

Epstein's (2001) framework provides a structure to categorize specific ways parents were involved in school-related activities. Based on extensive research, Epstein's (2001) framework delineates six types of parental involvement. Type 1, parenting, focuses on an appropriate home environment for children to be successful students. Type 2, communicating, stresses effective school-home and home-school communications about school programs and children's progress. Type 3, volunteering, recruits and organizes parent volunteers at school. Type 4, learning at home, educates families to help children with homework and other curriculum-related activities. Type 5, decision making, encourages parents to participate in school decisions as parent leaders and representatives. Type 6, collaborating with the community, calls for integrating community resources and services to create stronger school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. All six types of involvement were present in this district, but parents varied in practicing them.

Social network theory explains relationships between parents and parent groups. Adults use social networks to secure benefits, or social capital, for children's upbringing (Coleman, 1987; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2001). Middle class parents typically relate as a collective unit to schools in contrast to working class and poor parents who are less likely to form social networks (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2000, 2003). In this district, active PTA members had well-defined social networks of middle class and working class parents. Apparently, class did not account exclusively for parents' decisions to be involved in PTA.

From social network theory, concepts of network density (McNamee & Miller, 2004) and structural holes (Burt, 2001) helped describe the structure and influence of parents' social networks. Network density exists when members have strong, multiple ties with other group members. Individuals in structural holes establish and actively maintain ties with individuals who do

not have ties with one another. Besides being connected to principals, teachers, and other parents, parents occupying structural holes were well connected in their neighborhoods, churches, and community organizations and used their connections to support schools.

Rashotte (2007) defines social influence as changing individuals' "thoughts, feelings, or behaviors as a result of interactions with other individuals or groups" (p. 4426). Individuals make real change in their feelings and behaviors after interacting with others viewed to be similar, desirable, or expert (Rashotte, 2007). Individuals are influenced by the majority. Two areas of social influence theory help describe parent leaders' influence in this district: minority influence (Nemeth & Kwan, 1987), and expectation states theory (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980).

Minority influence occurs when a subgroup tries to change the majority (Rashotte, 2007). Every member of a group can influence others, particularly if the minority group is consistent in its presentation to the majority (Rashotte, 2007). Minority groups often provide more creative thinking and better solutions to tasks (Nemeth & Kwan, 1987). Parents who networked were a subgroup that influenced school activities and policies. Principals and the superintendent responded more favorably to parents' suggestions for change when they spoke as a group. Active, well-organized building PTA organizations had greater influence than individual parents.

Expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1980) proposes that group members develop expectations about performance of all group members that guide and maintain group interaction. Logically, members for whom others hold high expectations will be most influential in group interactions (Rashotte, 2007). Influential parents were expected to express values and concerns of parent groups to school leaders.

## Design

This single-site case study (Yin, 2003) describes involvement of parents who had both positive and negative experiences with their children's schools. To explore parents' perspectives about how schools encouraged or discouraged involvement, I collected data in a district in which there existed both strong support and harsh criticism of the schools.

## Setting

Rolling Hills (pseudonym) was a white working class community. Diversity was by social class, specifically occupation and income. Working class parents were employed at the manufacturing plant in town, fast food restaurants, or as

service providers. Middle class parents commuted to professional positions in the nearest city or were plant managers.

Rolling Hills School District included one senior high, one middle school, and five elementary schools. The district supported parental involvement, having adopted the first policy in the state that advocated parents' representation on district and building committees. Committee guidelines stated, "Parents should be included on appropriate committees." Parents had representation on school improvement teams.

PTAs were active and well-organized. Building PTAs volunteered in classrooms and sponsored events to support schools, including open houses, carnivals, and game nights. Money earned from fundraising provided special classroom activities and field trips. The Citywide PTA Council, consisting of all building PTA officers, met monthly to plan district events, including Reading Is Fundamental days and Families on the Right Track month, and to establish partnerships with local businesses and community groups. Citywide PTA sponsored community-wide family events, including free Saturday movies and "make your own sundae" Sundays. Officers spent considerable time on PTA with several holding offices in state and national PTA.

In contrast to PTA, other residents failed to support schools. Rolling Hills had not passed a bond referendum in 30 years. Having launched an aggressive bond campaign, the district was reaching out to the community through brochures, telephone calls, public meetings, and building tours. Radio and television announcements encouraged voters to support bonds to renovate old facilities and to add classrooms to overcrowded buildings. Bonds passed by a narrow margin. Working class individuals felt schools were adequate. One factory worker expressed a common attitude. Attending a tour of high school classrooms scheduled for remodeling, he commented, "I went to school here. It was good enough for me. This is going to raise my taxes."

Two community groups were displeased with the district's curriculum. Members of a conservative church who had mounted an unsuccessful campaign to gain representation on the school board had enrolled their children in a religious school in a nearby community. Other parents homeschooled 65 children, a large number compared to other districts in the state. Speaking of these two groups of parents, one board of education member commented, "A certain contingency is strongly committed to being involved in educating their children, but have not found the public schools to be their first choice." Rolling Hills included supportive parents and others who felt no commitment. Given these different attitudes, I thought parents would express various perceptions about ways that schools encouraged and discouraged involvement.

## Methods

Data collection included interviews with parents and observations of building and district activities that exemplified parental involvement.

### Interview Participants

Parents participated in semistructured interviews about their perceptions of parental involvement in the district. Using purposive sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), I asked the superintendent and seven building principals to recommend parents for interviews. To get a district-wide perspective, I requested names of two parents from each school, totaling 14 parents, who would be comfortable expressing their views about parental involvement. I was successful in getting permission from 13 parents to interview them. These parents provided rich data about benefits of being involved in the schools. Because their experiences had been positive, they did not have comments about barriers to involvement. To get a balanced view, I requested a second list of parents, specifically asking principals to nominate parents who had made formal complaints or who had difficulty working with teachers. From the second list of 14 parents, I interviewed 7 individuals. While all 14 parents verbally agreed to be interviewed, 7 parents asked to have interviews rescheduled until the time for data collection had ended or did not keep appointments. Results reported here are based on interviews with 13 parents who had positive experiences and 7 parents whose experiences were negative.

### Interview Procedures

I interviewed parents at a time and place convenient for them. Some parents asked me to come to their homes, while others preferred meeting at the school, their place of work, or a fast food restaurant. Use of a semistructured interview guide ensured that interview data were comparable for analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Using open-ended questions, I asked parents to describe involvement in their children's schools and to identify ways Rolling Hills schools encouraged or discouraged them from becoming involved. I asked parents to discuss benefits to children from parents' involvement and to talk about situations in which parental involvement would be undesirable. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, ranging from 45 minutes to one hour and 45 minutes. Assured participation was voluntary and confidential, parents openly shared their perceptions. Interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy.

## Observation Procedures

To triangulate interview data with actual parental involvement practices (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), I observed seven events in Rolling Hills schools that included parents. Principals and parent interviewees recommended activities. I attended three elementary PTA meetings, a high school parents' meeting and building tour, a classroom open house, a district family science night, and a Citywide PTA Council meeting. Observational data made me aware of relationships between parents and teachers. Parents who had been nominated for interviews were active at several events and often had friends who were teachers in the district.

## Analysis Procedures

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After interviews were transcribed and observations were written up, I coded each piece of data line by line, developing codes from language participants used and from interview probes. Next, I compared codes across interviews and observations to collapse, expand, and refine codes (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Then I compared coding categories for parents with positive and negative experiences to note similarities and differences in perspectives. Results are based on major themes that emerged from this coding process.

## Limitations

The small number of interview participants and observations makes it impossible to generalize results beyond this district. However, the study's original intent to describe a balance of collaborative and separate relationships was achieved in hearing parents describe their satisfaction or frustration with involvement. Findings suggest areas of consideration to establish collaborative relationships in other settings.

Another limitation is potential for researcher bias that exists in qualitative research (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). As Eberly, Joshi, and Konzal (2007) point out, it is important for researchers to examine their own personal histories as they examine others' perspectives. I have been an educator, first a high school teacher and now a college professor, my entire career. I also come from a working class family of European American descent. As I interviewed participants, I found myself relating to working class parents who were frustrated and professional parents who were pleased with collaborations. I think my working class background and professional perspectives helped me establish rapport with participants and remain objective as I listened to their stories.

## The Parents

Interviewees included parents of varied backgrounds. This section provides an overview of participants' sociological characteristics, family backgrounds, involvement in schools, and children's school performance.

### Sociological Characteristics

All interviewees were White. Several parents were life-long residents who attended Rolling Hills schools. Participants' lack of racial diversity and experience outside the district reflects the community's stability. The 13 satisfied parents included one father and 12 mothers; the seven dissatisfied parents included one father and six mothers.

Social class of interview participants included a broad range of educational attainment and occupation. Both supportive and disgruntled parents included high school, college, and vocational levels of education. Of 13 satisfied parents, four had college degrees and nine had high school degrees. Of the nine high school graduates, five had vocational training. Three of the seven dissatisfied parents were college educated; the other four were not.

Parents were employed in working class and professional positions. Nine satisfied parents were working class; four were professionals. Nine satisfied parents worked outside the home. Working class occupations included manager of a fast food restaurant, barber, church secretary, factory worker, farmer, classroom aide, and office employee. Professionals among satisfied parents included a church youth director/teacher, two nurses, and a business owner. Two satisfied college-educated parents were staying home with young children. Four dissatisfied parents were working class; three were professionals. The three dissatisfied professional parents included the pastor of the conservative church, a nurse, and a human resources director who was staying home with four young children. Working class dissatisfied parents included a beautician and retail store employee. Two dissatisfied participants did not discuss employment but were described by the superintendent as "blue collar." Administrators identified three of seven professionals and four of 13 working class parents as having challenged the school.

### Family Background

Participants had family members who were teachers. Of 13 satisfied parents, five had parents and siblings who were teachers. The satisfied father had a brother who was a high school principal. Of seven dissatisfied parents, four had siblings who were teachers. Based on participants' comments, all parents with teachers in their families understood challenges their relatives faced, but

these relationships did not help dissatisfied parents understand teachers' lack of cooperation.

Participation of interviewees' parents in school activities (when those interviewed had been students) varied, but did not appear to affect satisfied parents' involvement. Both satisfied and dissatisfied parents had mothers who were active, while other participants in both groups reported that their mothers either could not be involved because they had to work or chose not to be involved. Satisfied parents included PTA officers: four currently were PTA presidents, and four were past presidents. All but one satisfied parent volunteered regularly. Of seven dissatisfied parents, none were PTA officers or active volunteers though three had volunteered in the past. Their frustrations with the schools had led them to quit volunteering. Twelve of 13 satisfied parents talked about working with other parents in PTA or other activities; two dissatisfied parents talked about working with other parents.

### **Participants' Children**

Interviewees had children at all three school levels: 14 had children in elementary schools, two in middle school, and four in high school. Satisfied parents included nine at the elementary level, one at middle school, and three at high school. Five dissatisfied parents had elementary-aged children, one a middle school child, and one a child in high school. Parents of older children shared stories of involvement at all grade levels.

Most parents talked about their children's school success. Only two satisfied parents had children with special needs, but four dissatisfied parents had children with special needs identified through testing. Satisfied parents thought the school had responded appropriately to help their children, while dissatisfied parents were frustrated with the schools' response. The remaining 14 participants stated that their children did well or excelled in school.

## **Results**

Data are organized by general themes from the interviews. Parents described types of involvement in school activities and the ability of all parents to contribute. Participants thought parents should be involved in decisions about student learning, curriculum, and policies that affected classroom visits. Relationships with teachers and principals encouraged parents' involvement or sent the message that they were not welcome.

### **Types of Parental Involvement**

Parents thought their involvement helped children, and participants wanted to know, in the words of participants, "what's going on" in the classroom.

Satisfied and dissatisfied parents disagreed on meaningful involvement. Satisfied parents described meaningful involvement as occurring at school; dissatisfied parents valued involvement with children at home.

Satisfied parents thought involvement meant volunteering at school and in PTA. They welcomed opportunities to volunteer. PTA officers said involvement gave them a “sense of worth.” Being at school allowed them to observe children’s social relationships and, if needed, an opportunity to request additional assistance. Working parents, including an office manager and her husband who worked nights, arranged their schedules so they could volunteer on lunch breaks or eat with their children. Some parents felt “pressured” to do more. One PTA president-elect at an elementary school told the principal she was “very concerned that [she] was not volunteering more” even though she volunteered daily. She was a professional woman staying home with young children and spent several hours at the school each week.

