

# THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY JOURNAL

Fall/Winter 2011  
Volume 21, Number 2

Academic Development Institute



# The School Community Journal

Fall/Winter 2011  
Volume 21, Number 2

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*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 email 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 email 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.families-schools.org/CJindex.htm>.

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## Editor's Comments

*The School Community Journal* holds a unique position in its mission to encourage all schools to function as thriving communities of stakeholders collaborating on behalf of each and every student. Our online, open access format is allowing us to reach those concerned with education across the globe, at every level of education. Because of this, a delicate balance must be maintained. Our blind peer review process seeks to select and refine the best articles, representing a broad array of research, program and field reports, and essay and discussion, all which must add to our knowledge and inspire future work toward the realization of the mission, while appealing to a very diverse readership. The result, however, can be that some of the basic information in each article (usually the literature review section) may seem repetitive and superfluous. Those of us with intimate knowledge or years of practice using models honed by Joyce Epstein, Kathy Hoover-Dempsey, James Comer, and others in the field of family, school, and community partnerships must remember that someone accessing a particular article may have no previous knowledge of this aspect of education at all. Similarly, articles on the lack of preservice preparation for such partnerships abound, yet many states and colleges of education still are not requiring aspiring teachers to learn about or practice basic strategies that could be very influential in helping their future students to succeed. So I plead, for patience from those with experience, and also for future research and article submissions that continue to expand our knowledge and inspire us in new ways to forge ahead toward the goal of creating and sustaining healthy school communities.

I hope you will explore this issue thoroughly, as it contains many gems in the form of articles that continue to address these issues in ways that will inform and encourage us to continue with this vital work. From veteran SCJ writers to newcomers, from projects in the heartland of the U.S. to Finland, these articles continue to highlight various aspects of collaboration with the potential to change students' lives. As our own executive editor, Sam Redding, has said:

A school community is found in the relationships among the people intimately attached to a school...Devotion to children they know, love, and call by name is a powerful motivation to constantly seek better ways to insure that each child meets standards of learning and is able to reach beyond those standards.

Best wishes to each of you, and I look forward to your future submissions!

Lori Thomas  
December 2011

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# Families' Goals, School Involvement, and Children's Academic Achievement: A Follow-up Study Thirteen Years Later

*Diane W. Kyle*

## **Abstract**

A study conducted from 1996–2000 focused on the academic development of children within a statewide educational reform effort, including changing the organizational structure of the early years of schooling into nongraded primary programs (formerly age-based classrooms for kindergarteners through third grade). The multisite study involved children from mainly poor and working class families and focused on supports and barriers to learning both in and out of school. Family visits throughout the years of the study viewed parents as experts on their children, with teachers seeking to learn from them through informal conversations and formal interviews. The data collected provided an impetus for restructuring classroom instruction and for exploring ways of engaging the families more intentionally and meaningfully with their children's classrooms. The study reported here is a follow-up with families in one of the sites. Again, family visits included taperecorded interviews about the children's academic performance at the end of high school, current goals, and parents' perceptions of their child's schooling experience and their own involvement with the schools over time. The discussion includes an update about the families, a description of the children's educational outcomes and future educational plans, and insights and implications about family connections and student success.

**Key Words:** family, parents, involvement, engagement, schools, home visits, goals, teachers, longitudinal research, perceptions, achievement, low income

## Introduction

*“You don’t have to go to college, but you need to finish high school, because otherwise you are going to be doing like I’ve done as far as jobs.”*

*“My biggest mistake was school, and I really feel like that ruined my whole life, because I didn’t go to school.”*

This article introduces the children and parents of seven families from one small town who, over 13 years, invited their child’s teacher and a university research partner (the author) into their homes. On these “family visits,” each family shared insights about goals for their child, the child’s academic progress, their own involvement their child’s school, work and recreation activities of the family, as well as the family’s challenges and celebrations. The sections that follow provide an explanation of the initial study that began the relationship with these families; contextual information about the setting; descriptions of the children as they began school; findings from a recent follow-up study; and implications for enhancing family engagement with schools. We begin this account in 1996.

## Study of a State-Mandated Reform for Young Children

The two quotes above were shared by parents who participated in a funded study conducted from 1996-2000 focused on the academic development of children within a statewide educational reform effort (McIntyre & Kyle, 2001). An initial goal of equalizing state funding for school districts resulted in more sweeping changes which included a change in the organizational structure of the early years of schooling into nongraded primary programs (formerly age-based classrooms for kindergarteners through third grade), broadened decision-making to include more parent participation on site-based school councils, and redesigned curriculum and instruction and the assessment and reporting systems that would determine and communicate student progress.

Our multiyear and multisite study addressed the nongraded primary program aspect of the reform initiative. It focused on children from mainly poor and working class families, many of Appalachian descent, and addressed the following key questions: What inhibited learners in and out of school? What were the societal, institutional, and personal barriers to learning? What supports did the children receive at home and school that enabled some of them to transcend economic conditions to achieve at high levels? (These questions and issues, however, are not the focus of this paper. Findings on the initial study are found in McIntyre & Kyle, 2001.) Further, we specifically chose teachers

to participate in the study who had been identified by their principals as highly skilled and effective implementers of the reform agenda.

A sociocultural perspective (Tharp & Gallimore, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978) framed the initial study with a significant amount of effort paid to spending time with families and learning from them. Researchers such as Moll and González (2004) have demonstrated the benefits of getting to know families well and then building connections into classroom teaching with families' "funds of knowledge." This concept refers to families' essential knowledge and skills needed for their effective functioning (Velez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). This perspective and interest in families' views about their children's schooling experience and goals for their children's future has continued to frame the follow-up study reported here.

In order to address all of the research questions of the initial study, we followed 30 primary grade children for two, three, or four years (depending on the research site and students' entry and exit from primary grades). Our data sources included a variety of classroom documents that represented children's development, teachers' assessments of students' progress, and observations and formal interviews of the children's teachers.

We also visited, with the classroom teachers, the homes of the 30 children approximately every eight weeks for the duration of the study. This meant four visits for some families and up to 15 visits for others. During the visits, we viewed the parents as experts on their children, seeking to learn from them. Although we gained many insights through informal visits and conversations, we also formally interviewed the families, taperecording their responses. We first asked about their children, then about themselves; we asked about their backgrounds, demographics, beliefs about schooling, and goals for their children (McIntyre, Kyle, Moore, Sweazy, & Greer, 2001). The family data we collected provided a major impetus for restructuring classroom practices to provide the most effective instruction for these children and for exploring ways of engaging the families more intentionally and meaningfully with the schools and their children's classrooms (Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2002, 2006).

Researchers have confirmed what teachers know about the importance of family involvement and have demonstrated that such involvement has a positive impact on students' eventual success academically (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006/2007; Marcon, 1999; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Sanders & Herting, 2000). Furthermore, the benefits for students can be long term (Barnard, 2004).

In 2005, as the children were leaving middle school and entering high school, we conducted a follow-up study with approximately 25 families across the three study sites with the purposes of (1) understanding the parents'

perspectives about their child's schooling experience and academic progress since leaving the primary program; (2) determining parents' current educational goals for their child; and (3) with their permission, collecting and examining information either from the parents or from the school(s) about the child's performance on state and district required achievement tests and other assessments, such as the state-required writing portfolio, since exiting the primary program. We again conducted taperecorded interviews using a prescribed protocol as well as talking informally with the families.

When we conducted those visits, the children and their families asked if we would return as they were leaving high school. In one site, this has occurred. The study reported here provides data from this one site collected 13 years after the children entered kindergarten in an elementary school located in a small town about 40 minutes from a large urban area. The town is characterized by a courthouse square in the center, a railroad track running down the middle of the main street, small locally owned shops and restaurants, and an annual county parade full of bands, antique cars, and politicians. In the last few years, the town has expanded with new shopping areas, churches, and chain restaurants. The school still draws students from more affluent subdivisions as well as trailer parks, apartments, and government-subsidized housing.

The teacher involved in the initial and subsequent studies was experienced and highly respected in the district. She had grown up in the community, raised her children there, was active in a local church, and had taught the parents of some of the children now enrolled in her classroom. Although she was just a few years from retirement, she had requested a transfer to the school because it was to pilot the nongraded primary program before it was mandated to begin. She embraced the concept as consistent with her own views of teaching and children's learning and wanted to be a part of the new endeavor.

The primary classroom combined children in what would traditionally be labeled kindergarten and first grade, representing the notion of a continuous progress model based on developmentally appropriate practices. The following year, due to enrollment issues, kindergarten classrooms in the school became self-contained, and the organization became a combined first and second grade (again using more traditional labeling). Thus, the students who began as kindergarteners continued in the same setting with the same teacher for their first three years of schooling, K-2.

For the recent follow-up study reported here, the classroom teacher and I again made family visits. Of the initial 10 students in the study from this site, we were able to track down seven. We visited six families in their homes, where I conducted the same type of interviews as in the first follow-up study, and I subsequently conducted a phone interview with another family who had

moved to a nearby state. The data from these families help to address issues related to family goals for their children, family engagement with schools, and students' academic performance.

## **Study Design for Second Follow-up Interviews With Families**

Four research topics framed this study:

1. How do parents describe their child's schooling experience and academic progress since exiting from the primary program and completing high school? How have the parents been involved with their children's schools during this time?
2. What are the parents' post-high school goals for their child? What are the child's plans? How do these compare to the parents' goals stated as the children began school several years ago?
3. How have the children performed on state and district required achievement tests as they have completed high school?
4. How do the current data compare to parents' goals and the students' performance in their early years of schooling?

The collaborating teacher contacted the families and made arrangements for the visits and interviews. The interviews about the research topics took place in the families' homes, lasted about one hour each, and were taperecorded and later transcribed to enable descriptions of the families' perspectives about their children's academic development and current educational goals.

In addition, families gave permission to access the children's achievement test data from the high schools the children attended during the time of testing. Collecting the state-mandated achievement test data for each child made it possible to have both the families' perspectives about the children's performance as well as the actual test results. This information helped highlight the children's academic development over time and could be compared to their early academic performance. Further, the results raise issues to consider about the supports for learning needed by poor and working class children and the barriers that must be addressed to ensure their success.

## **Families and Children as Elementary School Began**

### **Family Demographics**

As noted, the initial study involved mostly poor and working class families. Table 1 captures the characteristics of the seven families who participated in both the initial and two follow-up studies.

Table 1. Demographics of Children in Previous and Recent Follow-up Studies

Child (Race*)	Living with mother with...						
	Poor	Working class	Lower middle class	Middle or upper middle class	less than high school education	high school education	more than high school education
#1 (B)		X				X	
#2 (W)		X				X	
#3 (W)		X				X	
#4 (B)			X				X
#5 (W)	X				X		
#6 (W)				X			X
#7 (W)			X			X	

\*B=Biracial; W=White

In 1996, the state had a concern about its high school graduation rate and the number of students who dropped out along the way. Certainly the children of poor, working, and lower middle class were at most risk for failing to acquire even a high school diploma, a basic necessity for even minimal economic security. Indeed, the statewide educational reform agenda aimed at helping more students achieve at higher levels and become able to reach academic goals.