Dissatisfied parents rarely volunteered, concentrating on involvement in their children’s lives outside of school. Home schedules centered on children’s sports, ballet lessons, church activities, and other community events. In fact, they thought that family time spent on children’s activities limited the amount of time parents could volunteer at school. One mother of three elementary children talked about balancing their schedules: “It’s not school. It’s everything. There are just so many different things pulling at people.” She thought her children’s participation outside of school enriched their educational experiences, which was important to her since she was not college educated and thought that teachers did not respect her because she lacked an education. Her feelings are particularly interesting since her sister was a teacher in another district, and the interviewee “saw both sides” of responsibilities of parents and teachers.

Dissatisfied parents whose children struggled academically spent considerable time and effort helping their children. They monitored school work daily. One working class mother who was not employed outside the home reinforced extra assistance her third-grade daughter received in resource room for reading. The mother would not allow her daughter to play after school until she had practiced spelling. This mother set a regular schedule:

We work on five words Monday, five words Tuesday, five words Wednesday, review Thursday, and hope on Friday we get 100%. We have to do the five words, we have to do this, and then we can play.

A widowed mother of a nine-year-old boy who received reading support set an even more demanding schedule. After she was home from her job managing a fast food restaurant, she helped her son with school work: “Every night is spent dealing with something with school...usually for about an hour and a half.”

As these examples show, involvement at home with school work usually meant working on practice and drill activities.

Parents who helped their children at home asked teachers for advice. They were frustrated when they felt their questions were not being heard. A nurse who worked night shift at the local hospital, a divorced mother of two elementary-aged daughters, asked her daughters' teachers for extra assistance, particularly for her daughter who had been in resource room. The mother described the frustration of dissatisfied parents:

It boils down to brass tacks—your kids and you. If my kids have trouble, I'm there. If they don't, I back off. They don't like my nose being stuck in the classroom door, and maybe that's part of it. Maybe they know if they do better, Mom's not going to go in and talk to the teacher.

Her attitude was common among parents who felt that they got help only when teachers wanted them to stop complaining.

### **Parents' Ability to Contribute**

Asked if parental involvement always should be encouraged, all participants agreed that any parent could make positive contributions. Parents who did not volunteer talked about the value of helping children at home, and actively involved parents spoke emphatically about potential contributions uninformed parents could make. One elementary PTA president very forcefully claimed, "Everybody has something they can do. I truly believe that. There is something that everybody can contribute." Her comments were meaningful because as owner of the local McDonalds she hired many high school students and got to know their parents. She also was a regular guest speaker about careers at the high school. She thought that she had good opportunities to observe parents' strengths and limitations. Other participants agreed that all parents had unique talents and resources to share.

Despite their stated beliefs about including all parents, volunteers and PTA officers found it challenging to encourage uninformed parents to come to school. Involved parents thought many parents waited to be invited to participate. One PTA president elaborated on the importance of soliciting parents' help. One mother who was staying home with elementary-aged children had worked with parents formerly as a special education teacher. Looking at involvement from a parent's perspective, she recommended parents invite others to events:

Parents want the invitation. They want to maybe feel like they are being singled out to be specifically asked for something. If you say, "I think this would be really good for you to do." Then they think, "Gosh, you're probably right. I've got some worth."

All PTA presidents struggled to encourage involvement. One president at an elementary school in a higher income neighborhood thought that it was difficult to “find a specific thing that each person could do.” Other presidents also were frustrated in not soliciting greater involvement.

A mother, a business owner serving as PTA president in a lower income neighborhood, attributed parents’ reluctance to volunteer to community values, attitudes, and lack of confidence. She stated, “It’s a blue collar community here and people don’t give themselves an outlet to grow. They have such a small scope of what they see that it affects how much they think they can do.” She said teachers reinforced working class parents’ limitations:

Even a teacher, being in a teaching situation is seeing through their own little tunnel. They are seeing these classroom kids in situations that maybe are getting out of control. They wonder, “Don’t their parents make them do anything, be responsible for their actions?” After a while, both sides can only see their own situation. That’s why people should be a lot more open to exploring other things than just what makes them feel comfortable. When that happens, they fail to see where other people are coming from.

Parents who were not active in PTA did not agree that all parents’ input was welcome. Many non-members felt decisions about how parents could be involved were made by a few active PTA members. One father who was a member of a district committee described this perception, saying he came away from meetings feeling he had little opportunity to contribute:

What has happened in this district is that basically the same people all the time make the decisions. There has not been any purposeful reaching out to get input from people who would have some very significant input for the school.

His comments are particularly interesting considering his experiences with the district. He had served as a member of the board of education, had been one of the few fathers to hold office in an elementary PTA, and was now on the Citywide PTA. Yet, he recognized lack of initiative to reach out to all parents. Several participants echoed his feeling that all parents’ participation was not equally welcome. One particularly frustrated mother labeled PTA “exclusionary” and “political.” She thought other parents did not respect her because she was not college educated. Having dropped out of PTA, she expressed her complaints about the school at board of education meetings. Other parents simply dropped out of participating.

An exception occurred in two low income elementary schools where active parents welcomed input from everyone. One volunteer expressed the attitude

of the principal and volunteers in the lowest income school that parents who needed assistance with parenting skills and personal issues would benefit from involvement. She commented, "It might help bridge things a little bit if people knew that there was a place to go without somebody pigeon-holing them into a certain group." This mother might have been pigeon-holed if one simply looked at her background. Both she and her husband worked on the production line at the local factory. She worked the night shift and slept in the day while her two children were at school. Yet she helped run the school store with the guidance counselor and assisted both of her children's teachers. Despite her lack of a college education, low paying job, and initially "being leery" of being involved in the school, she was "one of the best volunteers," in the principal's words.

Another mother who volunteered at another low income elementary school, while having a higher income level than the previous mother, agreed that all parents should be encouraged. She worked in an office while her husband worked at the factory. She thought communication would result in more parent participation:

It's the interaction of finding that balance between home and school and seeing that you can mesh. There are different ways to do that. Sometimes you have to be creative and try a little harder, but I always felt that what was important was to keep those communication lines open, regardless of what it is.

It is interesting that low income schools were welcoming of parents with few resources to contribute while PTA organizations in schools with higher socioeconomic status struggled to increase their membership and participation.

### **Involvement in Student Learning**

Parents of special needs children were most actively involved in children's learning. Two satisfied and four dissatisfied parents had special needs children. Satisfied parents volunteered in the school, but dissatisfied parents did not. Volunteers were more satisfied than inactive parents with schools' responses to special needs and willingness to communicate with parents. One PTA president in a low income school was the mother of two children with speech and language problems. She praised testing and extra assistance her children received. She was well versed in specific strategies teachers used with her children, particularly her eight-year-old son. When she was in the building to volunteer, she asked teachers about her children's progress. Like other satisfied parents, she had established communications to monitor her children's progress.

Parents of special needs children who did not volunteer talked about creating a "personal curriculum" to "make up deficits" in student learning. All four

inactive parents of special needs children provided extra instruction and drilled children on assignments at home. Many parents got materials from their children's teachers or from the public library to supplement classroom materials. Some parents thought teachers were uncooperative in recommending materials. The single mother who was a night nurse had made repeated requests for ways to help her daughter. This nurse expressed frustration:

If I don't have a resource to go to, how am I supposed to help? You know, as a parent, we need to help. And if we don't have the resources to go to, we're left in the cold. If she's not getting it at school and she needs more help, and I go to the teacher and can't get anything from her, I feel like my hands are tied.

This mother's experience was typical of parents who were not in the school on a regular basis based on comments of all seven dissatisfied parents.

### **Involvement in Curriculum**

Parent representatives sat on curriculum and textbook adoption committees, but participants disagreed on how they should contribute. Otherwise involved parents were uncertain about their role in curriculum decisions. A mother who was an elementary PTA president and volunteer for high school business classes responded "Absolutely!" when asked if parents should have a voice in curriculum. When asked how, she almost shouted, "I haven't a clue!" Her answer alludes to the attitude of satisfied parents about being involved in the school's curriculum. While they felt that parental involvement was important, they thought the school should set limits to involvement in curriculum. One mother who had volunteered at her children's elementary, middle, and high schools suggested using what she called "expert parents," or parents who were teachers, to give input on curriculum. By volunteering, she had become acquainted with what she called expert parents. Other parents were happy to let teachers make curriculum decisions because "it's what we pay them for." Interestingly, this blue collar mother who had served a term on the board of education couched teachers' responsibility for curriculum in terms of salary.

Parents who were happy with the curriculum thought that parental involvement should be limited to receiving information and being able to ask questions. Parent representatives on committees served as communication liaisons who explained how curriculum decisions were made. Describing parent representatives as "conduit[s] to the outside," one mother with children in elementary, middle, and high school observed that:

The buzzing always exists, and if a person who's on this committee is out there in proximity to the buzzing, they can say, "I was there, and that's

not the way that happened.” Or, “I was there. Here is how this decision was arrived at.” Accurate information, you can’t beat it. There’s more benefit than liability to having parents involved.

This mother had been a PTA president at each of her children’s schools, volunteered for Camp Fire Girls, helped vocational teachers, and was well known in her neighborhood as being knowledgeable about the schools.

Despite participants’ willingness to let the school take the lead on curriculum decisions, parents were dissatisfied with their input in three situations: adopting new textbooks, including conservative parents’ values, and integrating PTA activities into the school day.

Recent adoption of new mathematics books had stirred controversy among parents and, according to interviewees, teachers. A textbook selection committee had spent months reviewing materials. According to several parents, after the committee made its recommendation, the curriculum director “sprung” a new textbook on them by announcing it would be adopted. Parents struggled to help children with assignments and complained to teachers about the books. Several participants said teachers had confided they did not like the books either but were afraid to complain. Participants felt that parents’ opinions had been ignored by the curriculum director.

Members of the conservative church in Rolling Hills were displeased with how the district received their input. For some time, members of the congregation had questioned the curriculum. In his interview, the pastor stated the school did not have a curriculum. He would not be more specific about what he meant by lack of curriculum. Feeling “disenfranchised” by the district, he said district administrators would convey an attitude that said, “Thank you for your input. Now leave us alone.” According to the pastor, three of seven principals were members of his congregation and had to “walk a tight rope” between their personal views and professional responsibilities. Growing numbers of the congregation were withdrawing their children from public school because they were displeased that their ideas were excluded from the curriculum.

Parents who did not attend the church thought all views needed to be represented but that no one particular philosophy should determine the curriculum. One mother, who had lived in Rolling Hills since childhood and watched the conservative church increase in membership, worried that “the ideologies of on the edge [conservative] parents” not dominate the curriculum. Other participants spoke about the possibility of parents using the school’s curriculum to express church and personal agendas. A mother who had been a teacher and now stayed home with her children gave an example she had observed while volunteering at her son’s elementary school. She thought that a substitute teacher had attempted to integrate the church agenda into the curriculum.

A member of the conservative church, the long-term substitute had taught material that was not part of the curriculum, including a lesson in which she claimed that dinosaurs had not existed. Another mother of two elementary-aged children, who was also youth director at another church in Rolling Hills, agreed that too much parental involvement could lead to an unbalanced curriculum that reflected views of special groups. Speaking of the desired curriculum of the conservative church, she noted: "They would want a curriculum that is pro-creation, anti-abortion. As you get older, no sex education, no cultural diversity type of thing. You have other people who would probably want to push too much the other way." She added:

Parents should know what is being taught in their child's class, but they can teach a lot at home if they don't necessarily agree 100% with the school's point of view. I'm not sure school is the place where we should fight the battle for our own personal beliefs.

She and her husband, the pastor of their church, had talked about maintaining a balance between conservative and liberal views, such as those in their church's more liberal philosophy.

A different perspective on involvement in curriculum dealt with PTA's national curriculum. PTA officers were dissatisfied if their materials were not welcome in the school. The national organization provided materials to enrich school offerings, in the opinion of local officers. Yet PTA curriculum usually was provided in evening meetings. Building PTAs presented programs about parent education, health care, and academic achievement. These meetings were poorly attended with only active PTA members, often teachers in the district, present. At one PTA meeting I observed, a dentist talked about dental health to an audience of 12 parents.

Occasionally, PTA requested class time to offer lessons; principals did not always welcome these requests. One past PTA president described a conflict between the current president and principal. The PTA leader had volunteered in the school but did not have the close relationship with the principal that the previous president had enjoyed. PTA had a handwashing curriculum for elementary students. The president asked permission to teach the lessons during school, but the principal did not want to take time away from regular instruction. Eventually, the principal gave PTA time to teach the lessons. This example illustrates how challenging it may be to involve parents in curriculum.

### **Classroom Visitation Policies**

Parents criticized policies that restricted classroom visitations. Of particular concern was one school's notification policy. Required to contact teachers 24

hours before visiting, parents felt they were unable to observe what typically happened in a classroom. In another school, parents were not allowed to visit classrooms during the first week of school. One mother who experienced conflict with her daughter's teacher the previous year criticized the policy because she wanted to see how her child was adjusting to the new teacher. Interviewees expressed a feeling that both schools were trying to hide something.

Some parents agreed that restricting parent visits was necessary. One parent commented that teachers' duties made it difficult to talk with parents unless visits were scheduled:

A parent stops by the classroom right at the end of the school day, and the teacher's saying, "Yes, Bobby. See you tomorrow, Bobby." The parent is saying, "I need to talk to you about..." But the teacher's going through her ritual of sending the kids off the way they need to be sent off. But the parent feels like they're not communicating. The parent may be on the way to work and only has limited time. The parent really wants to know something, and it just doesn't work because the teacher only has so much time.

This parent who worked the night shift at the factory herself had limited time to talk with the teacher. As these examples suggest, parents were interested in school policies that affected their involvement with their children's teachers and classrooms.

### **Parent–Teacher Relationships**

Participants thought that parents and teachers should have equitable relationships. Whether or not they were satisfied with communications with teachers, participants had strong opinions about how to create equitable roles. They felt that it was important for teachers and parents to agree on how to work together. One parent summarized both satisfied and dissatisfied parents' perceptions that equitable relationships put teachers and parents "on the same page."

Most parents thought that parents and teachers should maintain separate, complimentary roles. Both satisfied and dissatisfied parents thought that teachers were trained to make decisions about what was best for children, and parents could offer input to help teachers decide. The working class mother who was past PTA president and former member of the board of education best expressed the attitude of parents about the collaborative role of teachers and parents:

I want those who are trained professionals to actually determine what's going to work. That's what we pay them for, to teach our children. I want

the parents in there learning what's going on and absorbing information, but I want professionals to make the final determination.

Her comments echo her previous comment that teachers are paid for their expertise. Other participants agreed that if teachers and parents did "their job," children would learn.

Participants thought teachers' attitudes could discourage parents from being involved. Both satisfied and dissatisfied participants described situations in which teachers gave parents the impression that their involvement was undesirable. Parents thought some teachers judged parents by education, occupation, or personal habits. A mother of three elementary school children was a beautician; however, she felt that her input was not valued because she did not have a college degree. When she expressed concerns to teachers, she observed that: "They [teachers] look at me and don't really come right out and say it, but hint around that 'You don't have an education and we do so we know really what's best.' I have a big problem with that."

Both satisfied and dissatisfied parents criticized teachers for making comments that judged parents' lifestyles. They thought teachers' casual remarks could convey the message that some parents were not "good parents." A mother, a PTA treasurer and volunteer at the highest poverty elementary school in the district, overheard a teacher make the comment that she did not want her child to "end up being a factory worker." Neither this woman nor her husband was poor, but she resented this comment that was made within hearing of parents who were employed at the local factory. The PTA president at this same school reported a similar incident. She overheard a teacher make a comment about a father who was visiting the school:

I heard a comment here when school started. It really bothered me, and it's probably because I'm a long ways from being mother of the year. I yell at my kids, you know. I'm not perfect by a long shot. One of the things that bothers me, I smoke. My husband smokes. I do have that nasty habit. When I was sitting in the hallway doing some stuff, selling memberships [to PTA], it was the night when the parents came in and the teachers told them what to expect for the year. One of the parents walked by, and I heard one of the teachers say, "Oh, he just reeks of cigarettes." I instantly saw red. I thought, "Why do you care? He's here."...I think that teachers sometimes think that way....The parents are judged like that. It was such a turnoff for me. It's like, but you got him here. You got him in this school, and it shouldn't matter if he's got dirt under his fingernails or what. He's here.

This participant's reaction is understandable considering her situation. She was the town's barber, and her husband worked at the factory. Their home was very small; her son slept on a rollaway bed in the living room. Despite their income level, this mother was respected by teachers and other parents in the district. Yet she heard teachers make derogatory comments about other parents whose challenges were similar to her own. Her story exemplifies the way teachers' comments may discourage parents from feeling welcome to collaborate with teachers.

Parents thought it was teachers' responsibility to maintain professional roles when collaborating with parents. Parents who were dissatisfied, particularly those with special needs children, thought that teachers failed to fulfill their responsibilities. If their children were having difficulties in school, parents felt that teachers did not want a collaborative relationship. One father met weekly with teachers to discuss his son's poor grades and behavior in middle school. The father was a widower, and his son had begun acting out after his mother's death. When his grades suffered, his father initiated weekly meetings with his son's teachers. He was frustrated that not distinguishing between teacher and parent roles was standing in the way of helping his son. He described one weekly meeting as an example:

At one meeting, we weren't clicking, or something wasn't going right. There were a lot of different opinions as to what are we going to do here. So I spoke up. I said, "Hey, just make sure the kid learns. I'll teach him how to succeed."

When parents thought teachers were not fulfilling professional responsibilities, they wanted more input into the teacher–parent relationship. One mother had asked to have her daughter tested for special placement for months. A first grader, her daughter was struggling with reading. While the mother was not college educated and was working class, she thought parents should be allowed to monitor teachers: "Parents should be able to go to school and sit in the background and observe what's going on." Other parents shared her feeling of helplessness when teachers did not respond to their requests.

### **PTA-Principal Relationships**

PTA officers and principals worked together on numerous projects in Rolling Hills. While these parents made positive comments about their relationship with principals, they worked together most successfully when they maintained separate roles. When PTA wanted to begin initiatives that might become regular activities, conflicts arose. Principals maintained the right to approve activities in their buildings. If a principal refused to permit PTA to begin

a new initiative, experienced PTA leaders would challenge the principal's decision. For example, elementary PTAs published monthly newsletters. When PTA asked permission to have newsletters, all but one principal agreed. Instead of accepting his refusal, the current and former PTA presidents sought the superintendent's approval. The superintendent overrode the principal's decision and recommended a compromise. Following the superintendent's advice, PTA officers and the principal agreed PTA could publish a newsletter after the principal approved articles. This arrangement worked, and the principal never vetoed an article. This situation is interesting considering that the former PTA president was the board of education member who remained active in this elementary PTA after her children no longer attended there. She used her relationship with the superintendent to override the principal's refusal.

Another example of disagreement between PTA officers and a principal happened on the middle school's Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) day, a PTA-funded activity at which all students received free books. RIF Day had been scheduled on the day an eighth grade computer project was due. Students were hurrying to complete their work and did not select books. When asked to reschedule the event, the principal refused, commenting, "They've had their opportunity." The PTA president wanted to compromise, saying, "I wish that maybe he had called me and said, 'Can we reschedule it for another time?'" However, she had never been active in PTA until she was asked to be the middle school president. She also had not been active in other community groups. College educated and outspoken, she thought she had been asked to serve as a "troubleshooter" but did not challenge the principal's decision.

A particularly contentious area was PTA fundraising. PTAs raised money to supplement school budgets. Willing to host some social events for teachers, the organization's mission was to contribute to the educational program. One PTA treasurer explained:

We've been taught in our leadership training from the beginning that we are not a fundraising organization. We are an advocacy organization, and we are there to help the kids. We would still be here if we had two cents in our treasury, and oftentimes I wish that's all we had. It might be easier.

This treasurer spoke with experience of having been PTA president of this elementary school attempting to overcome the perception that PTA's mission was fundraising. In two of five elementary schools, principals and teachers wanted to determine how funds were spent. One principal who had rejected a number of PTA's ideas for activities asked PTA to purchase televisions for classrooms. Teachers in another school asked PTA to buy a laminating machine to replace one they had purchased two years earlier. The treasurer "saw red" because

teachers had assured PTA that they wanted the original machine. PTA contributed to a new machine instead of supporting theater activities for students.

Parents' comments illustrate the challenges of maintaining collaborative relationships between parents, teachers, and principals. Parents' stories highlight the importance of two-way communication, defining parents' and teachers' responsibilities, and being open to new ideas.

## Discussion

Parents' perceptions illustrate Epstein's (2001) framework of six types of parental involvement. However, satisfied parents practiced different types of involvement than dissatisfied parents. Satisfied parents rarely spoke about their own children but commented on school activities and policies. The types of involvement they practiced required direct contact with the school. Satisfied parents communicated often with teachers about their children, volunteered regularly, served as representatives on committees, and collaborated on various programs. Dissatisfied parents concentrated on parenting and helping their children with learning activities at home. Dissatisfied parents did not volunteer in school or PTA activities. Several dissatisfied parents who paid PTA membership dues said they did not think their children would benefit from PTA involvement. It seems unusual that satisfied parents did not discuss their involvement with children at home given their commitment to involvement at school. The open-ended nature of interviews left parents free to talk about the types of involvement they chose. Perhaps satisfied parents' children did not need extra support for learning activities at home. This is a logical conclusion given that only two satisfied parents had special needs children, and these parents talked about monitoring their children's progress. Satisfied parents mentioned that their children did well in school, which gave parents time to engage in other activities.

The type of involvement parents practiced determined their satisfaction with how teachers responded to them. Parents of special needs children illustrate this point. Three of the four dissatisfied parents who had special needs children thought teachers were unwelcoming and not collaborative. Yet, two satisfied parents of special needs children found teachers collaborative and attentive to their children. Parents used two different approaches to ask teachers for help. Satisfied parents dropped by teachers' classrooms for progress reports about their children when they were in the building to volunteer. Dissatisfied parents came to school if they had a complaint. Without another purpose for being at school, they found teachers either unavailable or, in their opinions, unwilling to talk with them. Dissatisfied parents had not built relationships

with teachers through involvement. Teachers had an established role working with parent volunteers that was more comfortable for them than being placed in the role of responding to unhappy parents. These differences echo those noted by Lareau (2000, 2003).

Social network theory (Coleman, 1987; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2001) explains why parents with connections in the school and community had positive working relationships with school professionals. Satisfied parents were members of dense social networks with multiple ties to other parents. They built these networks through involvement in PTA, volunteering in classrooms, and being active in community organizations. Several active parents volunteered in more than one school. Eight were past or present PTA officers. Many satisfied parents were officers in church, theater, and community groups. Other parents had ties with managers of the local factory, chamber of commerce, and League of Women Voters. Perhaps the most connected parent was a former board of education member who volunteered at an elementary school where she was past PTA president, and also in the middle school and the senior high. She no longer had children in the elementary school but wanted to keep PTA “turned around” so the principal was not in control. She had worked for the bond referendum and defended closing an elementary school several years prior. She volunteered with Camp Fire Girls. As she exemplifies, satisfied parents’ connections gave them several possible avenues for communication. They occupied a structural hole (Burt, 2001) that gave them numerous ties in the school and the community.

Dissatisfied parents’ social networks did not include relationships with schools. None of them were active in PTA, calling it “too political” by “pushing its own policies.” They visited school only if they wanted to talk to teachers. Even though she worked nights, the dissatisfied nurse stopped by school to talk to teachers. She thought parents needed to “have their faces known” in case they wanted to complain. A stay at home mom said, “They don’t like my nose being stuck in the classroom door.” While these parents had not established positive relationships with teachers, most dissatisfied parents recognized that teachers were trying to help children.