In spite of what the state trends might have been, the families of the young children entering school held hopes for them and their ultimate achievement. The following section presents comments by some of the parents about their hopes and goals.

### Family Goals for Their Young Children

As expected, most of the parents across the sites in the initial study had a variety of goals for their children, reflecting their desire for their children to get educated for both economic and personal reasons. Several recognized, too, how their own educational limitations had impacted their current situations. The quotes at the beginning of this paper reflect just this viewpoint. Another parent shared:

I want him to enjoy life, I guess. Somebody that can take care of hisself (sic) and not have to depend on nobody. I'm afraid that if they [school policies] don't change it where they can't quit or something, that he'll quit when he gets 16 like his daddy did...

Some of the parents wanted their children to be comfortable financially and seemed to know what it might take to “get the good job,” but were not entirely sure that this was their highest priority in what they wanted for their children.

For example, one couple offered this perspective:

Mother: I want them to be happy. It would be nice if they had money...

Father:...so they wouldn't have to struggle.

Mother: We never had money, and we still are happy.

Several seemed to combine their goals of economic security and happiness in life with more academic goals. As one mother said, "I want her to be a good-hearted person, somebody who cares about others...wait to get married, wait to have kids, make a life for herself. I definitely want her to make good grades." And another noted, "I would like her to value herself and other people...I want her to have some kind of skills. I believe she needs to go to college. I want her to be proud of herself."

Because of the complexities of the families' goals for their children (to get ahead *and* to be loving, responsible, happy people), the families' goals and the schools' goals—with their primary emphasis on academic achievement—were not always consistent. This, in part, could explain the hesitancy some of the families felt about schools. For many, school was not a place where they had been successful or, for some, currently felt welcome.

### **An Attempt to Know and Involve Families**

As described above, a "funds of knowledge" approach framed the initial study in an attempt to get to know the families, learn from them, make instructional connections that would make learning more meaningful for the children, and involve the families in varied ways. Multiple visits to the families helped to communicate respect for the families' insights. We entered their homes with a view of them as experts about their children, and this perspective helped to open up conversations.

At the end of each year, we asked the parents about the visits. Uniformly, the responses were positive as the following comments convey:

I think it's good. I think it's good for the children to know that, you know, you can interlink with each other and not be afraid or scared or whatever. Be friends. I think it's good for a kid to see the parents and teacher in a different environment than school.

I've enjoyed talking to you, and I've learned a lot about [child]. I mean, just listening to myself talk about him sometimes is like, "Wow, yeah, I really do realize that about him." (Kyle et al., 2002, p. 67)

As powerful as the family visits were in building relationships between teachers and families, they were insufficient for actually engaging them in the ongoing academic work of the classroom. To do that, the teachers used a variety

of strategies. They communicated through newsletters, journals, and informal surveys; they modified homework with “expert projects” and “me boxes” as ways to engage the families, and they (with assistance from us as researchers) held several family nights on topics of interest to the parents such as math and literacy but expanded with such topics as hobbies and game-making (Kyle et al., 2002, 2006).

The teachers further made attempts to modify instruction in ways that incorporated what they knew about and had learned from the families. For example, the teacher of the students visited recently created mathematics lessons about measurement based on information shared by the families during a Math Family Night (Kyle, McIntyre, & Moore, 2001). The families contributed favorite dishes to a potluck dinner and brought along the recipes. The measurements and ingredients then became the basis of problem-solving activities with solutions presented in some kind of visual way, and each child developed a recipe book of all the recipes to take home.

Much effort, therefore, focused on providing the kind of support needed to help the children reach high academic standards and, over time, attain their (and their families’) educational goals. The following section describes the children academically during their first years of school.

### **Children’s Academic Performance in the Early Years**

The documents we collected, including teachers’ assessments based on student work, contributed to conclusions about each child’s academic achievement. All of the data were compiled and analyzed to create a portrait of each child as a learner and to describe overall performance.

We used the following terms to summarize what the children’s progress meant: *Regressors* began the study with low performance and, over the course of the study, did not gain a year’s worth of academic progress for a year in school; *stuck kids* began school at a low or low-average level of work and did gain a year’s worth for a year in school but no more than that, thus remaining “stuck” at a low level of school performance; *maintainers* began school with average, high-average, or high work and over time maintained their high status; and *leapers* gained *more* than a year’s worth for a year in school, moving from the low or low-average range to the average or high-average range.

Qualitatively through our many assessments, we found that of the children in this one classroom (10 originally), none were “regressors,” nine were “stuck,” one was a “maintainer,” and none were “leapers” in the area of literacy. In mathematics, none were “regressors,” three were “stuck,” two were “maintainers,” and five were “leapers.”

These data suggest that concerns were warranted about whether the children's long-term academic achievement would be sufficient for reaching the educational goals stated by their parents. Most were "stuck" in low achievement in literacy, although their performance in mathematics seemed more promising. The second follow-up study reported here provides insights about what, in actuality, happened with seven of these children.

## **Families and Children as High School Ends**

### **Updates About the Families and Children**

Four of the seven families live in different homes than when we first visited, with one that moved briefly to another state and then returned to live within two hours of the small town of the original study. Six of the seven families have remained in that town or nearby.

All families reflect the same socioeconomic conditions that characterized their lives several years earlier with no major shifts in circumstances. One family who previously lived in a trailer park now rents a small house in a government-subsidized neighborhood. Another family previously lived in one apartment complex and now lives in a different apartment complex. A third family moved from a very modest house in the small town to a similar house in a high poverty area of the nearby larger city.

While one family has both parents continuing to work in professional roles, all other parents work in the same type of clerical, labor, or service industry jobs they have always held. However, in four of the seven families, the parents have changed from the job they held when we first visited to a similar job with another company or business.

Two of the seven families have experienced divorce, with the children currently residing with the mothers in both instances. Neither mother shared information about the father nor how the divorce had affected the children or family situation. None of the families expressed plans for any major changes in circumstances in the near future.

### **Involvement With and Perception of Schools**

Although most of the parents reported attending sports or other types of school events that specifically involved their child, they consistently indicated that their involvement with the schools had diminished during the middle and then high school years. One parent, indicating she would have liked to have been more involved, pointed out, "I just couldn't get away from work." Another, however, placed some of the blame on the schools, sharing that the schools made less and less an effort to reach out to the families:

Elementary school, you hear from teachers all the time...middle school a little less communication, but at the high school you don't hear from them at all unless they [the children] are being extremely bad and disruptive. I never did hear from them that way [meaning positively].

The families also found that teachers in the upper grades tended to place less emphasis on knowing and being responsive to the particular learning styles and interests of individual children. Several comments captured the parents' views of and concerns about the teaching their children had experienced:

Many of the teachers, I don't think motivated him in a good way... They went about it in a way that he felt wasn't working for him... What he was being taught, there weren't connections made.

In high school, I don't know if the teachers would all help her if she asked. They'd say, "This is how to do it, now do it." That's not the approach for a hands-on learner.

Consistently, then, these families found the schools less responsive to their children's needs as they proceeded through school into upper grades. Further, they found that schools made fewer attempts at communication with the homes or at working in partnership with the families.

### **Academic Performance in the Later Years**

The families who participated in the recent in-person interviews provided permission for access to the children's most recent state level assessment tests as well as ACT results. (Note: These assessments were not made available by the parent of the child who moved to a nearby state and was interviewed by phone. However, the parent noted that the child had made As and Bs in school and had earned 15 college credits while in high school.) The following table captures the known assessments of the children in their last years of high school. State assessments use a four-category system of results which include, from highest to lowest: *distinguished*, *proficient*, *apprentice*, and *novice*.

When compared to the students' earlier portraits as generally "stuck kids" and "maintainers" in literacy, these results near the end of high school are not surprising. Only two of the seven students demonstrated consistently proficient performance on state tests; the performance of the others fell in the lower apprentice and novice categories. Further, in the state where all but one of these students reside, ACT scores have been established for admissible college entrance in credit-bearing English and mathematics courses, with 18 being the required ACT score for English and 19 being the required ACT score in mathematics (although a higher score might be needed for a major in mathematics at some institutions). Only two of the six students whose scores are known met

this standard for English, and three of the six students met the standard for mathematics. Since the student (#2 in the Tables) whose scores are unknown was accepted for college admission, we can assume her scores met the required standards in her state and by her institution.

Table 2. Academic Results in High School

Child	2007-2008 Assessment Math	2007-2008 Assessment Science	2007-2008 Assessment Social Studies	2008-2009 Assessment On-demand Writing	ACT 2008 English	ACT 2008 Math
#1	Apprentice	Apprentice	Apprentice	Apprentice	15	16
#2	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Un-known	Un-known
#3	Apprentice	Novice	Novice	Apprentice	11	17
#4	Apprentice	Proficient	Apprentice	Unknown	25	20
#5	Apprentice	Novice	Novice	Proficient	8	15
#6	Proficient	Proficient	Proficient	Apprentice	15	26
#7	Proficient	Proficient	Proficient	Proficient	19	21

### Educational Outcomes and Goals

Visits with and data from the families revealed that all of the children graduated from high school, two from an alternative high school. One girl attended her district’s alternative school when she became pregnant, and one boy attended the same school because, according to his mother, he needed the more structured environment to stay focused on his studies. Three applied to and were accepted for enrollment at a state university and began classes in Fall 2009; one began classes at a community college and intended to transfer to a university for the next academic year; one (the young woman now taking care of her new baby) planned to begin community college within the year with the goal of eventually transferring to a university; one began training to become an emergency medical technician, and one who already worked as a volunteer firefighter and a paid firefighter on weekends had been accepted for more advanced training that would lead to full-time status as a professional firefighter.

In all cases, the parents expressed pride in their children’s accomplishments. One expressed her feelings this way: “He finished high school and got his diploma. That’s something his daddy couldn’t do. He [the father] didn’t finish high school, but he got his GED.” Another pointed out, “She finished and got her education before [the baby] come along. It’s hard to try to go to school and tag along a baby and, you know, I didn’t want her to have to go through that.”

Table 3. Post-High School Education or Training

Student	Admitted to College	Admitted to Community College with Plans for College	Plans for Community College	Training Program
#1			X	
#2	X			
#3				X
#4	X			
#5				X
#6	X			
#7		X		

The parents also felt the goal of their child’s success in either college or other formal training was an attainable one and would be reached. One parent, whose daughter is entering training to be an emergency medical technician, reflected on goals held for her child many years ago when she started kindergarten. She recalled, “It’s always been something in the medical field.” Another parent projected, “He’ll become a full-fledged firefighter...successful—I’m not saying rich—but in the line of work he really wants.” Yet another parent looked ahead, “He’ll graduate from college in four or five years and find a career that would make him happy,” and another joked, “I want her to graduate from college and support me!”

### **Insights and Implications About Family Connections and Student Success**

The children in this second follow-up study began school thirteen years ago with a highly skilled teacher for multiple years, an educational program designed to be developmentally appropriate, and a teacher who made a concerted effort to engage families meaningfully and in a sustained way. Further, their parents took part in a longitudinal study which focused on valuing parents as experts about their children, learning from and engaging the families, and changing instruction in ways that connected with what the children and families knew—all for the purpose of increasing the likelihood of the children’s academic success.

Having now interviewed seven of the families about their involvement with schools over time and their current goals for their children, and having examined the students’ assessments of academic progress, what does this study

reveal? What issues does this study raise about engaging families and the supports children need both within and external to schools to be academically successful?

Certainly we cannot claim that having a good start in school with many things in place to support these students—excellent teacher, well-conceived program, family visits—can solely explain the rather surprising news that most of them are either in a college or on a path to get there or in a training program. No causality is claimed or even a correlation. However, we can speculate and wonder a bit.

Even though many of these students were “stuck kids” in literacy at the end of their primary grade years, many were also “maintainers” or “leapers” in mathematics. They had the advantage of having a well-respected, skilled teacher who, although near retirement, was eager to learn the most current, educationally sound practices for teaching young children. This included strategies for teaching content as well as strategies for creating a learning environment based on caring relationships and positive recognition of students’ contributions. Further, most of the students remained in this teacher’s classroom for their first three years of schooling as part of the continuous progress, nongraded emphasis of the primary program framework. Perhaps this kind of start in school exerted a subtle effect on how the students saw themselves as learners that somehow held beyond those early years.

In addition, these students and their families became well known by the teacher through multiple visits to their homes. Not only was the family knowledge respected, what was learned from them became more embedded in the activities of the classroom than might be typical in many classrooms. As a consequence, these children had an increased opportunity to feel a greater connection with what they were learning (even if they didn’t realize it). Also, the parents had increased opportunities to become engaged with the school and to feel as if their perspectives were understood. This way of working in partnership during the primary years might have been more beneficial than initially realized in helping to provide a strong foundation for learning for these children. We can only speculate about whether their learning over time and eventual outcomes would have been different if the connections with the families had not occurred and if the classroom instruction had not been of high quality.

We can also wonder what kind of positive impact on student learning might have occurred if the middle and high schools the students attended had been similarly committed to reaching out to the families, learning from them, and engaging them. The parents consistently reported that communication from the schools lessened as their children proceeded through the grades. Since many students begin to slip academically during these later years, efforts to

establish ongoing communication and effective partnership arrangements become especially critical for student success. Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) made a similar recommendation based on their survey study of 770 parents of students in seventh through ninth grade. According to them, “Also of interest in this study are the perceived invitations from the teachers to motivate parents to become involved at school” (p. 172).

Efforts of middle and high schools, such as those described in the work of the National Network of Partnership Schools associated with Johns Hopkins University, can provide helpful insights and guidance for others (Epstein, 2007). Further, Deslandes and Bertrand suggest,

The findings call attention to the value of personal teacher–parent contacts for building trusting relationships that will be manifested subsequently by parent involvement activities at school and by other forms of parents’ willingness to help. (p. 173)

However, Hill and Tyson’s (2009) meta-analysis of the kinds of strategies related to parent involvement in middle schools that promote achievement resulted in findings that addressed the issue in another way. They found that “...a specific type of involvement, namely academic socialization, has the strongest positive relation with achievement during middle school” (p. 758). By this they mean parents’ conveying to their middle school child their expectations for achievement, the value of education, effective learning strategies, and goals for the future. Schools can assist parents in learning useful ways of addressing such issues. As Hill and Tyson (2009) note,

One of the largest challenges for middle school teachers in their attempts to involve parents is the large number of parents with whom they must develop relationships...Academic socialization as a parental involvement strategy is adaptive for middle school contexts because it is not dependent on the development of deep, high-quality relationships with the teacher. (p. 759)

Instead, they recommend that schools share information about academic socialization through communications between the school and home and the use of electronic means.

## **Closing Reflection**

When we examine the quotes that open this paper and others included about parents’ early goals for their children, we find that they focused on hopes of their children finishing high school rather than envisioning college in their children’s future. Perhaps this was due to their own challenges in reaching the

goal of high school graduation, and so they wanted this goal for their own children. Or perhaps the notion of college attendance seemed too far removed from their family's frame of reference or experience to even speculate about it. Or even if college attendance could be seen as a desired goal, perhaps the cost involved for these mostly poor and working class families made it seem out of reach. In at least three families, though, and perhaps eventually five, the children have essentially surpassed their parents' earlier goals despite the fact that the families remain in the same economic conditions they were in 13 years ago. Somewhere along the way, the children and families set more than a high school diploma as a goal and, at least for now, an attainable one. Certainly they recognized that to be meaningfully educated and employed today takes college preparation or technical training.

Lareau (2000) reported that many educators continue to view some families as not caring about education, and this view especially exists about poor families. However, other studies have refuted the perception that poor families neither care about nor support their children's education (Cooper, 2004; Kyle et al., 2002; McCarthy, 2000; Rogers, 2003; Valdés, 1996). This study offers further confirmation of such findings. In fact, several of these students seem to be on their way to breaking through their family histories to reach a new level of educational attainment.

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# The Intersection of Culture and Achievement Motivation

*Elise Trumbull and Carrie Rothstein-Fisch*

## Abstract

Achievement motivation is something that all members of the school community want to support in students, however few may recognize that it is influenced by culture. The very meaning of “achievement” is culturally variable, and the motives that students have for achieving may be quite different, depending upon their cultural background. The practices of schools tend to reflect the individualism of the dominant U.S. culture. Many students come from families that are more collectivistic. Elementary bilingual teachers used a cultural framework of individualism/collectivism to guide understanding and innovations related to achievement motivation. Examples illustrate cultural differences and how they can be bridged.

Key Words: achievement motivation, cultural differences, bridging cultures, individualism, collectivism, academic goals, social goals, schools, teachers’ practices, parents, Latino, action research, expectations

## Introduction

Achievement motivation is an important contributor to students’ academic success (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996) and, hence, of interest to all stakeholders in the community of the school. It is well documented that cultural differences affect achievement motivation (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Kaplan, Karabenick, & DeGroot, 2009; Maehr & Yamaguchi, 2001; Otsuka & Smith, 2005; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). For that reason, parents and teachers may be

coming at the issue from very different perspectives because of cultural differences between home and school (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). We believe that if a school community truly wants to promote the success of all students, it must recognize how achievement motivation varies culturally within the population it serves.

School personnel need to learn from parents how students have been socialized at home to think about academic achievement. At the same time, they can also help parents understand the culture of the school and the kinds of expectations schools may have of their children. Such communication is key to forging continuities between home and school (Shor & Bernhard, 2003; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). In this article, we use a cultural framework (individualism/collectivism) to explain how Latino immigrant students' achievement motivation may be different from that of their mainstream American peers. We offer examples from elementary teachers' classroom-based research to illustrate how achievement motivation can be approached in a more culturally responsive way. Our findings come from Bridging Cultures,<sup>®1</sup> a teacher collaborative action research project.

## **What Is Culture?**

“Culture” is a contested construct: Nearly everyone believes it exists, but few can agree on exactly what it is and whether using research about culture to inform educational decisions is more helpful—leading to insights—or damaging—leading to stereotypes (Hollins, 1996). Nevertheless, faced with increasing student diversity and evidence that students from a given cultural background appear to share certain understandings and “powerfully motivating sources of their action[s]” (Strauss & Quinn, 1997, p. 3), many educators are paying attention to culture.

We characterize culture as a dynamic system of values, expectations, and associated practices that help organize people's daily lives and mediate their thoughts and actions. These values, expectations, and practices are learned in social contexts and are transmitted across generations, even as they are modified by people within a culture in interaction with people from other cultures and in the face of new needs (Greenfield, 2009). Cultures are not strictly bounded; that is, there is considerable overlap in the values, expectations, and practices of different cultures (Strauss & Quinn, 1997).

## **Approaches to Achievement Motivation**

Achievement motivation theory has been primarily cognitive in nature, attributing the sources of motivation to individual goals (e.g., Ames, 1992;

Dweck, 1986; Stipek, 1998). Students are thought to have *task* goals (focused on improvement and mastery) and *ability* or *performance* goals (focused on showing their ability, particularly vis-à-vis other students; Ginsburg-Block, Rohrbeck, Lavigne, & Fantuzzo, 2008; McInerney, Roche, McInerney, & Marsh, 1997). "...[I]mplicit in both mastery and performance goals is a focus on individualism where priority is given to the goals of individuals" (McInerney et al., 1997, p. 208).

Since the early days of achievement motivation research, theorists have increasingly acknowledged the importance of social influences, such as peers, family, and community (e.g., Weiner, 1994). Some have identified social aspects of the classroom that affect motivation (e.g., Matos, Lens, & Vansteenkiste, 2009), including relationships with peers and teachers (Hudley & Daoud, 2008). Covington (2000) points out that social goals may motivate students: "Like academic goals, the pursuit of social goals can help organize, direct, and empower individuals to achieve more fully" (p. 178). Covington observes that students' desire to achieve for the sake of the group (a prosocial goal) is the basis for the success of cooperative learning. Covington concludes that prosocial goals affect achievement directly, as well as in combination with academic goals. Other social goals are to affiliate with or please others (Kaplan et al., 2009). Ryan and Deci (2000) include in their theoretical framework "relatedness," or social-emotional connection to other people, as a source of motivation. Social goals should not be trivialized as simply students' wanting to socialize. Such goals arise from basic, culture-based values. Conclusions about the relationship between social goals and achievement motivation drawn from research on dominant culture American students cannot safely be extended to other cultural groups.

## **Integrating a Cultural Perspective Into Achievement Motivation Theory**

Although the field of achievement motivation has moved beyond a strictly individualistic perspective to recognizing the role of social factors, it has delved into the role of culture less deeply. The existing research that does address culture is largely with post-secondary students and often based in other countries. However, as the U.S. K–12 population has become more diverse, more attention is being given to cultural factors here (e.g., Hill & Torres, 2010; Kaplan et al., 2009; Perreira, Fuligni, & Potochnick, 2010). Our research makes a special contribution in that it provides an organizing framework for understanding the findings of previous research and offers empirical examples of elementary teachers' innovations field-tested in their own classrooms.

## Research on Achievement Motivation and Culture

It can be argued that culture figures in every factor that has been linked with achievement motivation (Singelis, 2000). In this section, we review studies that investigate varying cultural perspectives on the meaning of (a) achievement, (b) social goals and relationships, (c) education, (d) praise and criticism, and (e) peer and adult approval in relation to student motivation.

### *The Variable Value of “Achievement”*

The perceived value of “achievement” itself varies culturally. For instance, it may be valued primarily for promoting future success (job, schooling), as in Western cultures, or for bringing honor to one’s family, as in Eastern cultures (Urdan, 2009). Fuligni (2001) found in his research that both Asian and Latin American adolescents had higher academic motivation than their European American peers, which he attributed to their “sense of obligation to the family” (p. 61). In addition, there are cultural differences in perceptions of what it takes to achieve—for example, effort versus ability (Heine, Kitayama, & Lehman, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), listening versus participating in dialogue (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000), collaborating versus working individually (Salili, 2009).