Dissatisfied parents’ social networks included family members and neighbors rather than other parents they met at school. Ironically, four of seven dissatisfied parents had spouses or siblings who were teachers. Compared to 12 of 13 satisfied parents who talked about relationships with other parents, only 2 of 7 dissatisfied parents talked about other parents: Two dissatisfied parents were advising other parents whose children were having problems. No dissatisfied parents had regular communications with other parents in their children’s schools. As one mother stated, when they needed to ask someone’s opinion or

advice, they had “no recourse” because members of their social networks also did not have connections with the school. These differences in social networks reflect Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau’s (2003) findings.

Burt’s (2001) definition of structural holes explains the influence of parents with multiple connections in dense networks. Parents occupying structural holes were connected to individuals who did not have connections with one another. These parents held positions that put them in regular contact with others in more than one school and the community. One mother was uniquely suited to occupy a structural hole. An elementary PTA president, she also was the barber in town. She cut everyone’s hair including factory workers and professionals. Her success in helping a retired engineer become a tutor for elementary children exemplifies the influence of someone with connections in more than one place. Occupants of structural holes, they also were called upon to influence school decision making, as explained in expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1980).

Some parents in dense social networks were more successful than others in having a collaborative relationships with schools. Social influence theory, particularly minority influence (Rashotte, 2007), explains why some parents were better able to articulate beliefs of groups they represented. PTA influenced school decisions, while the conservative church failed to be influential despite members’ dense social network. One dissatisfied church member exemplifies lack of influence. Her children attended the religious school where she led the founding of a parents’ group. When her children attended Rolling Hills, she was frustrated because she could not persuade the district to listen to her opinions about curriculum. Disregard for her potential to contribute is in sharp contrast to respect accorded the involvement of the parent/youth director at another church. The youth director more closely represented district and community values.

PTA’s strong leaders were able to influence district practices and policy decisions. According to expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1980), PTA leaders were expected to express known opinions of the organization. Spokespersons had been active in PTA for years and had built strong networks with educators in the district. Teachers and administrators reflected and were influenced by their opinions. The influence of PTA leaders is evident in the example of the superintendent overriding the principal’s denial to establish a newsletter.

Social network theory helped to explain challenges to maintaining an optimal balance of collaborative yet separate home–school relationships in this district. As Lareau (2000, 2003) found, parents with social networks most like those of school professionals (and in some cases including school professionals) were productive, collegial, yet respectful of both parents’ and teachers’

autonomy. Parents who were not in parents' social networks, even if family members were teachers, felt teachers did not respect them, value their opinions and concerns about their children, or welcome requests for assistance. Parents who shared teachers' characteristics were happy with the cooperative relationship they had with teachers. Parents whose background and experiences were different from teachers felt isolated and frustrated. The answer to my original question, "Is there an optimal balance of collaborative and separate relationships between parents and schools in this district?" varied by parents' overall satisfaction with how they were treated.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study suggests schools could be more welcoming to all parents. Participants wanted collaborative relationships with teachers and had specific ideas about strategies schools could use to create parental involvement that would help parents support their children.

Participants agreed that teachers needed to be trained to communicate with parents. They thought that teachers should have a positive attitude about children and treat each parent as if his or her child was special. One mother had experienced the importance of positive communication as a former special education teacher. At a parent-teacher conference, she was surprised that a mother broke down in tears. The mother was crying because no teacher had ever said anything nice about her son. Another mother was hurt when it was explained that her daughter had not been tested for special placement because, "She's not top priority," meaning that her reading problems were not as severe as those of other children who needed to be tested. The mother responded, "But she's mine!" These comments exemplify the importance of schools creating collaborations that respect parents from all educational and class backgrounds, as noted by Henderson and Mapp (2002). Principals could establish relationships by connecting parents of academically successful children with parents whose children have difficulty so parents could support one another. This approach would build parents' social connections (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and give parents without social networks more personal resources.

Participants wanted changes in content and timing of communications about children's academic progress to include frequent, specific information. One mother suggested that progress reports be "broken down into smaller chunks" to help parents understand their children's progress. Parents wanted immediate feedback and were frustrated if they did not learn about problems until conferences. They thought they might have helped their children if they had known about problems when they occurred. This suggestion supports

Dearing, Kreider, and Weiss's (2008) findings about long-term benefits of family involvement. Henderson and Mapp (2002) concur, noting continuity in home–family involvement over time helps children succeed.

Parents' recommendations are useful to identify specific methods schools could use to communicate more effectively with parents. Participants valued and desired informal, personal conversation about their children. School leaders and teachers could create regular, advertised opportunities for parents to meet informally with teachers. Classroom teachers could hold "open houses" on a specific evening once a month. Parents could see work their children had completed and ask questions. These meetings would be in addition to parent–teacher conferences because they would be voluntary. Principals could hold office hours in the evening on a weekly basis so that parents could drop by to visit. Superintendents and principals could lead these initiatives by working with teachers' unions to modify the calendar to permit the personalized communication that parents want. Administrators' creating informal gatherings would support Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies's (2007) emphasis on leadership as key to family–school partnerships.

While these meetings would be relatively unstructured, topics that parents would value include information about children's academic progress and social behavior. Parents seek strategies they can use at home to supplement classroom lessons. Teachers could give parents tips about how to help with spelling, reading, math problems, or any other challenging topics for children. They could advertise special topics for specific open houses to encourage parents to attend. Rather than take more time, teachers would find they were spending less time answering parents' individual questions. They would be talking with parents in less stressful situations than is the case if parents come to school when they are upset. Obviously, there are topics about individual children that should be handled privately. This recommendation is in keeping with Henderson and Mapp's (2002) recommendation that programs "address specific parent and community needs" (p. 43).

Personal communication with parents is critical to resolve actual or potential conflict with unhappy parents. In this study, parents of special needs children were upset by lack of information about children's progress. Schools must be proactive in establishing regular communication with parents whose children struggle academically. Most complaints in this study came from parents of special needs children who felt they had not been informed or given suggestions to help until it was too late. While it is well known that parents can feel intimidated by the IEP process, these parents suggest they are comfortable talking one-on-one with teachers. Informal conversations could help parents understand and participate in children's formal IEP meetings. Principals may aid

in creating a process for teachers and parents to collaborate in helping special needs children. Everyone would benefit if parents were taught to appropriately advocate for their children, consistent with Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies's (2007) recommendation.

School professionals are advised to rethink specific strategies to involve parents at schools. While valuable, volunteering at school was practiced by a small group of parents who were not representative of this working class community. Yet, research shows (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008) that involvement at home is critical to help children be academically successful. In this study, PTA officers and school professionals continued to make frustrated attempts to involve all parents in volunteering rather than recognizing the value of home involvement. Uninvolved parents shared the frustration, and both sides felt helpless to improve the situation. Opening lines of communication would result in new, creative ways to make parents feel more welcome and to provide them an opportunity to contribute to their children's school experience. Schools might consider having parents engage in action research projects with children and keep journals with teachers. They also could assign parents a "buddy" to consult for support and advice.

Schools are encouraged to think of creative ways to involve parents. Schools could work with other community groups to tap into unique talents and interests of parents and children beyond the school curricular and co-curricular programs. All parents have something to offer. Schools must value and discover talents that are unique to the parents it serves to create successful home-school collaboration.

## References

- Berger, J., Rosenholtz, S. J., & Zelditch, M., Jr. (1980). Status organizing processes. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 6, 479-508.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Burt, R. S. (2001). Structural holes versus network closure as social capital. In N. Lin, K. Cook, & R. S. Burt (Eds.), *Social capital: Theory and research* (pp. 31-56). Boulder, CO: NetLibrary.
- Coleman, J. S. (1987). Families and schools. *Educational Researcher*, 16(6), 32-38.
- Comer, J. (1980). *School power*. New York, NY: University Press.
- Crowson, R. L. (2003). *School-community relations, under reform* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Berkeley, CA: McCutchan.
- Dearing, E., Kreider, H., & Weiss, H. B. (2008). Increased family involvement in school predicts improved child-teacher relationships and feeling about school for low-income children. *Marriage and Family Review*, 43(3/4), 226-254.

- Eberly, J. L., Joshi, A., & Konzal, J. (2007). Communicating with families across cultures: An investigation of teacher perceptions and practices. *School Community Journal*, 17(2), 7-26.
- Epstein, J. L. (1990). School and family connections: Theory, research, and applications for integrating sociologies of education and family. In D. G. Unger & M. B. Sussman (Eds.), *Families in community settings: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 99-126). New York, NY: Haworth Press.
- Epstein, J. L. (2001). School, family, and community partnerships—Caring for the children we share. In J. L. Epstein (Ed.), *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools* (pp. 403-426). Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Glaser, B. J., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Goldring, E. B. (1990). Principals' relationships with parents: The homogeneity versus the social class of the parent clientele. *Urban Review*, 22(1), 1-15.
- Griffith, J. (1998). The relation of school structure and school environment to parent involvement in elementary schools. *Elementary School Journal*, 99(1), 53-80.
- Henderson, A. (1987). *The evidence continues to grow: Parent involvement improves student achievement*. Columbia, MD: National Committee for Citizens in Education.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Henderson, A. T., Mapp, K. L., Johnson, V. R., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Henry, M. (1996). *Parent-school collaboration: Feminist organizational structures and school leadership*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Horvat, E., Weininger, E. B., & Lareau, A. (2003). From social ties to social capital: Class differences in the relations between schools and parent networks. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(2), 319-351.
- Lareau, A. (2000). *Home advantage: Social class and parental intervention in elementary education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lawson, H., & Briar-Lawson, K. (1997). *Connecting the dots: Progress toward the integration of school reform, school-linked services, parent involvement, and community schools*. Oxford, OH: The Danforth Foundation & the Institute for Educational Renewal at Miami University.
- Lightfoot, S. L. (1978). *Worlds apart: Relationships between families and schools*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McNamee, S. J., & Miller, R. K. (2004). *The meritocracy myth*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nemeth, C. J., & Kwan, J. L. (1987). Minority influence, divergent thinking, and the detection of correction solutions. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 17, 788-799.
- Ogawa, R. T. (1996). Bridging and buffering relations between parents and schools. *UCEA Review*, XXXVII(2), 2-3, 12.
- Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 1-24.

- Putnam, R. D. (2001). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Rashotte, L. (2007). Social influence. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *The Blackwell encyclopedia of sociology, Vol. IX* (pp. 4426-4429). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Sheldon, S. B. (2002). Parents' social networks and beliefs as predictors of parent involvement. *The Elementary School Journal, 102*(4), 301-316.
- Sheldon, S. B. (2005). Testing a structural equation model of partnership program implementation and parent involvement. *The Elementary School Journal, 106*(2), 171-187.
- Sheldon, S. B. (2007). Improving school attendance with school, family, and community partnerships. *The Journal of Educational Research, 100*(5), 267-275.
- Sheldon, S. B., & Van Voorhis, F. L. (2004). Partnership programs in U.S. schools: Their development and relationship to family involvement outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 15*(2), 125-148.
- Smrekar, C. (1996). *The impact of school choice and community: In the interest of families and schools*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Taylor, S. J., & Bogdan, R. (1998). *Introduction to qualitative research methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Carolyn L. Wanat is an associate professor of educational administration in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership Studies at the University of Iowa. Her research focuses on home-school relationships, school leader preparation, and qualitative research methods. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Carolyn L. Wanat, N442 Lindquist Center, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242, or e-mail [carolyn-wanat@uiowa.edu](mailto:carolyn-wanat@uiowa.edu)

# **A Multisite Program Evaluation of Families and Schools Together (FAST): Continued Evidence of a Successful Multifamily Community-Based Prevention Program**

*Mary Crozier, Laurie Rokutani, Jill L. Russett, Emilie Godwin, and George E. Banks*

## **Abstract**

Strong school and family ties have long shown success in influencing positive child development and lasting academic success. While a multitude of programs exist to help facilitate the school–family connection, one program in particular, Families and Schools Together, or FAST, stands out as an effective prevention program that is suitable for a number of diverse populations. This article adds to the growing body of literature on the effectiveness of FAST. This study of the implementation and evaluation of the Kids FAST and FAST-WORKS programs over multiple years in a large metropolitan area of Virginia was conducted using existing data collected from individual program sites over the course of 35 months (Spring 2005 to Winter 2007), analyzed in aggregate using quantitative methods as prescribed in the FAST evaluation protocol. Few FAST program site results are analyzed in aggregate, even though this method is encouraged by the FAST developers. Thus, previous evaluation of individual program sites yielded mixed results. Analyzed in aggregate, families graduating from multiple sites of FAST programs were shown to make significant gains on most measures. These results indicate positive outcomes and can provide insight for program improvements as well as support for continuing to use the FAST program in the Virginia Beach City Public Schools and in similar sites. Limitations of this study and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Key Words: Families and Schools Together, FAST, family, systems, theory, prevention, community partnerships, evaluations, collaboration, evaluations, parents, education, programs, risks, social capital, quantitative, aggregate

## Introduction and Background

Developed in 1988 by Dr. Lynn McDonald, the FAST program was designed as a preventive program for at-risk children aimed at improving family functioning, thereby strengthening child resiliency. Today, FAST is offered to both intervention and prevention populations with its blend of “family therapy principles, delinquency and substance abuse prevention strategies, psychiatric techniques, family systems theory, and group dynamics” (Sass, 1999, p. 2). As a universal prevention program that targets the family and school domains, FAST uses developmentally sound approaches to help bolster family functioning and reduce risk factors such as school failure, violence, delinquency, substance abuse, and family stress (Terrion, 2006). Fast is a multisession group for families of elementary school children to increase parental skills and family well-being with the objective of preventing risks (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2008). FAST has been credited with meeting the needs of all socioeconomic, racial, or geographical groups making it a successful universal program (FAST, n.d. a). In addition, different FAST curricula have been developed to meet the needs of specific target populations including: Baby FAST, Pre-K FAST, Kids FAST, Middle School FAST, and Teen FAST.