### *Social Goals, Relationships, and Motivation*

The importance ascribed to social relationships varies widely across cultures. Relationships are, no doubt, important within all cultures, but they play a relatively stronger role in collectivistic cultures (note: collectivism and its contrasting counterpart individualism are described below under “The Individualism/Collectivism Framework”). For instance, in collectivistic cultures like those of Japan and Mexico, achievement motivation is often correlated with social versus individual goals (cf., Urdan, 2009).

Positive relationships with peers have been cited as especially important for the engagement and success of immigrant Latino students (e.g., Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009). Likewise, caring relationships with teachers have been cited as particularly important for Latino students (Conchas, 2001; Gibson & Bejinez, 2002; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). Research with ethnic “minority” students has shown that perceived teacher support is particularly important to keeping them engaged with school—literally in school, not dropping out (Hudley & Daoud, 2008). Hudley and Daoud (2008) found that low levels of teacher support (as reported by students) negatively affected low-socioeconomic status Latino students’ engagement (as reported by teachers). In fact, relationships with teachers were more strongly related to engagement than were peer relationships.

Guay, Senecal, Marsh, and Dowson (2005) studied immigrant and non-immigrant Turkish students in Belgium and found that in comparison to non-Turkish Belgians they tended to be higher in relatedness. Verkuyten, Thijs, and Canatan (2001) found that both Dutch adolescents and immigrant Turkish adolescents in the Netherlands exhibited individual achievement motivation; however, only the Turkish students also exhibited “family motivation,” a desire to achieve for the sake of the family (cf., Fuligni, 2001).

Research on immigrant and U.S.-born Latino immigrants found that not only academic competence but also school belonging and parent involvement were positively related to achievement motivation (Ibañez, Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2004). Numerous other studies have pointed to “belonging” as an important factor in the school achievement of ethnic “minority” students (cf., Booker, 2006; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Kia-Keating, 2007; Osterman, 2000).

### *Culturally Differing Notions of “Education”*

Research with both Latino students in the U.S. (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995) and Chinese students in China (Li, 2002) has shown that “education” is perceived as having a moral dimension in some cultures. Immigrant Latino American parents are likely to believe that *educación* is meant to foster a morally developed student and that one cannot be a good student without being a good person (Reese et al., 1995). Chinese parents are likely to communicate that education entails “moral striving” (Li, 2002, p. 248), and their children may feel guilt or shame if they are not motivated to learn. Likewise, American Indian families tend to believe that education must have a moral and ethical dimension (Trumbull, Nelson-Barber, & Mitchell, 2002). European American parents no doubt value their children’s moral development, but they are likely to see it as something that is supported in parallel with cognitive development, not intertwined with it (cf., Greenfield et al., 2000).

### *Culture and Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation*

Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are fundamental constructs in conceptualizations of achievement motivation. “Extrinsic motivation” refers to engagement<sup>2</sup> generated by external forces, such as rewards or incentives (Hendlerlong & Lepper, 2002). “Intrinsic motivation” refers to the performance of activities for the sake of the pleasure or satisfaction inherent in the activity itself (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 2001). Both forms of motivation could be thought of in terms of differing incentives. According to Slavin (2006), an intrinsic incentive is “[a]n aspect of an activity that people enjoy and therefore find motivating” (p. 334); an extrinsic incentive is “[a] reward that is external to the activity, such as recognition or a good grade” (p. 335). Much research

has shown that more often than not extrinsic rewards undermine intrinsic motivation (Cameron, Banko, & Pierce, 2001; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999).

Both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations vary in relation to culture. “[I]nate psychological needs for competence and self-determination” are thought to underlie intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2001, p. 3), however even the notion of “self-determination” is culture-bound. Some cultures are much more “self”-oriented than others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). And what counts as an extrinsic motivator, as well as how it is received and used, is also culturally variable (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008).

### *Cultural Differences in the Use of Criticism and Praise as Motivators*

It is standard wisdom in the canon of Western child rearing that children should be praised in order to support development of their self-esteem and criticized very selectively. This value of praise is also widely espoused in teacher preparation programs (see popular educational psychology texts, such as Eggen & Kauchak, 2004; Woolfolk, 2004). But criticism and praise are also not viewed uniformly across cultures. Public praise may make some students feel uncomfortable because it singles them out from the group and, by implication, elevates them above their peers (Geary, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). Some students may be more motivated by critical feedback because their goal is to meet the expectations of their teachers and/or family (Heine et al., 2001). Heine and colleagues (2001) found that Japanese college students tended to be more self-critical and responsive to “failure feedback” than Canadian college students, who tended to discount negative feedback. Whereas Canadian students were “reluctant to conclude that they had performed worse than their average classmate, Japanese were hesitant to conclude that they had performed better” (p. 71). These findings bring into question the universality of the value of focusing on the positive aspects of students’ performance.

In a study by Geary (2001), a school counselor intern was tutoring a group of Latina students in English. “He constantly used praise in a manner that he felt would be motivating to the young women. However, one of his students mocked his praise and imitated his comments in a sing-song manner; ‘Good job,’ and then erupted into giggles” (personal communication, March 10, 2000, based on research reported in Geary, 2001, p. 112). In this example, praise that was intended to increase students’ achievement motivation had the unlikely result of eliciting mockery. Thus, it appeared to actually serve as a disincentive.

### *Differences in Construal of “Adult Approval” and “Peer Approval”*

Cultural differences are evident in the meanings of “adult approval” and “peer approval.” As mentioned above, in many cultures academic achievement

is valued because it reflects well on the family, and helping one's peers to succeed reflects a fundamental value—not a personal psychological need to be accepted (Elliott & Bempechat, 2002; Kim & Choi, 1994; Trumbull et al., 2001; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). In such cases, “adult approval” and “peer approval” are better understood in terms of a set of values very different from those of the dominant U.S. culture, where academic achievement is quite clearly an individual matter and where social goals are usually interpreted as being in the service of the self (Reeve, 2006; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). In other words, the apparently same social goals may serve different purposes in different cultures.

## **The Bridging Cultures Project**

Examples of the interaction of culture and motivation come from the Bridging Cultures Project, a longitudinal collaborative action research project. This work is fueled by theory and research and also contributes to both by its findings in regard to the academic motivation of younger students who share a particular cultural background. Not only our own examples but also those we have cited from the literature can be understood with reference to the organizing cultural framework of individualism and collectivism.

We offer a brief introduction to the project below (an extended description can be found in Trumbull et al., 2001). The goal of the project was to investigate whether teacher professional development on cultural theory and related research would result in changes in teachers' thinking and practice vis-à-vis their largely immigrant Latino students from rural or working class backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

The project did not set out to examine impact on specific practices or student outcomes (e.g., achievement). The intention was to document closely over a period of several years whether and how teachers changed in whatever domains they identified or that became evident through interviews and observations. The Project research also focused on how the children in each teacher's classroom responded to any teacher innovations.

## **The Individualism/Collectivism Framework**

### **Method**

The Bridging Cultures Project introduced teachers to the cultural framework of individualism and collectivism via a series of professional development workshops and followed changes in teachers' thinking and practice over a period of more than five years. Two early parallel studies conducted by psychology students compared teacher–student and student–student relationships in a

Bridging Cultures classroom and a matched non-Bridging Cultures classroom (Correia-Chavez, 1999; Isaac, 1999). Other research spawned by the original project continues to the present (e.g., Greenfield, Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Espinoza, & Monterroza, 2011). The project's primary perspective is ethnographic, although a quasi-experimental design guided an intervention with teachers and some methods of data collection and analysis.

*Individualism and Collectivism: Two Contrasting Systems of Values*

Our research uses the framework of individualism–collectivism (I/C) (Greenfield, 1994; Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1989) as a tool for understanding differences between the culture of immigrant Latino students and the dominant culture, as represented in U.S. schools. The tasks of human development have been framed in terms of two fundamentally different cultural pathways: one individualistic and one collectivistic (Greenfield, 1994; Greenfield et al., 2006). Individualism emphasizes individual identity, independence, self-fulfillment, and standing out; collectivism emphasizes group identity, interdependence, social responsibility, and fitting in (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003). Individualism is associated with competition and self-assertion, whereas collectivism is associated with collaboration and respect for authority (e.g., teachers).

There is, of course, variation within any cultural group, and these generalizations represent idealized versions of value systems. In addition, societies change in response to new environmental conditions. For example, as societies become more urban, educated, and industrialized, they tend to move in the direction of individualistic values (Greenfield, 2009). Despite the dangers of oversimplification, these constructs (collectivism and individualism) have been shown to be extremely useful in crystallizing some fundamental differences that can explain the nature of certain cross-cultural conflicts in the classroom (e.g., Greenfield et al., 2000; Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008; Trumbull et al., 2001). Dominant U.S. culture (rooted in Western Europe and reflected in U.S. classrooms) is highly individualistic. On the other hand, the cultures of a great many non-dominant cultures in the U.S. are highly collectivistic (Hofstede, 2001). These cultural orientations play out somewhat differently in different cultural contexts. For example, the collectivism of Chinese culture is heavily influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes early mastery of impulse control in preparation for later academic achievement (Ho, 1994), which is also strongly valued. Thus, “academic achievement motivation should be exceedingly strong” (Ho, 1994, p. 293) among Chinese children. The immigrant students from Mexico and Central America may not be socialized so strongly to academic achievement, in part because of lack of consistent educational op-

portunities afforded their parents. What they are likely to have in common with Chinese students and other Asian-culture students are the values of sharing with and caring for the group, great respect for elders (including teachers), and modesty about their own accomplishments (Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000; Ho, 1994; Roosa et al., 2002).

### *Participants*

Seven Spanish/English bilingual elementary teachers from the greater Los Angeles area, referred by colleagues or administrators who identified them as excellent educators, volunteered to participate. Four identified themselves as Latino and three as European American. Grades kindergarten through fifth were represented. Teachers' experience ranged from 5–21 years ( $M = 12.7$  years) at the outset of the project. Teachers began as participants and evolved into teacher-researchers in the first year of the project. Four "staff" researchers conducted the study: a cross-cultural developmental psychologist (Patricia Greenfield), a Latina immigrant graduate student (Blanca Quiroz), an applied psycholinguist (Elise Trumbull), and an educational psychologist who is a teacher educator (Carrie Rothstein-Fisch).

### **Procedure**

#### *Phases of the Project*

The Bridging Cultures Project developed in four phases. The first phase included three half-day workshops on cultural theory and research spread out over a period of four months. In the second phase, the seven teacher researchers and four staff researchers met every two or three months for four and a half years to discuss teachers' thinking and practice. Classroom observations and interviews took place during this phase as well. During the third phase, which continues, we (staff researchers and teacher researchers) have disseminated the findings of the project. The fourth phase involves ongoing collaborations with graduate students and teachers (including one of the Bridging Cultures teachers, Ms. Catherine Daley) to investigate a range of questions, including whether professional development on culture is useful with parents or with preschool teachers.