As a parent education process, FAST consists of numerous components and activities designed through the logic model to meet its ambitious goals. The components, which add rigor and effectiveness, include the selection procedure, structured group education and activities for multiple families, assessments, and follow up via FASTWORKS. The primary program goals are to enhance family functioning, prevent school failure, prevent substance abuse in parents and children, and reduce stress in parents and children (FAST, n.d. b; McDonald & Ziege, 2003). McDonald understood that resilient families with skillful communication strategies and social support were less vulnerable to risk factors such as school failure, substance abuse, delinquency, and violence (FAST, n.d. a). Research by Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller (1992) supports the premise of FAST. It has been demonstrated that by increasing protective factors, such as family management practices, parent to child and parent to parent bonding, connections with community agencies, and commitment to school, behaviors in children such as substance abuse and school underachievement or dropout can be mitigated (FAST, n.d. b). A qualitative review of FAST

identified three key variables which build social capital in FAST families thereby enhancing protective factors in children: bonding among family members and between the family and school, bridging between FAST parents and social agencies, and bonding as seen in increased family empowerment and cohesion (Terrion, 2006).

FAST also aligns with other traditional parent education models. Research on effective parent education programs supports the inclusion of parents and children (Redding, 2001 as cited in DiCamillo, 2001). FAST achieves this inclusion by offering focused interactive activities led by school and agency collaborators to address social, academic, developmental, and health topics (DiCamillo, 2001). Additionally, FAST uses change strategies from the community development and therapeutic family intervention literature to promote growth in participants (McDonald et al., 1997). Currently, FAST has a strong rating as an effective prevention program under the SAMHSA Center for Substance Abuse Prevention's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices. According to this registry, FAST received a score of 3.7 out of 4.0 on the Quality of Research ratings and an overall rating of 4.0 (on a 0.0-4.0 scale) for Readiness for Dissemination (SAMHSA, 2009). FAST has been replicated in 38 states in both urban and rural settings and in over 600 school communities of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic status (Kratochwill, McDonald, Levin, Bear-Tibbetts, & Demaray, 2004).

Literature detailing the program structure, operational framework, and real-world implications for the FAST program is in abundance (FAST, n.d. b; FAST, n.d. c; McDonald et al., 2006). In addition, a number of empirical studies have investigated outcomes for the implementation of FAST programs within individual schools. However, despite encouragement by FAST developers to analyze program effectiveness across program sites in aggregate, literature to date has continued to focus on independent school programs and has yielded mixed results. In order to evaluate efficacy across the multiple schools contained within a program site, the Virginia Beach (VB) FAST program has been analyzed in aggregate, and results are presented herein.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The foundational theories upon which FAST is based include family stress and prevention theory and incorporate multifamily group models that promote family interaction as a preventive tool. However, while multifamily group psycho-educational models have long been a practiced prevention technique, FAST's incorporation of the school into the family process has shown profound results for children in both home and school environments. Empirical

evaluations of worldwide FAST implementation have consistently shown a 20 percent improvement in child behavior and functioning at home as well as in school (Coote, 2000). As such, FAST has effectively drawn from family systems theory which argues an inseparable overlap of distinct environments and provides an answer to the call for successful family–school collaboration models, particularly for at-risk children.

Family systems theory evolved in the social sciences from general systems theory in the general sciences wherein systems were explained to be interrelated components of a cohesive whole as opposed to independent self-regulating parts (Dowling & Osborne, 2003). The foundation of the theory understands relationships to be interrelated and interactive as opposed to consisting of linear cause and effect occurrences. Families, then, are conceived of as units in which all personal interactions both within and outside of the family work together as moderating influences on behavior and thinking. The inception of systemic thinking in psychology shifted assessment of families away from distinct interacting individuals toward a holistic view of the family unit in which all environments encompassing the family are considered to be influential. For school-aged children in the family, this systemic analysis called for the incorporation of the school environment and school-based behaviors and attitudes into the overall understanding of the family. Moreover, child behavior in the home could no longer be viewed as distinct from behavior in school.

As an evolving understanding of families as systems emerged, so too did an increasing awareness in education that parent involvement in schools increases the likelihood of student success. The connection between parent involvement and student achievement is now well established (Dunst, 2002; Griffith, 2000; McWilliam, Maxwell, & Sloper, 1999; Parent Involvement Task Force, 1999), and it illustrates the need for school programs that facilitate relationships between the schools and students' families. Moreover, Epstein (1995) outlines multiple benefits to increasing family–school collaboration, including “improving school programs and school climate, providing family services and support, increasing parents' skills and leadership, connecting families with others in the school and in the community, and helping teachers with their work” (p. 701).

Despite the clearly illustrated benefits to improving parental involvement in education, there remain many challenges to the implementation of programs that facilitate this in practice. A primary challenge to programs that facilitate collaboration between families and schools is the historically held beliefs of many educational institutions which assert that organizational separation facilitates stronger learning environments (Unger & Sussman, 1990). This view of separateness includes a need for distinct goals and standards for families and

schools. An entrenched component of this educational model is that interaction between families and schools is only facilitated by the school when there is significant trouble. However, when families enter a school environment for the first time in response to a crisis, they are often operating from a position of defensiveness as opposed to collaboration (Griffith, 2000). As a result, the relationship between parents and school personnel can become adversarial with disparate agendas, thereby reducing the likelihood that students will benefit from cohesive objectives and unified support.

An additional obstacle to effective school–family partnership is the failure of many schools to effectively invite marginalized families to participate in collaborative efforts. Research illustrates that affluent communities typically have more positive parental involvement than schools in economically depressed communities, unless the school has specific programs in place to encourage collaborative efforts (Epstein, 1995). Although schools may expect and encourage parental involvement, often parents in lower socioeconomic groups are only contacted as the result of student behavioral or academic problems. Further, the expectation of families to operate in a value system that may differ from their own can belie efforts at effective collaborative dialogue.

The challenge of increasing family involvement in the schools is underscored by a need for understanding the goals of this collaboration. Christensen and Sheridan (2001) recommend that schools implementing collaborative programs must work toward four specific objectives in order to achieve a positive outcome for the school and the families involved. First, collaborative efforts must be student centered and focused on shared school–family goals of improving student academic, social, behavioral, and emotional skills. Next, rather than ascribing specific roles for families and schools, there should be a shared focus on both education and positive socialization. Additionally, collaborative interactions should be designed to enhance an optimum relationship between the family members and school personnel. Finally, approaches should be preventative in nature and focused on solutions to promote student learning and overall development. These objectives should be met for all students, and a focus on improving historically poor relationships between schools and marginalized families must be forefront on the school’s partnership agenda (Christensen, 2004).

The FAST program’s holistic, ecological view of the family and school as interrelated components of a larger system allows for comprehensive integration of the family–school partnership model into an educational setting. This program embraces the idea that collaborative efforts are an essential component of widespread academic success for all students by addressing historical challenges to partnership (FAST, 1998). First, the FAST philosophy rejects the theory of

success in education as being dependent upon a strong, independent educational institution. Moreover, the program welcomes families who may have traditionally been called to the school only for student behavioral or academic infractions by extending an invitation to participate in multifamily programs in the school building during times of non-crisis. The meetings are designed to create a sense of partnership among the families themselves as well as between each family and the school in order to share the objective of preventing student failure in academic, behavioral, social, and emotional realms. The role of educator is extended beyond the school and into the home, while the personal interactions between family and school personnel facilitate the sharing of caretaking duties historically assigned to the family. Finally, the foundational framework grounded in prevention theory allows for a solution-focused approach to addressing student, family, and school challenges as they arise.

### **FAST Program Description**

Kids FAST (K-5) is a program for parents and their elementary age children. The program is designed to build protective factors for children and empower parents to be primary prevention agents for their children. Short-term outcomes include “improved family functioning, increased social support, increased parent involvement in school, improved parent–child relationships, expanded social relationships, and improved child behavior” (McDonald, Frank, & Price, 2007, p. 9). Long-term outcome goals are the prevention of substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, juvenile delinquency, mental health problems, school failure, and violence (McDonald et al., 2007).

The Kids FAST program is an interactive, voluntary, multifamily program that engages the whole family system. It consists of eight weekly evening sessions which last for two hours each and are typically held in a school. The program is facilitated by a trained team consisting of a school and community representative and includes the parent, other family members, and the child. FAST activities range from age appropriate lessons with music, to feeling charades, to creating a family flag, to dinners on and off site, to fun family play. A central component includes structured and unstructured playtime which include the parents and children (FAST, n.d. d)

The follow-up program, FASTWORKS (FAST, n.d. e), is a year-long structured program for families who have completed all eight sessions of Kids FAST. In this program, families meet on a monthly basis and continue doing so for up to two years or more. FASTWORKS is unique in that it is a parent-led program that meets in the school or community. One of the primary tenets of FASTWORKS is that during the meetings parents have one-on-one time with

their children. The goal of FASTWORKS is to empower parents to strengthen their families, to be their child's advocate, and to become leaders in the community and school. Through FASTWORKS, parents build an ongoing support network.

### **FAST Program Implementation: Virginia Beach FAST Initiative**

This study consists of a series of Kids FAST programs conducted over a two-year time span in VB, Virginia. According to a 2006 estimate by the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of the city of VB is 435,619 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). As published on the VB City Public Schools (VBCPS) website, as of September 2007, the K-12 school census was reported as 34,194 (Virginia Department of Education, 2008). There are 55 elementary schools serving the area (VBCPS, 2008).

The Kids FAST program began in VB in February 2005 in two elementary schools. At that point it was under the direction of a different national authority targeting at-risk families, and VB developed limited FAST programs administered in four at-risk elementary schools. When national changes occurred, FAST became a "universal" prevention program targeting all families of elementary school children. According to the Institute of Medicine,

*a universal preventive measure* is a measure that is desirable for everybody in the eligible population. In this category fall all those measures that can be advocated confidently for the general public and for all members of specific eligible groups, such as pregnant women, children, or the elderly. (1994, pp. 20-21)

Virginia Beach began to include additional schools and programs. FAST has now been conducted in 10 elementary schools. Carolyn Decker, Program Coordinator for the VB FAST Programs, noted that

any stigma that may have existed with the program being initially marketed for at-risk families began to disappear. It is nonexistent now. Lack of participation these days is generally due to conflicting schedules—kids' sports activities, etcetera. As families have begun to integrate as a FAST Family Group, all types of exchanges have taken place...demonstrations of preferred behaviors, ideas on handling stressful situations, acceptances of differences, whatever they may be—educational, economical, etcetera. It has all been positive (personal communication, March 26, 2008).

From February 2005 to December 2007, 18 FAST cycles were conducted in VB elementary schools and completed over a span of 35 months. A total

of 251 families attended FAST, with a total of 165 families meeting FAST National's criteria of completing all eight weeks and officially graduating. On average there were 9.2 families per cycle who officially graduated per each of the 18 cycles. The FAST team consists of trained facilitators through collaborative partnerships with VB Mental Health Services and VBCPS. Data were available for 14 of the 18 program cycles.

## Methodology

The FAST program has been rigorously evaluated since 1990 using an evaluation protocol originally developed by McDonald and Billingham (1988). The evaluation package includes standardized questionnaires with accepted validity and reliability and uses published norms for children and families. The measurements are administered using a pre- and post-assessment at home and in the school by both parents and teachers. The FAST evaluation package has been used in more than 300 schools and communities, and the improvements are predictable and consistent.

This study was conducted using existing data collected from individual program evaluation results from sites implemented over the course of 35 months and was analyzed in aggregate, using descriptive statistics and paired sample, t-tests. The evaluation protocol for the VBCPS was a non-experimental, single-group, pre-post design in compliance with FAST program evaluation standards. Participants were exposed to the FAST program taught by trained staff at VBCPS. The following instruments were utilized for this evaluation: Family Environment Scale, Social Relationships Questionnaire, Self-Efficacy Scale, Parental Involvement in Education Scale, Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire, Substance Use Questionnaire, Social Support Instrument, and Reciprocal Support with Other Parents (McDonald et al., 2007).

### Family Environment Scale

The Family Relationship Index of the Family Environment Scale (FES) rates cohesion, conflict, and expressiveness on a 27-item scale (Moos & Moos, 1981). These scales measure the amount of support and commitment between family members. Higher scores indicate higher levels of family functioning and more effective communication whereas lower scores indicate family distress. Conversely, high scores on the conflict scale indicate distressed families. The FES uses standardized norms and scores and has acceptable levels of validity and reliability. The two month test-retest reliabilities, all in an acceptable range, vary from a low of .68 for independence to a high of .86 for cohesion. Test-retest reliabilities were also relatively high for the four month interval.

### **Social Relationships Questionnaire**

Specifically designed for the FAST program, the Social Relationships Questionnaire (McDonald & Moberg, 2002) measures the relationship that parents have with their FAST child. It also measures social relationships with other people and community agencies. Eight questions measure the relationship that parents have with their FAST child, and 11 questions measure the relationship that parents have with other people and community agencies. Respondents are asked to score each item on a scale of 0 to 9, with higher scores corresponding to stronger relationships. Test-retest reliability (Cronbach's alpha) scores range from .88 for the Community Social Relationships scale to .94 for the Parent-Child Relationship scale.

### **Self-Efficacy Scale**

The parents complete the Self-Efficacy Scale (Coleman & Karraker, 2000; Sherer et al., 1982) that measures self-efficacy expectations dependent upon the parent's past experiences and their tendencies to attribute success to skill rather than to chance. The questions in the Self-Efficacy Scale were adapted to measure the parent's general sense of personal effectiveness. A total of 10 items address the relationship between self-efficacy and general tasks. Six questions ask about social relationships and self-efficacy, which determine the parents' beliefs about their ability to establish and maintain friendships. Seven items were developed by Coleman and Karraker to measure the relationship between the parents' self-efficacy and their ability to support and nurture their children. Scores range from 1 to 5, where a 5 indicates the highest level of efficacy. Internal consistency, Cronbach alpha (persistence) = 0.64 (Bosscher & Smit, 1998), and Cronbach alpha (whole scale) = 0.86 (Sherer et al., 1982).

### **Parental Involvement in Education Scale**

The Parental Involvement in Education Scale (Epstein & Salinas, 1993; Shumow, Vandell, & Kang, 1996) is widely used and measures the level of parents' involvement in their child's school. The eight questions look at parental school involvement, parent-initiated contact with teachers, and school-initiated contact with the parent. Reliability for each domain ranges from .70 to .76. Scores for the items range from 0 to 4 with higher scores indicating increased involvement.

### **Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire**

The Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is an instrument about children's behavior that is completed by parents and teachers (Goodman, 1997).

There are 25 items that address two subscales: strengths (prosocial behavior), and difficulties (emotional issues, conduct problems, peer relationships, and hyperactivity problems).

Scores for the prosocial and individual difficulties subscales can range from 0 to 10. A higher score for strengths corresponds to positive behavior. A lower score for difficulties corresponds to less difficult behavior. The total difficulties subscale is the sum of the individual difficulties subscales, and scores can range from 0 to 40, with a lower score indicating less difficult behavior. Five additional questions are used to assess the impact that the FAST child's difficulties have on his or her everyday life. A score of zero or one corresponds to no or very little impact, and a score of two or three indicates moderate or high impact on the child and family. Reliability, internal consistency, ranged from .61 to .82 and criterion validity was assessed and found to be acceptable.

### **Substance Use Questionnaire**

The Substance Use Questionnaire asks parents about their use of various substances over the past 30 days (Center for Substance Abuse Prevention Government Performance and Results Act [CSAP GPRA], 2005). The four questions ask about consuming alcohol, intoxication, smoking cigarettes, and using marijuana. The scores range from "0 Days" to "All 30 Days."

### **Social Support Instrument**

Four aspects of social support are measured by the 12-item Social Support Instrument (Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991) as follows: emotional support (expression of affect, empathetic understanding, and encouragement of expressions of feelings); tangible support (providing material aid or behavioral assistance); affectionate support (expression of love and affection); and total support (sum of emotional, tangible, and affectionate support scores). Scores on each item range from 0 to 3, and a higher score corresponds to stronger social support. Reliability of the scale as a whole is .97 (Cronbach's alpha) with individual subscales ranging from .91 to .96.

### **Reciprocal Support with Other Parents**

The final measure, Reciprocal Support with Other Parents (McDonald & Moberg, 2002), includes six items that determine the level of support that parents may receive from or provide to other parents, such as help with babysitting, carpooling, sharing feelings, and getting together socially. Scores can range from 0 to 5, with a higher score corresponding to more support. Test-retest reliability (Cronbach's alpha) range from .90 for the Support Received scale to .91 for the Support Provided scale.

## Participants in the FAST Program

During the data collection period, a total of 196 children and 187 parents participated in the VB FAST program. The average age of the children was 7.7 years and the average age of parents was 33.7 years. Both children and parents represented different racial groups. There were 1 to 7 children aged 18 and under in each household with an average of 2.4 children per family. Regarding marital status: 117 parents (67%) were married; 52 (30%) were separated, single, or divorced; six (3%) were members of an unmarried couple; and 12 did not answer that question. The annual family income of participants ranged from “less than \$10,000” to “\$100,000 or more” with a median family income range of \$35,000 to \$49,999. Tables 1 and 2 provide demographic profiles of the children and parents, respectively, who participated in the studied FAST cycles.

Table 1. Child Demographic Profile

Demographics	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Sex		
Female	101	56.7
Male	77	43.3
No response	18	3.2
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian	76	42.9
African American	65	36.7
Hispanic/Latino	11	6.2
Asian	1	.6
Native Hawaiian or Native Islander	3	1.7
Mixed race	18	10.2
Other	3	1.7
No response	10	
Age	Mean= 7.7	

Table 2. Parent Demographic Profile

Demographics	Number of Respondents	Percentage
	187	100
Sex		
Female	156	89.1
Male	19	10.9
No response	12	3.2
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian	87	49.7
African American	60	34.3
Hispanic/Latino	14	8.0
Asian	3	1.7
Native Hawaiian or Native Islander	2	1.1
Other	3	1.7
No response	12	
Age	Mean= 33.7	Range = 21-60
Education		
Elementary or some high school	14	8
High school diploma or GED	47	27
Attended a junior college or had some college education	69	39
College degree or higher	45	25
No Response	12	
Employment		
Employed - full-time	90	52
Employed - part-time	28	16
Unemployed and looking for work, not working outside the home, a student, or disabled	5	28
No response	15	

Note: These data refer to the parents who graduated from the program and completed the pre- and post-tests. For additional descriptions of FAST families, see Appendix A, Table 3, available from the authors or editor upon request.

## Results: Virginia Beach FAST Initiative

### Outcome Data Reported by Parents

On the Family Relationship Index of the Family Environment Scale, parents reported statistically significant changes in cohesion ( $p < .001$ ), expressiveness

( $p < .01$ ), conflict ( $p < .001$ ), and total relationship ( $p < .001$ ; see Appendix A, Table 4, available from the authors upon request). All subscale scores span from zero to nine. Higher scores in cohesion, expressiveness, and total relationship suggest the presence of these protective factors in the family. Lower scores on the conflict subscale suggest a protective factor.

Parents rated how they felt about their self-efficacy or personal effectiveness in three areas. Nurturance efficacy, general efficacy, and social self-efficacy scores fall on a scale of 1 (low effectiveness) to 5 (high effectiveness). Their scores indicated a slight increase in social self-efficacy (+2.6%) and a significant increase in general efficacy ( $p < .001$ ) and nurturance efficacy ( $p < .001$ ; see Appendix A, Table 5, available upon request).

On the Social Relationships Questionnaire, parents reported the quality of their social relationships with 1 being poor and 10 being excellent quality. The parents reported significant increases in community social relationships ( $p < .001$ ), relationship with FAST child ( $p < .001$ ), and total social relationships ( $p < .001$ ; see Appendix A, Table 6, available upon request).

On the Social Support Questionnaire, parent responses may range from 0 (never have support) to 3 (always have support). Parents reported significant increases in tangible support ( $p < .001$ ), affectionate support ( $p < .001$ ), emotional support ( $p < .001$ ), and total support ( $p < .001$ ; see Appendix A, Table 7, available upon request).

FAST provides opportunities for parents to support one another. Reciprocation is essential to building social support. Parents were asked about the support they received from and provided to other parents. Scores can range from 0 to 5, with higher levels meaning more support. The parents reported statistically significant increases in support provided to other parents ( $p < .001$ ) and support received from other parents ( $p < .001$ ; see Appendix A, Table 8, available upon request).

Parents reported on their children's strengths and difficulties. Subscales, including prosocial behaviors, emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer problems, and hyperactivity range from 0 to 3. Total difficulties can range from 0 to 60 and the impact scores can range from 0 to 15. Parents reported a significant decrease in children's emotional symptoms ( $p < .001$ ) and impact ( $p < .01$ ; see Appendix A, Table 9, available upon request).

When parents were asked about their involvement and contact with the school in the past month, they reported statistically significant changes in parent-school involvement ( $p < .001$ ), parent-to-school contact ( $p < .001$ ), school-to-parent contact ( $p < .001$ ), and total parent involvement ( $p < .001$ ; see Appendix A, Table 10, available upon request). Responses can range from 0 (never) to 4r (six or more times).

### Parents' Substance Use

Parents were asked four questions about how often in the past 30 days they used or did the following: smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol, were drunk from alcohol, and smoked marijuana or hashish. Response categories were: 0 = 0 days, 1 = 1-2 days, 2 = 3-5 days, 3 = 6-9 days, 4 = 10-19 days, 5 = 20-29 days, and 6 = all 30 days. In reviewing 30-day use rates, responses were largely unchanged except for cigarette use ( $p < .05$ ; see Appendix A, Table 11, available upon request). Generally, parents reported very little use at the pre-test, leaving little room for reduction.

### Special Presentation

Each FAST site decides on the topic of the special presentation, which can range from substance-related issues, to prevention of gang violence, to mental health issues, to yoga and other stress reducing techniques. Because the FAST program focus is on substance abuse prevention, the FAST evaluation assesses special presentations that focused on alcohol, tobacco, or other drug use (ATOD). In particular, the evaluation focuses on whether the presentation helped to increase parents' knowledge concerning substance-related topics. If the special presentation focuses on a topic unrelated to ATOD, parents do not complete these questions. The special presentation for this site focused on substance abuse through the avenue of family communication skills.

Information on knowledge-related change is collected using a retrospective pre- and post-test design. This fact means that parents are asked at the post-test to assess their level of knowledge as it was before the FAST session and as it was after the FAST session. Participants are asked to rate their understanding of the following, on a scale of "low" (1) to "high" (5): the impact of ATOD on the family; the ability to recognize a problem with addiction in a family member; where to get help for a problem with addiction; and the negative effects of alcohol/tobacco/other drugs on one's health.