#### *Pre- and Post-Assessments*

To determine the teachers' orientation to problem solving based on individualistic or collectivistic perspectives, at the beginning of the first workshop they were given a pre-assessment consisting of four problem scenarios to be resolved (Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000). A parallel set of problem scenarios was administered at the end of the third workshop. Figures 1 and 2 below show scenario examples.

Figure 1. The Classroom Jobs Scenario (Pre-test)

It is the end of the school day, and the class is cleaning up. Denise isn't feeling well, and she asks Jasmine to help her with her job for the day, which is cleaning the blackboard. Jasmine isn't sure that she will have time to do both jobs.
What do you think the teacher should do?

Figure 2. The Dinner Scenario (Post-test)

Dennis is the first one home in the afternoon. when his mother gets home at 7, she finds that Dennis has not started cooking dinner yet. When she asks Dennis why he didn't get dinner started, Dennis says he wasn't hungry.
What do you think his mother should do?

### *The Professional Development*

Teachers were taught about the I/C framework and research based on it during a series of three half-day workshops that were videotaped and documented in field notes. They were encouraged to explore whether the framework could be used to understand their own cultures and the cultures of students and school—and if so, in what ways. The professional development was not prescriptive, that is, no suggestions were made as to what might constitute an improvement in classroom practice based on cultural knowledge. Hence, teachers could not “tell researchers what they wanted to hear.” Experimentation and innovation were left completely up to the teachers, and a “reflective practice” approach (Schön, 1983) was used to foster teachers’ development. They were introduced to ethnography as a tool for learning about their students’ cultural communities from parents and family as well as students themselves.

Ethnography is a research method used by anthropologists. In brief, it entails learning about a cultural group directly from members of that group and from direct observation. An ethnographic approach is non-judgmental, and when teachers engaged in ethnography, they suspended their role as experts, looking to parents and students as experts on their own culture. They became participant-observers in their own classrooms as they documented how students responded to various instructional and organizational strategies (Trumbull et al., 2001). This non-judgmental approach resulted in changes in perceptions, understanding, and educational practice (Trumbull, Greenfield, Rothstein-Fisch, & Maynard, 1999; Trumbull et al., 2001).

*Videotape Documentation and Discourse Analysis*

The professional development sessions and one follow-up meeting were videotaped. Discourse analysis of videotape transcripts documented changes in the ways teachers talked about “culture.”

*Classroom Observations*

In the two years following the workshops, all teachers were observed in their classrooms by staff researchers at least twice for two to four hours during each visit. The protocol for each observation was guided by teachers’ prior claims regarding changes in practices. For instance, if a teacher was focusing on increasing the involvement of parent volunteers and improving relationships with parents, we observed during times when parents would be in the classroom, asked the teacher for documentation of parent visits, and asked post-observation interview questions related to that topic. Observers met with each teacher to debrief immediately after the observation (typically during the teacher’s lunch or preparation time). Intensive interviews with each teacher were also conducted during phase two, organized around the topics of cross-cultural conflict and teachers’ changed practices.

**Results**

All of the teachers shifted dramatically from a very strong individualistic orientation (85% of responses) on the pre-assessment to one that was either much more collectivistic (50% of responses) or balanced in individualistic and collectivistic perspective (43% of responses) on the post-assessment (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, Quiroz, & Greenfield, 1997). Discourse analysis showed changes in teachers’ understanding of “culture,” including recognition that they themselves “had culture” and that their choices in the ways they designed their instruction reflected cultural perspectives (Trumbull et al., 1999).

The observations provided evidence of practices that the teachers actually used, corroborating their claims during interviews and group meetings of the ways that they were guided by an understanding of their students’ home cultures. Although we do not have data on these teachers’ practices prior to their involvement with Bridging Cultures, their reports of new practices and perceptions are in harmony with changes on the pre- and post-assessments of cultural knowledge and the changes in their discourse about culture documented in the videotapes. (For an expanded exploration of results, see Isaac, 1999; Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, & Hasan, 2000; Trumbull et al., 1999, 2001, 2002; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003.)

## Examples from Bridging Cultures Classrooms Related to Achievement Motivation

### Example 1: Reframing the Meaning of an External Motivator

The following example is drawn from a third-grade classroom in Southern California, serving an almost exclusively immigrant Latino population (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, Isaac, Daley, & Pérez, 2003). The teacher, Mrs. Amada Pérez, is a Mexican immigrant who came with her family to the United States as a young child. Our exposition weaves back and forth between Mrs. Pérez's thinking and practice and the children's behaviors.

During an observation in Pérez's class, a star chart was noticed. The chart documented how many multiplication math facts each third grade child had successfully memorized and could repeat in a specified time. Students' progress was tracked by the placement of metallic stars next to each child's name corresponding to his or her level of achievement. The chart appeared to be an individualistic way to motivate children to master their multiplication facts. The observer asked Mrs. Pérez about its use. She explained:

For many years I had known about having charts where children's names are up, and they collect stars when they pass different things, especially used in math....I went ahead and tried it, but I was never happy with it, and it wasn't always completed. For a while, I put it on the inside of the closet door. It was a struggle for me, but I didn't know why.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Pérez had learned about using the chart as an extrinsic motivator to prompt a desire in students to demonstrate individual achievement. But it did not seem to work in the way expected, and she struggled to figure out what to do with it. Mrs. Pérez continued, "I realized that it was based on extrinsic motivation, and I wanted intrinsic motivation. So as time passed, I just quit using the chart completely."

#### *Retooling the Purpose and Use of the Star Chart*

Originally, Mrs. Pérez's only frame of reference for understanding the lack of motivational value of the chart was the dimension of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. She did not have other frameworks for understanding what might influence children's motivation. Then, she encountered the cultural framework of individualism and collectivism in the Bridging Cultures Project and saw it as a source of understanding why the star chart may have bombed as a motivational tool. She observed:

Then years passed, and I went to Bridging Cultures. And I started learning another way of thinking, and I started learning about the success of

groups collectively....I decided to try bringing [the chart] out again, to use the power of the group to help everybody succeed.

Equipped with a new understanding of culture, and in particular the collectivism of her students, Mrs. Pérez reconceptualized the chart—from a means of encouraging students to earn more stars for themselves to a visual aid that stimulated and encouraged the children to think about achievement motivation as a group issue.

We all looked at the chart together and talked about it....The students asked, “Wouldn’t it be neat if it would be a solid block of stars and the whole chart was filled in?” and everybody said, “Yeah, yeah, that would be so neat.”

From the children’s collectivistic perspective, the chart seemed to be a potential motivator for group achievement rather than individual achievement. The children’s academic motivation was apparently tied to a social goal: whole-group success. Their concern was not the individual lines of stars for any one student, but the entire chart, representing the whole class.

To accomplish their shared goal, the students decided on a buddy system to support learning of their math facts. The more advanced students would help/tutor those still learning. When both tutor and tutee decided the tutee was ready, the student would sign up to be time-tested on his or her multiplication facts.

[During the testing process,] [t]hey were allowed to bring their buddy [or group] up for moral support. While the buddy watched—they weren’t allowed to say anything—the person being tested experienced success most of the time....Nobody tried to whisper the answer. They had tremendous self-control. When they passed, they hugged each other and gave words of encouragement.

The testing situation itself included several opportunities for a collectivistic approach to learning, but no one transgressed the rule of individual performance, once it was time for testing. According to Mrs. Pérez,

This went on until we achieved a 100% up to a certain point [on the chart]. The kids were ecstatic. They achieved a whole block of stars! A day of celebration—they were even more encouraged to go on. In third grade, they only have to go up to the 5’s. Many went to the 12s. All got to the 6’s...they went beyond the requirement. It was extremely exciting....How could I have not done that all these years? I didn’t have the clear knowledge of the framework of individualism and collectivism. I continue to use that.

### *A Seamless System*

During a visit to Mrs. Pérez's classroom, the second author observed the individual testing and one more motivational component to the star chart. Students successful in their timed math facts rang a bell to signal the placing of a star on the group chart. The entire class stopped working, looked up, clapped to acknowledge another star on "their" chart, and seamlessly returned to their task. They did not appear to be distracted by the bell or to show a great deal of interest in the actual star that was going up on the chart; instead they seemed to recognize the child who had accomplished something meaningful.

### **Example 2: Another Case of Reframing an Individual Reward as a Group Reward**

In another Bridging Cultures classroom, Mrs. Elvia Hernandez's combined class of K-1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup>-grade students, motivation took another turn toward the group. This time, the students' desire to share a tangible reward with each other superseded the appeal of an individual reward (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). On the basis of desirable behavior, students were able to earn fake money that could be used to purchase rewards. However, they preferred to pool their money rather than use it individually:

They always gave the money to the banker. When they purchased something, they thought about what they could buy to share. In the case of a coloring book, they wondered about ripping out the pages and thus turning the book into worksheets and not a book at all. (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 97)

### **Example 3: Offering a Social Reward Responsive to Cultural Values**

Another example comes from the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>-grade classroom of Ms. Marie Altchech (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). Though she had used group rewards in the past, that practice took on new form and meaning as a result of her involvement with the Bridging Cultures Project. In one long-standing practice, table clusters of four students each were able to earn points for good behavior towards a reward of their choosing. Over time, Ms. Altchech had discovered that the most desired reward in her classroom was the opportunity to have lunch with her. She says,

I let them make the decision [about what would motivate them] and the students said "free time," or "art." Once I suggested maybe lunch with me, the children wanted that above all else. Eventually, they all earned the points to have lunch, so everyday I sit with different tables outside

during lunch, and I can see their table manners and chitchat. Now I don't need table points for any reason, I just enjoy listening to them during lunchtime.

In this case, the reward for good behavior or task completion was effective because the students successfully changed the reinforcement paradigm. First, the teacher rewarded the students with a special lunch with her—something more desirable than even free time or art. But then Mrs. Altchech's perspective shifted. First, she found that she enjoyed the special, unstructured time with the students. Second, she came to realize that the point system might not be necessary—that the opportunity to eat lunch with the teacher was the only reward students wanted and that a token economy used to buy and sell an array of rewards was superfluous.

#### **Example 4: Selecting “Family” Topics as an Incentive to Engagement and Performance**

Bridging Cultures teachers say that activities and materials that incorporate a focus on family are highly motivating to their students. Fourth-grade teacher Mr. Giancarlo Mercado selects stories from the basal reader that focus on family. “Las Mañanitas” is a story about a boy from a family of migrant workers. The boy always knows when the family is about to move, because dozens of cardboard boxes appear in their house. Mr. Mercado asked his students how many of them thought the boy should stay with friends if he could when his family moved, so that he could keep going to the same school and keep up academically and how many thought the boy should move and help his family. All 28 students raised their hands for the latter alternative. Mr. Mercado says that students were riveted by this story (Trumbull et al., 2000).

Mrs. Pérez noticed that when 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students wrote about family experiences, they tended to write more than when asked to write about “what it's like to be a good friend” on the district-wide writing assessment. She says,

I suggested [at a faculty meeting] that their richest experiences were with their families. Many have been to Mexico or to a family event like a birthday or baptism. I drafted a question on the spot, and it got accepted [by the district]. “Write about an experience that you had with your family. Be sure to include who, what, where, when, and how.” [This was parallel to the structure of the district assessment's prompt.] We got a lot of production. Individual scores jumped—some from 4 to 17 points, demonstrating better language use, punctuation, capitals, vocabulary, and quotation marks. (Trumbull et al., 2000, p. 18)

### **Example 5: Competition vs. Collaboration: Contrasting a Bridging Cultures and Non-Bridging Cultures Classroom**

Another example of students' collaboration comes from the classroom of 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade teacher Ms. Catherine Daley. In her classroom, during large- and small-group instructional activities, students were encouraged to help each other learn and show what they have learned. For instance, in preparing for annual district-wide tests, students worked together on practice test items. Ms. Daley explained:

We would put the question on the board or overhead and work on it as a group. Or just work out of one booklet—but always in a group. I still do this. I prefer to work my class in small or whole groups. Little by little we move away from the whole group as we get ready for the actual test. I make sure to explain to the students what changes are going to occur regarding group and individual work. (Rothstein-Fisch et al., 2003, p. 135)

Observed during such cooperative activities in Ms. Daley's classroom, students were clearly engaged; there was no misbehavior or need for Ms. Daley to reprimand students. The activity went with the "cultural flow," which is for the children to work together for group success. When it comes time for the formal test, Ms. Daley reminds the students that they cannot help each other—that this is a time to show what they can do independently.

Insights about effective (or ineffective) motivational practices came not only from the Bridging Cultures teachers but also from a comparison 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade classroom of primarily immigrant Latino students. A student of one of the Bridging Cultures researchers spent dozens of hours videotaping in this 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade classroom as part of the research for her senior honors thesis (Isaac, 1999). One event she captured and recounted at a Bridging Cultures meeting crystallized the contrast between a culturally aware approach to achievement motivation and one that is based on a set of dominant-culture values.

The teacher organizes students in two teams to compete with each other to solve addition problems on the blackboard. Children are lined up in two rows, many of them looking anxiously at each other. Even though the children are in teams, they are not allowed to help each other. Children (one from each team) take turns going to the blackboard; when friends nearby try to give encouragement or help with solving the problem, the teacher shushes them with the admonition that they need to show independently what they know. As each student team representative approaches the board, the children shout "Ooooh," indicative of the pressure this activity evoked. Some of the children position themselves as if praying. The two children at the board are actually competing

with each other without any help or support from their group members, which visibly results in stress. (Rothstein-Fisch et al., 2003, p. 134)

The competitive framing of the task clearly does not result in the kind of engagement the teacher is most certainly seeking. Moreover, as Isaac (1999) reports, throughout the extended period of observation in this classroom, the teacher spent what seemed to be an inordinate amount of time managing the students' behavior. Her immigrant Latino students' natural inclinations to help each other were met constantly with admonitions to work independently. With an apparent view of learning as a strictly individual matter, the teacher did not perceive the possibilities of student collaboration, nor did she have a cultural framework for understanding the likely source of the students' behaviors or why some instructional activities might not be motivating for them (Isaac, 1999).

## Discussion

To understand why a classroom practice or tool may be motivating or not, one needs to know something about the students involved. Social contextual factors such as geography, economics, ethnic/racial composition of the school, the culture of the school, teachers' perception of cultural differences, and school relations with parents undoubtedly affect motivation either directly or indirectly. Historical and structural realities also affect students' engagement with schooling and their achievement motivation. Immigrant Latino students like those in the Bridging Cultures study "often encounter ill-equipped learning environments, inadequate instructional materials, ineffective teachers, and defiant peer subcultures..." (Conchas, 2001, p. 475). Conversely, supportive high-level academic opportunities are associated with higher expectations on the part of such students (Conchas, 2001).

Here, we have focused on cultural values, expectations, and practices to which a child has been socialized at home as one source of differences in achievement motivation. In a sense, parents help to set their children on a developmental path that may or may not parallel the path established by the dominant culture (Greenfield, 1994; Greenfield et al., 2006). For a family from the dominant culture, this path maps to the largely individualistic and independent orientation of schools. However, for more collectivistic families who socialize their children to identify with their group, work together for the good of the many, and relate interdependently, there is an inherent conflict with the individualistic values implicit in the traditional U.S. schooling process.

### Analyzing the Examples From the Bridging Cultures Classrooms

In Example 1, the retooling of the use of the star chart in Mrs. Perez's classroom is evidence of collectivistic students' orientation to "group" rather than "individual" and their tendency to reinterpret a motivational strategy in their own terms. Harry Triandis, a pioneer in cross-cultural psychology, notes, "People who have been raised in collective cultures tend to 'cognitively convert' situations into collective settings; people who have been raised in individualistic cultures tend to convert situations into individualistic settings" (Triandis, 1995, cited in Otsuka & Smith, 2005, p. 95). This seems to be exactly what these 3<sup>rd</sup>-graders were doing.

The use of the star chart (responsive to students' wanting a solid block of stars) as well as the buddy system for studying and support during testing show how social (group) goals merged with academic goals (see Covington, 2000, cited earlier). Being together as a group and working interdependently apparently fulfilled students' social goals (including positive relationships), but mastering subject matter seemed equally important to them (Covington, 2000). Why was the bell-ringing process important at all? Our interpretation is that students wanted to acknowledge their classmate's accomplishment because it contributed to the success of the whole group. The value of helping or of being helped is central throughout this example. First, children responded immediately to the need of a buddy for assistance. Second, they also wanted to help during the assessment phase, as moral supports; third, this inclination generalized to the whole table group. Their behavior is not surprising, given that children from working-class immigrant Latino families are typically expected to take on considerable responsibility by the age of seven to help younger siblings (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). Yet, as potent as the helpfulness value is to these children, it is also evident that they knew and accepted what the rules of the school were—that helping with answers during the test was prohibited (Trumbull et al., 2003).

In both Example 1 (star chart) and Example 2 (students' pooling money), individual rewards were translated into group rewards or a reward that benefits a member of the group, as needed, rather than on the basis of individual merit. Teachers' awareness of the collectivistic culture of students permitted them to see the logic of the students' approach and to allow the changes to take place.

Students' behavior in these situations can also be construed as an outcome of a particular cultural form of childrearing in which social/ethical learning is seen as inseparable from cognitive/academic learning. In a study of immigrant Mexican and Central American parents, Goldenberg and Gallimore (1995) found that many parents did not distinguish between education as *schooling*

and education as *upbringing*. One parent said, “The two things [formal study and moral rectitude] go hand in hand....It would be impossible to get to the university if one doesn’t have good behavior, if one isn’t taught to respect others...” (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995, p. 198).

Example 3 (in which students chose lunch with their teacher, Ms. Altchech, over other rewards) illustrates the value of student–teacher personal relationships. On many occasions, Bridging Cultures researchers had documented how Mrs. Altchech served as an academic advocate for her students—going to bat for them to gain access to academic opportunities, including placements in middle school following fifth grade. Yet, that role differed from the “personal relationship” role that grew as she came to examine more critically what kept her students engaged and connected to school.

Example 4 shows the power of linking instruction and assessment to students’ value of “family.” Mrs. Pérez’s suggested revision of a district writing assessment prompt showed that when school activities connect with students’ deep values, they may be more motivating and achievement may well be affected. Her innovation resulted in actual improvement in academic performance on the revised district writing assessment prompt. It is standard educational wisdom to make connections to students’ *interests* and to build on their *prior knowledge* during instruction (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999); however, the practices of Mrs. Pérez and Mr. Mercado reflect an understanding of how connecting to students’ deeply held *values* can be powerfully motivating. Example 5, a set of contrasting examples, is illustrative of not only what can go right when students’ cultural orientation is considered in the classroom but what can go wrong when it is not. Allowing students to help each other (Ms. Daley’s test prep activities, in this case) seems to tap into students’ natural inclinations—for a productive result. But framing an instructional activity for collectivistic students as competitive appears to backfire. It is worth noting that numerous researchers have come to the conclusion that a performance-oriented approach to motivation, which often takes the form of promoting competition, is not generally productive for *any* students (Brophy, 2005; Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006).

### Considerations for Teachers

Recognition of cultural discontinuities between home and school on the part of teachers and willingness to bridge them are conditions for reducing students’ sense of disconnection from school and for the enhancement of motivation (Warzon & Ginsburg-Block, 2008). Once teachers understand the social goals their students may have, based on the kinds of cultural values they have been socialized to embrace, they can organize activities to capitalize on

those goals and maximize students' achievement motivation. When students are allowed to transform reward systems to be more in line with their own values, they may be more likely to work toward learning goals.

Cultural factors do not *determine* achievement motivation, nor can students' motivation reliably be inferred from their group affiliation or even their behaviors. For example, recent research and theory related to African American students suggests a complex interaction among cultural values, racial identity, perceptions of opportunity to learn, teacher expectations, private vs. public identity, and gender (Cokley, Komarraju, King, Cunningham, & Muhammad, 2003; Graham, 1997). Culture is but one important part of the picture.

At least three other considerations must be highlighted. First, the cultural roots of achievement motivation for many students from non-dominant cultures are likely to be most evident in the early years of schooling, before they have become more deeply familiar with a new set of expectations and practices. By the time they are in secondary school, many students from non-dominant cultures have effectively become cultural "hybrids" (Andriessen, 2006). They have absorbed ways of functioning that reflect both their home culture and school culture; however, fundamental values (e.g., group vs. individual orientation) tend to persist throughout life (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994). If students are left torn between the cultural values of the school (that their parents may not understand) and the cultural values of their home (that their teachers and school staff may not understand), then disengagement from one or both systems—home and school—can occur (Hudley & Daoud, 2008; Warzon & Ginsburg-Block, 2008). Such disengagement may be avoidable if teachers recognize potential sources of conflict and make invisible cultural values (such as when it is appropriate to help and share and when it is not) explicit to young children early on in the educational process. As discussed earlier, relationships with teachers may continue to be important throughout their schooling years as deterrents to dropping out (Hudley & Daoud, 2008).

Second, we should caution that although we have presented individualism and collectivism as contrasting value systems, they are not two ends of a spectrum in terms of how they operate in people's lives. "What comes closer to the truth is that both collectivistic and individualistic tendencies co-exist" in any culture (Ho, 1994, p. 305).

A third consideration is germane to any group of students: What teachers assume to be necessary or useful extrinsic motivators may be neither necessary nor effective. Many teachers have been steeped in the remnants of a behaviorist paradigm, which emphasizes the relationship between tangible rewards and behavior. The examples recounted here (as well as previous research) seem to suggest that teachers need to be cautious in their assumptions about (a) the

need for tangible rewards, and (b) how they may or may not mediate achievement motivation.