Parents reported a slight gain in their knowledge of the impact of ATOD on the family (3%) and significant gains in their knowledge of where to get help for a problem with addiction ( $p < .05$ ) and in their ability to recognize a problem with addiction ( $p < .05$ ), as well as their knowledge of the negative effects of ATOD on one's health ( $p < .05$ ; see Appendix A, Table 12, available upon request).

### Outcome Data Reported by Teachers

On the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, teachers reported significant improvements in students' prosocial behaviors ( $p < .001$ ), but little or no

change in the difficulty scores (see Appendix A, Table 13, available upon request). The range of scores is the same as for parents.

Teachers were asked about the FAST parents' involvement and contact with the school in the last month. The scores range from 1 to 5, with higher numbers indicating a better relationship with the child's parent, more frequent contact with the parent, and a perception of greater parental involvement in school. Teachers reported no significant changes in relationship with parent, teacher contact with parent, or parent involvement in school (see Appendix A, Table 14, available upon request).

## Discussion

The FAST evaluation protocol (McDonald et al., 1997) focuses on measuring change toward the FAST program goals in the following areas:

Goal: enhance family relationships

- family environment
- parental empowerment

Goal: reduce incidence of academic failure for the target child

- family participation in school
- behavior of student

Goal: prevent substance abuse by the child and family

- knowledge of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs
- past 30 day use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs

Goal: stress reduction for families in the school community

- interpersonal relationships
- communal support
- program satisfaction

The results from the measures used in the FAST assessment protocol suggest that the FAST program at these locations, analyzed in aggregate, achieved the desired proximal objectives of assisting participants in making gains in improvement of family functioning, parental self-efficacy, and social connectedness, and parental knowledge of ATOD-related issues and substance use. However, results from the school-to-parent relationships and targeted children's behavior subscales were mixed.

As the results indicate, parents exhibited significant increases in the cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, and total relationship domains of the Family Environment Scale. Evaluation of individual program sites yielded mixed results, but analyzed in aggregate, it appears that families participating in FAST

made significant gains in each of the subscales for assessing family environment, especially in the conflict and total relationship domains. These results appear to meet the FAST goal of enhancing family relationships. In addition, parents made slight gains in social self-efficacy, but made significant gains in general efficacy and nurturance efficacy on the Self-Efficacy Scale. These results indicate that parents participating in these FAST programs made proximal progress toward developing a sense of empowerment, again, consistent with the FAST goal of enhancing family relationships.

The parents reported significant gains in community social relationships, relationship with FAST child, and total social relationships measures on the Parent Involvement in Education by Parents scale. This indicates that participation in FAST helped parents enhance their social connectedness and develop closer relationships to their children, at least while they were enrolled in FAST. Furthermore, participant parents appear to have made improvements in social support, which was evidenced by gains in several measures. Parents made significant gains in tangible support, affectionate support, emotional support, and total support. Thus, it appears that while parents attended FAST, they made improvements in these areas which, if maintained, can serve them in the future when faced with adversity, and they can also model this behavior for their children (McDonald et al., 2007). The parents reported significant increases in support provided to other parents and support received from other parents. These results further support the validity of the gains made in social support and social relationships and provide tangible evidence that these gains were put into action, thereby meeting the FAST goal to reduce the stress that parents and children experience from daily life situations.

Both parents and teachers observed improvements in some of the target children's behaviors. Parents reported a significant decrease in emotional symptoms and impact while teachers found significant improvements in prosocial behaviors ( $p < .001$ ) but little or no change in the difficulty scores. However, no gains were reported by either parents or teachers in any of the subscales. Yet, on the scores that did not meet statistical significance, parental and teacher perceptions appeared to be similar. On the subscales that were different, it is possible that parents and teachers observe children in different settings and thus have differing opportunities in which to note change. For example, teachers reported a significant improvement in prosocial skills, but they also may have more opportunity to observe children in numerous social situations. Conversely, parents reported significant gains in emotional and impact scores. Thus, progress appears to have been made toward the FAST goal to prevent the target child from experiencing school failure, but continuous parental and teacher consultation is advised to establish mutual goals and define target behaviors in order to address these risk and protective factors.

When parents were asked about their involvement and contact with the school in the past month, they reported statistically significant gains in their school involvement, parent-to-school contact, school-to-parent contact, and total parent involvement. Teachers reported no gains in relationship with parent, teacher contact with parent, and parent involvement in school. However, the scales were different for parents and teachers, so it is difficult to make a direct comparison. In the relationship with parents and parent involvement in school, there appeared to be a ceiling effect, as the teachers' scores were near the top of the scale at pre-test, thus leaving little room for gains. Although it is a positive development that parents made significant gains, it is difficult to state with certainty that the results of these measures show progress toward the FAST goal to prevent the target child from experiencing school failure. Thus, it is difficult to make definitive statements as to the effectiveness of the FAST program regarding this goal, but it also signifies the need to ensure that teachers are familiar with the FAST program goals. Generally, the results of the FAST program are promising, but teacher awareness and involvement is critical and consistent with the FAST program fidelity protocols.

When asked about their substance use, the parents noted 30-day use rates were largely unchanged except for cigarette use. Generally, parents reported very little use at the pre-test, leaving little room for reduction and thus revealing another ceiling effect. In response to a special presentation on substance use, parents found a slight gain in their knowledge of the impact of ATOD on the family and significant gains in their knowledge of where to get help for a problem with addiction, their ability to recognize a problem with addiction, and their knowledge of the negative effects of ATOD on one's health. Considering that these parents report very low ATOD use but appear to have made significant gains in knowledge of ATOD effects as well as how to identify and address ATOD problems, results strongly indicate that the probability of achieving and maintaining the FAST goal to prevent substance abuse by the child and family was enhanced.

The literature review yielded few FAST program site results that were analyzed in aggregate, even though this method is encouraged by FAST developers as it can produce more confidence in the results (McDonald et al., 2007). This has been true for the VB FAST program sites as sessions have been evaluated individually with mixed results, and even in those program sites that produce positive outcomes, the "*N*" (number of participants) was generally small (i.e.,  $N \leq 20$ ). While program outcomes and real-world implications have been detailed in existing literature, without aggregate analysis to support individual site findings, program effectiveness has not been holistically validated. Therefore, this study analyzed results in aggregate from multiple program sites,

conducted over a two-year period, thus adding validity to individual site results and supporting the efficacy of the FAST program and its utility for the VB community.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although there were statistically significant gains made on most scales and subscales, this study was a non-experimental design and thus cannot make general claims to the effectiveness of the FAST program in VBCPS. For example, parents could have obtained knowledge from other resources, which could have contributed to the gains cited in this study. Furthermore, the measures were pre-program—post-program and not longitudinal, so no definitive statements can be made as to long-term retention of these gains. Also, the scales used to measure parent–school involvement were different for parents and teachers, so comparisons should be made with caution.

In addition, there were no data available that tracked family attendance at individual sessions, as it was collected in aggregate. Thus, it was difficult to attribute changes due to specific modules or activities or to assess the impact of absence from a particular module or activity. FAST is a model program (SAMHSA, 2009), and this research identified additional participant gains. It is recommended that future research address FAST participation and long-term behavioral changes.

In conclusion, although follow-up data were not available for this study to make statements regarding long-term impact, significant proximal gains were made on the standardized quantitative measures included in the FAST evaluation protocol. Furthermore, the FAST program is a model program (CSAP GPRA, 2005) and, therefore, if implemented with fidelity, should produce similar results as compared with the original FAST research and evaluations (SAMHSA, 2009).

## References

- Bosscher, R. J., & Smit, J. H. (1998). Confirmatory factor analysis of the general self-efficacy scale. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 36, 339-343.
- Center for Substance Abuse Prevention Government Performance and Results Act. (2005). *Drug & alcohol use survey*. Retrieved from [http://www.samhsa.gov/budget/B2005/GPRA04\\_report.pdf](http://www.samhsa.gov/budget/B2005/GPRA04_report.pdf)
- Christenson, S. L. (2004). The family–school partnership: An opportunity to promote the learning competence of all students. *School Psychology Review*, 33(1), 83-105.
- Christenson, S. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2001). *School and families: Creating essential connections for learning*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

- Coleman, P. K., & Karraker, K. H. (2000). Parenting self-efficacy among mothers of school-age children: Conceptualization, measurement, and correlates. *Family Relations*, 49, 5-11.
- Coote, S. (2000). *Families and schools together (FAST)*. Paper presented at the Conference Reducing Criminality: Partnerships and Best Practice convened by the Australian Institute of Criminology, Perth, Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.aic.gov.au/events/aic%20upcoming%20events/2000/criminality.aspx>
- DiCamillo, M. (2001). Parent education as an essential component of parent involvement programs. In D. Hiatt-Michael (Ed.), *Promising practices for family involvement in schools* (pp. 153-183). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Dowling, E., & Osborne, E. L. (2003). *The family and the school: A joint systems approach to problems with children* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London, UK: H. Karnac Books.
- Dunst, C. (2002). Family-centered practices: Birth through high school. *The Journal of Special Education*, 36(3), 139-147.
- Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 701-713.
- Epstein, J. L., & Salinas, K. C. (1993). *School and family partnerships: Surveys and summaries*. Baltimore, MD: Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning.
- Families and Schools Together. (n.d. a). *Perspective & vision*. Retrieved from <http://www.familiesandschools.org/about/perspective-vision.php>
- Families and Schools Together. (n.d. b). *Risk & protective factors*. Available from FAST secure portal at <http://www.familiesandschools.org/portal/research/dev-science-article.php?i=10>
- Families and Schools Together. (n.d. c). *Research background of FAST activities*. Available from FAST secure portal at <http://www.familiesandschools.org/portal/research/fast-parts.php>
- Families and Schools Together. (n.d. d). *Kids FAST*. Retrieved from <http://familiesandschools.org./programs/kids-fast.php>
- Families and Schools Together. (n.d. e). *FASTWORKS*. Retrieved from <http://familiesandschools.org/services/fastworks-family-education.php>
- Families and Schools Together. (1998, April). *Tools for schools*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/ToolsforSchools/fast.html>
- Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: A research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38, 52-58.
- Griffith, J. (2000). School climate as group evaluation and group consensus: Student and parent perceptions of the elementary school environment. *The Elementary School Journal*, 101(1), 35-61.
- Hawkins, D., Catalano, R., & Miller, J. (1992). Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early childhood: Implications for substance abuse prevention. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112(1), 64-105.
- Institute of Medicine. (1994). *Frontiers for preventive intervention research*. [Electronic Version]. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Kratochwill, T. R., McDonald, L., Levin, J. R., Bear-Tibbetts, H. Y., & Demaray, M. K. (2004). Families and schools together: An experimental analysis of a parent-mediated multifamily group program for American Indian Children. *Journal of School Psychology*, 42, 359-383.
- McDonald, L., & Billingham, S. (1988). *Families and Schools Together program evaluation by family*. Madison, WI: FAST National Training and Evaluation Center.
- McDonald, L., Billingham, S., Conrad, T., Morgan, A., Nina, O., & Peyton, E. (1997). Families and Schools Together (FAST): Integrating community development with clinical strategies. *Families in Society*, 78(2), 140-155.