## Conclusion

If high academic achievement for all students is a goal, then achievement motivation theory must move beyond a cultural universalist stance to the recognition that cultural values influence students' social and academic goals. Rather than focusing only on students as the source of cultural difference, "[it] would be wise to turn our lens from the individual to the institution to understand the ways school culture can support achievement motivation among all students" (Hudley & Daoud, 2008, p. 191). The cultural variability one sees in orientation to achievement parallels cultural differences in what counts as school success. Cultures that socialize their children to put relatively greater emphasis on the group than the individual also often tend to have notions of success that integrate the social and moral dimensions with cognitive and academic dimensions of development. Social goals can best be understood in students' sociocultural contexts, as reflecting families' and communities' implicit validation of particular developmental pathways (Greenfield, 2009). In the case of the immigrant Latino students taught by Bridging Cultures teachers, the collectivistic values of group success, supported by cooperation and a general orientation to help others, were fundamental to students' social goals—and to what would motivate them to achieve in school.

Improving schooling for students from ethnolinguistic minority groups cannot be accomplished, we argue, without attention to how fundamental child development goals of such groups are understood. Attempts to systematically assess how motivation affects achievement or school satisfaction need to take into consideration students' cultures, the culture of schools, the relationship between the two, and how that relationship can be positively mediated by teachers' actions (Warzon & Ginsburg-Block, 2008).

Additional research that uses the individualism-collectivism framework in new contexts could shed light on the complex relationships among teacher practices, home practices, achievement motivation, culture, and many other contextual factors—at the levels of student, classroom, school, community, and society. Such research could be designed to answer such questions as, "What are some possible ways to increase student motivation and engagement, based on an understanding of students' home-culture values?" "What teacher (or peer) behaviors are associated with more/less student engagement in classroom activities, given students from particular backgrounds?" "In classrooms of multiple cultures, what strategies ensure that the achievement motivation of

all students is maximized?” “Is academic achievement, measured in a range of ways, improved by the use of culturally responsive motivation strategies?”

It is known that pro-social behaviors (such as helpfulness, sharing, kindness, and cooperation) are associated with higher achievement (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000, cited in Miles & Stipek, 2006; Ginsburg-Block et al., 2008; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000). Hence, another research question worth investigating is, “Can more individualistic European Americans expand the degree to which they are motivated by contributing to the well-being of the group?” Some research suggests that indeed they can (Solomon et al., 2000). If the kinds of strategies teachers used and permitted their immigrant Latino students to use work for dominant culture students, so much the better. Such an outcome would not mean that a universalist approach to achievement motivation is appropriate for all students (i.e., business as usual). This has not worked in other areas, such as mathematics and science instruction, where Latino and African American students continue to lag behind their White peers on such national indicators as NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005, 2009). Yet, when instruction has made explicit links to minority students’ experience, it has proven to be engaging and successful in terms of academic achievement with both minority and majority students (e.g., Brenner, 1998; Lipka & Adams, 2004; Nelson-Barber & Lipka, 2008).

The framework of individualism/collectivism is a starting point for understanding basic cultural differences, but it is likely to be most useful in combination with other theoretical constructs from a range of disciplines. In this paper, we have drawn largely from literature in the fields of education, psychology, and anthropology. We have used a range of largely qualitative methods associated with these fields. However, sociology and sociolinguistics, among other fields, may also yield constructs and research tools that are useful in research on student achievement motivation. For example, discourse analysis (a sociolinguistic technique, Gee, 1996), is a powerful means of documenting not only changes in teachers’ thinking but also students’ variations in classroom participation within and across time frames during different kinds of activities (Trumbull et al., 1999).

Insights into student’s achievement motivation are more likely to emerge, we believe, from classroom-based efforts that depend more upon naturalistic observation and teacher and student interviews than experimental methods. At the very least, such multifaceted qualitative methods will complement more experimental approaches. In research on assessment, for instance, mixed methods (quantitative/experimental and qualitative/ethnographic) have yielded important understanding about not only middle-school students’ mathematics

performance, but also about their thought processes during the completion of educational tasks (Trumbull et al., 2002).

In the context of the continued achievement gap that separates dominant culture students from their non-dominant culture peers, it behooves achievement motivation researchers to persevere with efforts to deepen our understanding of what motivates students—in particular, efforts to examine how cultural differences and educational responses to them are associated with different patterns in achievement motivation as well as academic achievement.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Bridging Cultures is a registered trademark of WestEd and four researchers, Patricia Greenfield, Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, Elise Trumbull, and Blanca Quiroz.

<sup>2</sup>According to Hudley and Daoud (2008), engagement is a “motivational construct that indexes the persistence and quality of students’ involvement in learning activities” (p. 191). They identify two components to engagement: behavior and affect. Behavior is what students do to stay involved with learning. Affect is the attitudes they hold toward “academic activities and achievement striving” (p. 191).

<sup>3</sup>The term “Latino” masks great economic, social, geographic, and historical diversity among a group that shares aspects of ethnic and linguistic identity (Roosa, Morgan-Lopez, Cree, & Specter, 2002).

<sup>4</sup>Quotations not attributed to a source are from field notes and teacher interviews.

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# Identity Border Crossings Within School Communities, Precursors to Restorative Conferencing: A Symbolic Interactionist Study

*Kimberly Giaudrone Haney, Joy Thomas, and Courtney Vaughn*

## Abstract

Our study uses an interdisciplinary theoretical lens to understand the complexity of community building as a precursor to restorative practices. Key to these measures is that offenders take responsibility for their actions and undergo reintegration into the school community. Yet, until these students feel they belong to the school community in the first place, “re”integration is moot. Thus, we interviewed 14 adults who had been school offenders, asking them what might have been done to make them feel a part of school, and then we focused analytically on the symbolic interactions they described. We first present their stories as vignettes using their own words to make illustrative points. Weaving interview data throughout fictional research writing (FRW), we conclude with classroom dialogical groups and restorative circles that illustrate how educators could develop communities where our participants could have seen themselves in others.

Key Words: identity, border crossings, schools, classroom, community, restorative conferencing, symbolic, interactions, interactionist, practices, responsibility, engagement, behaviors, offenders, fictional research writing, dialogical groups, teachers, shame, belonging, bullying, dropout prevention, social, emotional, development, culture, climate

## Introduction

When school infractions occur, antithetical to retribution, restorative practices rely heavily on circle/conferencing group encounters. With pre-conference preparation, victims, offenders, and their supporters encourage a wrongdoer to take responsibility for the infraction. The group then determines how s/he can make amends (Braithwaite, 2000; Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994; Retzinger & Scheff, 1996). This is a social process, theoretically and practically, that intends to mend a school's cultural fabric. Yet flurries of scholars have debated the ennobling or debilitating role that "reintegrative shaming" and subsequent guilt can have on offenders before, during, and after restorative conferencing (e.g., Harris, Walgrave, & Braithwaite, 2004, p. 192; Stokkom, 2002).

Springing largely from Erikson's (1950) seminal work on identity development, some researchers remind readers that an infant's failure to experience autonomy and a toddler's inability to achieve initiative result in negative consequences: shame and guilt, respectively (Maxwell & Morris, 2002). Other scholars make distinctions between the two, claiming one or the other can lead to productive empathy, remorse, and subsequent restorative action (Harris et al., 2004; Moore, 1997; Parker & Thomas, 2009; Retzinger & Scheff, 1996; Scheff & Retzinger, 1991; Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996). Initially Braithwaite and others painstakingly discriminate between effective and derisive shaming. The former focuses on the offense itself and reintegrates the recalcitrant student back into the school, whereas the latter results in stigmatizing (Braithwaite, 2000). Yet in later work, Braithwaite and other scholars acknowledge that the emotional volatility involved in a restorative conference *can* be hard to handle and devolve into both the offender or victim feeling negatively shamed (Harris et al., 2004; Morrison, 2006; Stokkom, 2002).

Irrespective of this debate, no restorative process can "re"integrate a victim or offender back into the classroom culture of which s/he *never* felt a part. In this article we select a group of 14 formerly disaffected students and uncover their stories of rejection and a few of acceptance to determine how educators might have encouraged an inviting classroom community. The reader will meet each of them through individual vignettes laced with their own words. Following the edicts of fictional research writing (FRW), we also use the participants' narratives or paraphrased statements, always nesting both within the original context, to create scenarios of a positive classroom community building circle and successful restorative conference (Spindler, 2008). In so doing, we answer Harris' (2001) call for more qualitative research on the restorative conferencing process and the multiple symbolic gestures of acceptance that could foster

belonging rather than isolation. We also echo Carr-Chellman, Beabout, Almeida, and Gursoy (2009) who contend that the perspectives from those rendered silent, such as the prisoner population in their study, can help schools create effective and just educational systems.

## **Theoretical Lenses**

Various theoretical lenses emphasize these ideas and shed light on important details in our interviews. A healthy school culture evolves from continuous dialogue conducted on mutually constructed ground. Violence, bigotry, and hatred have no place within this safe clearing (Martin, 2002). With this in mind, planned or everyday interactions between and among teachers, administrators, and their students involve cultural bookkeeping where people continuously construct individual and group identities, minimizing liabilities and maximizing assets. Martin calls this “an exchange of gifts” (2002, pp. 133, 134, 139).

Although we are optimistic, achieving this goal is no small task. Giroux (1994) laments that at the twentieth century’s end, “public schools have been unable to open up the possibility of thinking through the indeterminate character of the economy, knowledge, culture, and identity” (Modernist Schools section, para. 9). Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2008) point out that identity consists of multiple self-perceptions in a number of areas such as race, gender, ethnicity, and family or school, to name a few. Each person may bring one aspect of him/herself into a particular human interaction. Although, to understand how teacher–student identities can act in concert or be at odds, we also find a few singular identity development models helpful. For example, a Caucasian teacher has recognized her entitled upbringing and in the spirit of overcompensation she explains to an African American student that she understands his history of discrimination. Suspicious of what might be racism veiled as benevolence, the student recoils (Banks, 1994; Cross, 1978; Helms, 1995). In our newly reconstructed classroom communities, through self-reflection, both teachers and students are aware of their current identity development status and the potential conflicts that could result. In so doing, they could come to view each other as evolving in community (Zehr, 2009).

## **Methodology**

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interaction provides the methodological lens for our study. It holds that humans construct themselves through continuous communication

with others. For example, Mead (1908/1909), a sociologist, and Dewey (Shalin, 1988, 2003/2000), a philosopher, see the “social situation [as] an organic whole in which both the individual and society are functional distinctions or two abstract phases of the same process” (Odin, 1996, p. 194). Cooley (1902) poetically sums, “Each to each, a looking-glass reflects the other that doth pass” (p. 184). Particularly relevant for us, Cooley (1902) holds that pride or shame are two potential outcomes in human interaction, the former contributing to a moral sense of self, the latter to self-effacement (Mead, 1908/1909). More contemporary restorative practice scholars might add respect to the positive column (Morrison, 2006). An examination of these guideposts determines what could bring together or divide an individual or group of students from others within any given classroom.