- McDonald, L., Frank, M., & Price, K. (2007). *Evaluation report for City of Virginia Beach, Parkway Elementary*. Madison, WI: FAST National Training and Evaluation Center.
- McDonald, L., & Moberg, D. P. (2002). *Social relationships questionnaire*. Madison, WI: FAST National Training and Evaluation Center.
- McDonald, L., Moberg, D. P., Brown, R., Rodriguez-Espiricueta, I., Flores, N. I., Burke, M. P., & Coover, G. (2006, January). After-school multifamily groups: A randomized controlled trial involving low-income, urban, Latino children. *Children & Schools*, 8(1), 25-34.
- McDonald, L., & Ziege, A. (2003). *Evaluation report for Hawaii Department of Education—Central district Mililani, Hawaii participating school: Elementary*. Madison, WI: FAST International.
- McWilliam, K., Maxwell, L., & Sloper, K. (1999). Beyond involvement: Are elementary schools ready to be family-centered? *School Psychology Review*, 28(3), 378-394.
- Moos, R., & Moos, B. (1981). *Family Environment Scale*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Parent Involvement Task Force. (1999). *Report and recommendations to the South Carolina oversight committee*. Columbia, SC: Author.
- Sass, J. (1999, November). *Comprehensive evaluation report for the Canadian replication of the families and schools together (FAST) program*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Evaluation Association, Orlando, FL.
- Sherbourne, C. D., & Stewart, A. L. (1991). The MOS social support survey. *Social Science and Medicine*, 32(6), 705-714.
- Sherer, M., Maddux, J. E., Mercadante, B., Prentice-Dunn, S., Jacobs, B., & Rogers, R. W. (1982). The self-efficacy scale: Construction and validation. *Psychological Reports*, 51, 663-671.
- Shumow, L., Vandell, D. L., & Kang, K. (1996). School choice, family characteristics, and home-school relations: Contributors to school achievement? *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 88(3), 451-460.
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration; Department of Health and Human Services. (2009). *Families and Schools Together, April 2009* [Data file]. Retrieved from National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, <http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/listofprograms.asp?textsearch=families+and+schools+together&ShowHide=1&Sort=1>
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration; Department of Health and Human Services. (2008, December). *Families and schools together*. Retrieved December 10, 2009 from National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, [http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?PROGRAM\\_ID=169#description](http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?PROGRAM_ID=169#description)
- Terrion, J. L. (2006). Building social capital in vulnerable families: Success markers of a school-based intervention program. *Youth Society*, 38(2), 155-176.
- Unger, D. G., & Sussman, M. B. (1990). *Families in community settings: Interdisciplinary perspectives*. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2006). State and County QuickFacts: Virginia Beach City, VA. Retrieved June 11, 2008 from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/51/51810.html>
- Virginia Beach City Public Schools. (2008). *School locator/map center*. Retrieved June 11, 2008 from [http://www.vbschools.com/map\\_center/zone\\_maps/elem.asp](http://www.vbschools.com/map_center/zone_maps/elem.asp)
- Virginia Department of Education. (2008). *Data and reports: Virginia education statistics: 2007*. Richmond, VA: Author.

Mary Crozier is an assistant professor and the coordinator of the Substance Abuse Counseling Certificate at East Carolina University. She has worked in

several mental health and academic settings in Virginia and Canada since 1979. Her research interests include substance abuse prevention and behavioral addictions. She can be reached at [crozierm@ecu.edu](mailto:crozierm@ecu.edu) or East Carolina University, Department of Rehabilitation Studies, Substance Abuse and Clinical Counseling, Greenville, NC, 27858.

Laurie Rokutani is an Adjunct Instructor at the College of William and Mary and President and CEO of MoonShadow, LLC, which provides consultation, training, curriculum development, technical assistance, preservice and continuing education, workforce development (individual and organizational), and evaluation services in substance abuse and mental health. She has worked extensively with collaborative prevention programs focused on substance abuse.

Jill L. Russett is program coordinator for the Prevention of High Risk Drinking among College Students at the College of William and Mary's School of Education. Her research interests focus on the development of addictions practitioners, gender issues related to substance use, and enhancing quality programs for prevention efforts.

Emilie Godwin is the family services program coordinator at Virginia Commonwealth University—Health Systems, Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Division of Neuropsychology. Her work is primarily with families who have a member with a traumatic brain injury. Areas of specialty work include assisting TBI families in school-based issues, psychoeducational family intervention following brain injury, and family counseling.

George E. Banks is an evaluator for the Office of Mental Health in the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. He also runs his own evaluation consulting firm, Positive Outcomes, specializing in conducting community needs assessments, human services program evaluation, and policy analysis.



## **Book Review of (Mis)Understanding Families: Learning from Real Families in Our Schools**

*Lee Shumow*

Key Words: families, understanding, family engagement, schools, involvement, book review, misunderstanding, learning, teachers, Marsh, Turner-Vorbeck

Readers who believe that families are an essential part of any school community and therefore should be understood, respected, and included in order to serve the best interest of students will be interested in a volume edited by Monica Miller Marsh and Tammy Turner-Vorbeck and published by Teachers College Press in 2009. The editors intend to help educators recognize and question their understanding of families in a way that will help them develop productive relationships with the wide array of families they inevitably encounter in their work. Each chapter ends with a series of discussion questions with which to guide these purposes. Any teacher or teacher educator is likely to find at least some, if not all, of the chapters valuable.

One valuable and unique contribution of Marsh and Turner-Vorbeck's blueprint for the book is that they ground it in Bakhtin's theory. Wertsch (1991), a sociocultural scholar, embraced and introduced Bakhtin's ideas to social scientists, but few scholars have applied Bakhtinian concepts to understanding school-family relationships. Yet, several of his ideas about identity are enormously helpful in framing an understanding of how we come to understand ourselves and others. For example, like others, Bakhtin believed that individuals incorporated how others perceived and talked about them (or members of their group) into their identity. He privileged discourse and multivoicedness as the primary form of interaction and reaction through which individuals construct and reconstruct ideas about self. Further, Bakhtin saw the act of creating and reading texts as a form of dialogue between the author, those who had

influenced the author, and the reader. Clearly, most chapters can be interpreted using a Bakhtinian framework, although the connections are not explicit in each chapter.

Following an introduction by the editors and an opening chapter by Pushor, the book is organized into two parts. The purpose of the five chapters that comprise part one is to describe and critically consider how families are represented in both formal (school documents and curriculum) and informal (film, television) texts. Part two, which also consists of five chapters, intends to use understanding derived from such a critical approach to comprehend and construct beneficial home–school relations.

In the first chapter, Debbie Pushor contrasts a conventional beginning of the yearly “Meet the Teacher” night for parents with a visionary “Meet the Parents” night. In doing so, she brilliantly and clearly conveys a vivid impression of what could be and how a simple but fundamental shift in thinking and practice could profoundly improve home–school trust and relationships. She explicitly identifies the taken for granted assumptions, stories, and beliefs embedded in “Meet the Teacher” night. She then suggests alternate conceptions to replace those including believing in the value of (a) what children bring to school, (b) parents knowledge about their children, and (c) engaged parents. This chapter is a must-read for teacher educators and both preservice and practicing educators.

## **Part 1: Representations of Families in Formal and Informal Curriculum**

Next, Lopez and Stoelting set out to examine traditional representations of parent involvement as those pertain to Latino families and to provide better alternative representations. Accordingly, the authors critique Epstein’s framework as being school-focused and exclusive of Latino parents’ culturally based understanding of the parental role. On the other hand, they endorse Hoover-Dempsey’s model, which emphasizes the importance of how parents perceive their role, and suggest that educators need professional development that involves getting to know and understand families of students in order to genuinely work collaboratively with parents. While the chapter may be helpful, readers hoping to learn specifically about Latino families are likely to be disappointed. Although they use several examples of how Latino parents understand their role, their critique of parent involvement models and practices as well as their case for rearticulation applies to any culturally distinct group and perhaps to the mainstream population of parents as well.

In Chapter Three, Shirley Steinberg writes about television families that have served as an informal text for teachers, students, and parents over the 60 years that television has been “the media weft within the fabric of American society” (p. 38). Steinberg, a leading voice in critical pedagogy and media in the lives of children and adolescents, classifies and describes various types of television families: (a) suburban middle class, (b) poor working class, (c) child point of view (i.e., *Beaver Cleaver*), (d) motherless, (e) single father, (f) blended, (g) historical, and (h) animated. Her description and critical analysis of television families is very interesting to consider as a form of hidden curriculum. Unfortunately, she does not present evidence that this does impact teachers, students, or parents, or how it does and with what consequences. Rather she assumes this is obvious. The reader is also left wondering whether the pre-1990s shows are relevant to current K-12 or college students and, most importantly, how to best address these texts with teachers, parents, or students.

The next two chapters pertain to fiction about families. In Chapter Four, Lindsey and Parsons content analyze representations of families in award-winning young adult literature from several recent years (2005-2007). They identify five themes about families in these books. Prize winning books tend to be well represented in the curriculum and in young adult library book collections, yet a limitation of the chapter is that a very limited range of books are analyzed. Huber, Graham, Orr, and Reid then describe a literature circle they participated in as a way of exploring their identities as teachers. They shared their own family stories as they read stories of families. They report that their discussion process led them to ask how they might use their family stories in order to attend to the family stories of students and educators and how curriculum can be designed to allow for inquiry into family stories.

Marsh and Turner-Vorbeck collaborate to write Chapter Six about their own experiences as adoptive parents. They relate the difficulties that adoptive and foster families face and illustrate those with numerous school discussions, projects, and homework assignments which require students to consider family background. Using a Bakhtinian perspective, they sensitize the reader to ways in which family stories contribute to identity. Importantly, they present possible ways to adapt school activities to make them inclusive of adopted and foster children.

## **Part Two: Family–School Collaboration**

Part Two of the book opens with a chapter by Graue and Hawkins about the perspectives of fourth grade students’ parents on what schools know and should know about their families and their values. This chapter is rich with

ideas about why and how to support a two-way flow of information between schools and homes and to develop instruction that incorporates family experience. The chapter includes powerful quotations from parents that were masterfully chosen to make the case for meaningful home–school relations. To their credit, the authors acknowledge the time and effort that would be required to forge such partnerships. The voices in this chapter rang true and were enlightening

Chapter Eight, written by Brock, starts with a letter to the reader setting the purpose and background for the chapter. A short theory section introduces black feminist theory and critical pedagogy. The remainder of the chapter is a fictional dialogue about urban schools and families between Professor Brock and her students on the first day of class. It is a very clever and, according to Brock, culturally attuned method of presenting her research. The dialogue was, indeed, an interesting way of learning about different myths and assumptions about urban students and families, which were subsequently debunked by the professor's voice. This dialogue is uneven, however. It is believable and smooth in portions, but seemed contrived in others.

In Chapter Nine, Jaime and Russell present an excellent summary of the history and legacy of Native American families and schools. They cogently discuss parental support and the very nature of education from an indigenous perspective. Their examples are compelling. They conclude the chapter with a set of concise practical ideas that could go far to redress past mistakes and advance current practice in a way that would benefit parents, teachers, and most importantly, students.

Chapter Ten by Li pertains to low socioeconomic status immigrant families. Case studies of two Sudanese and two Vietnamese families and their relationship with schools illustrate how these parents struggled to be involved with their children's education. For example, time and financial constraints impeded the parents' engagement with their children's school work and schools. As well, the parents culturally based understanding of how to raise children was inconsistent in some basic ways with child rearing patterns in the United States. The parents, who lived in high crime neighborhoods because that was where they could afford housing, worried about their children's safety and exposure to negative role models which led them to isolate their children. Although Li's recommendation that educators need to learn about their children's lives outside of school is well taken, it is not clear to many educators how to do so. The chapter ends with several excellent unconventional ideas about how schools might foster more involvement with low-income immigrant and minority families.

The final fascinating chapter, by Chung and Clandinin, is a narrative inquiry focusing on the family stories of one newcomer third grade child from Korea, her mother, and her teacher. Six story fragments are used to show how family lives and stories intersect and reverberate in classrooms and how these could be used to generate a co-constructed living curriculum. The authors make a compelling case for the importance of relational knowledge and, notably, described how they intentionally created a project through which children's family stories were used in a classroom for "cocomposing a curriculum of lives alongside children, families, and teachers" (p. 193). This chapter is an excellent finale because it aggregates the purpose, theoretical underpinnings, and practical value of the volume.

### Conclusion

This recent book should be welcomed by teachers and teacher educators alike. Anyone who is looking for resources to help them understand their own assumptions about family involvement, the perspectives of diverse families, or how to construct meaningful home–school relationships will be well served by this book. In the spirit of Bakhtin's regard for polyphony, the contributions should spark lively dialogue and exchange between the voices of readers, authors, and families at the heart of each chapter.

### References

- Marsh, M. M., & Turner-Vorbeck, T. (2009). *(Mis)Understanding families: Learning from real families in our schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Wetsch, J. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lee Shumow is a professor of educational psychology at Northern Illinois University where she is a Presidential Teaching Professor. Her research focuses on out of school influences (e.g., activities, relationships, resources) on the school adjustment of children and adolescents. She has conducted several studies of homework using different methodologies. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lee Shumow, Northern Illinois University, LEPP Department, DeKalb, IL, 60115.