Relying heavily on Mead’s (1934/1967) “I” and “me” concepts, we identified crucial interactions and interpreted and displayed them. Engaging in continuous reformation, a person brings his/her “I,” a symbolized object of consciousness, into every interaction. S/he reacts to another’s perception of her/him (“me”) and changes accordingly (Mead, 1934/1967). The new “I” is a “creative response” to the symbolized structures of the “me” (Mead, 1934/1967, p. 197). Within an environment, such as a school, each communicator takes “the role of the other” to grasp “the meaning of signs, symbols, gestures, and indications” (Blumer & Morrione, 2004, p. 28). It is therefore as social beings we become moral beings (Mead, 1913). In education this happens when “the school becomes organized as a social whole, and...the child recognizes his conduct as a reflection or formulation of that society” (Mead, 1908/1909, p. 328). Thus, for isolated students and remote educators, affirming each other encourages the “old self” to disintegrate and a new moral self to emerge (Mead, 1913, para. 15).

### Participants

As youngsters, our 14 adult participants were disconnected from school and eventually dropped out. With one exception they fall into what we believe are the most endangered group of students, those who are both aggressors and victims (Ahmed, Harris, Braithwaite, & Braithwaite, 2001; Morrison, 2006). They range in age from 19 to 46 and are all from working or underclass backgrounds. However, their race and/or ethnicity vary: two Native American, two African American, one Mexican American, and six Caucasian women; and one Hispanic and two Caucasian men (see Table 1). Through their words and insights, at the end of this study, we imagine and write about what might have been successful classroom symbolic interactions.

Table 1. Chart of Participants

Pseudo Names of Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Educational Status
Bradley	25	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Pam	30	Native American	Pursuing GED
Matt	late 30s	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Keisha	20s	African American	Pursuing GED
Frances	late 30s	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Lena	37	Caucasian	Obtained GED
Maggie	31	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Susan	20	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Alexandro	22	Hispanic	Pursuing GED
Star	19	Native American	Pursuing GED
Maria	46	Hispanic	Pursuing GED
Beth	25	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Paige	32	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Sidney	32	African American	Pursuing GED

At the time of our investigation, our participants were part of a General Educational Development (GED) and post-secondary coursework program at a facility in one small Midwestern city's Community Resource Center (CRC), but they had lived all over the United States. Some had committed crimes, were on probation, and court ordered to the CRC. In other cases, the state's Department of Human Services (DHS) required attendance to receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a time restricted program to prepare parents to support their families. (This accounts for the predominance of females in our sample.) Never having received a high school diploma, a few participants were voluntarily pursuing a GED with an eye on further vocational or college education. To some degree, all were engaged in an identity reconstruction process.

All three of us authors are aptly suited to conduct this study, but we also come from "positions" of authority (Tisdell, 1999) and personal biases that we better understood after engaging in researcher reflexivity (Salzman, 2002). Striving to prevent potential bias or an inability to hear what the participants

said, we shared our own experiences with each other. That helped us identify threats to the study's trustworthiness or goodness.

Although each of us is associated with higher education, there is some variation among us. The first author is a married, Caucasian mother of three, two sons and a daughter. She is a PhD candidate who has 22 years of combined experience as an adjunct college instructor and educator/administrator in elementary, secondary, and adult education. She has worked in the CRC and battles her desire to evaluate the program of which our participants were a part. Also a PhD student, the second author has 16 years experience in the social service field with the last 5 spent working as an adult transition educator for incarcerated offenders. She writes from the lens of being an African American, middle-class female who is shaped by being a Christian, first generation college student, and divorced mother of three daughters. For this study, her challenge was to remember her researcher—not practitioner—role: to listen, not instruct. Our third author, a Caucasian woman, has taught in inner city and rural high schools and spent 32 years in higher education working with educators from numerous geographic school settings. Long since removed from social service practice and having interviewed hundreds of participants from murderers to schoolchildren, she has extensive practice in listening and not judging (Patton, 1980). Our working- to upper-middle class backgrounds from African American and Caucasian neighborhoods led to many lively debates when interpreting the data.

## Method

We conducted the interviews in a dialogical manner, asking participants to speak about their upbringings and school experiences. Bohm, Factor, and Garrett (1991) explain, "Dialogue is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. It enables inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations, and even different parts of the same organization" (p. 2). Dialogue also lends itself to unstructured conversations that provide safe communication (Bohm et al., 1991). This communication method further enhances trustworthiness by unearthing our participants' heartfelt experiences that we sought not to judge or influence but listen to and understand (Patton, 1980). Of course the participants could only represent their own perspectives, not those of the educators and other students' about whom they spoke. But their stories illustrate how they negatively interpreted "me's" from teachers' and other students' middle-class signs and symbols that stressed being well dressed and poised, for example. In the spirit of equity we also answered any questions about our lives that the participants asked (Mead, 1934/1967).

## Analysis and Overview

We all reviewed the transcribed interviews, teasing out key interactions that formulated the participants' identities and dialectical self-perceptions (Patton, 1980). They came to school with only fragmented senses of self. Throughout their young lives, like pinballs they had bounced back and forth, living with different family members and in foster homes. In most of these settings they saw pejorative "me's" (Mead, 1934/1967): "You are poor, dumb, unlovable, inconvenient, or bad." They came to school more needy than most, longing for a secure connection "with others in the environment" and an experience of themselves "as worthy of love and respect" (Osterman, 2000, p. 325). After numerous meetings we compared our independent interview codes (Patton, 1980) and decided that there was one overarching theme or outcome of the participants' key encounters: *invisibility*, manifesting itself as shutting down, acting out, or quitting school. However, one other subtheme did thread some of the interviews. Similar to Carr-Chellman et al.'s (2009) prisoners, our participants sometimes wished for or remembered a caring teacher who might have squired them through a personally connective process. These themes are laced throughout the following vignettes.

### Vignettes

#### *Bradley*

Bradley is a large man—over six feet tall. Reviewing his conversation, we saw both gentility and anger, confusing emotions for him. He had no criminal history but dropped out of school in the ninth grade, being diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and bipolar disorder. At 25, he decided to get a GED and adopt a new attitude about learning. He claims to have once had a childlike enthusiasm for school, but its beginning and end was encapsulated in a dramatic elementary school incident with a teaching intern.

Bradley's parents were not overtly abusive but bestowed on him little attention. In first grade he was supposed to have a special education teacher but was mainstreamed instead. However, a student teacher spent extra time with him, and he was devastated when she told him her time at the school had come to an end. The day she was slated to leave, Bradley sneaked out of the classroom to hide in the backseat of her car. When she drove away, she caught a glimpse of him in her rearview mirror. Bradley looked back at her through the same looking glass and saw ("me"), regret but rejection (Cooley, 1902). She took him back to class, and he never saw her again.

His successive days at school were scattered with fights and self-destructive acts like punching his hands through walls. He sought attention in other ways.

One year on Halloween, Bradley tied his ankle to a tree limb. Hanging upside down, he acted like a ghoulish neighbor as children passed by and threw candy at the “crazy white boy.” A testament to the human spirit the following day, he recounts,

they had this thing in the park the next day for little kids who didn’t get some, and I went there and said, “candy for sale,” but it was really just, “come up and get what you want.” I had four big trash bags full....They were all sweet kids.

*Pam*

In her early 30s, Pam began attending classes at the CRC “to make a better life for her four children.” Her own home life had been abysmal. In her early elementary school years, the state’s DHS removed Pam from her alcoholic mother’s home. The young girl’s situation went from bad to worse when she moved in with her maternal grandmother who was abusive in every way.

Nevertheless, as a Chickasaw, Pam constructed an identity based on collective rather than individualistic cultural settings (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999), so the small rural school she attended was a lifesaver. The teachers nurtured her personally and emotionally. But the moment she entered a large high school in her ninth grade year, Pam began suffering from acute anxiety. In search of comfort she filled the next two years with promiscuity and drug use. She rarely asserted herself in class and felt invisible to school personnel unless she had a violent outburst. Pam repeated the ninth grade and after a semester “just quit going....I don’t even think anyone missed me. I don’t remember anyone from school contacting me or my grandmother,” she recalled.

Before Pam dropped out she had begun dating a popular wrestler who would come by her grandmother’s house and give her personal hygiene products and other essentials. “His family was really nice to me,” she said. They eventually married and had three children, but heavy drug use, primarily on his part, led to violence, and Pam had no hope of reconciling with him.

*Matt*

At the time of our interview Matt was in his mid- to late-30s and lived in a compound with his parents and two uncles, none of whom graduated from high school. Matt’s home life appears to have been unremarkable. Nevertheless he dropped out of school in junior high, working construction and other types of manual labor for a time. A felony conviction earned him probation, but he was court ordered to attend the CRC.

When asked about his high school experiences he focused on being a special education student. This confused Matt as he struggled not to absorb the special education “me” (Mead, 1908/1909). “I guess they thought I was stupid

or something. It didn't bother me, but it made me feel dumb." "Did you ever make friends with any of...the kids?" we pressed. "No, they were dumb; my friends were in the smart class," he replied.

In other respects Matt perceived himself an outsider. As a Caucasian minority in a junior high school he fought constantly with African American and Mexican youngsters for whom he had great disdain. Even so, his second wife was an African American. "That's the worst thing I ever did, marrying her," he recollected. When we asked if multicultural courses might have given him a less racist attitude he replied, "I don't care to learn Spanish." He needed much more than Martin Luther King Day in January and *Cinco de Mayo* in May to even begin to broaden his horizons (Banks, 1994; Cross, 1978; Helms, 1995).

### *Keisha*

For Keisha home life was trying. After her stepfather left, her mother began dealing drugs to support the family, was arrested, and sentenced to several years in the penitentiary. At 12, Keisha began living on her own and taking care of her younger brother until their maternal grandmother took them in. It is no surprise that Keisha went to school with a "mother" identity that she was conflicted about shedding. Once, she went in tears to the only teacher "who didn't take my shit" and confessed she lived alone with her brother. The teacher told her to concentrate on school, but Keisha woefully responded, "I can't abandon my family." Keisha asked the educator not to tell anyone about her situation but suspected this was not the case. When asked how she knew, Keisha said, "You can just see it in *their eyes*" (Mead, 1934/1967; Cooley, 1902).

Although Keisha felt responsible for her brother, she hated it when the students called her a "goody two shoes," because school authorities constantly called her out of class to calm her disruptive brother. Tired of being picked on, she began fighting back and never quit. Anyone who "messed" with her felt the force of her fists and feet, actions for which she was constantly suspended. Although two Caucasian girls paid her to beat up boyfriends, it appeared that Keisha, an African American, accosted fellow students without prejudice. When she was not in combat she sat on the back row of class and did not say a word. By her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year, the road to the back door was paved. Keisha walked down it and never looked back.

### *Frances*

Frances's life had been similar. "I went to 13 high schools....My dad did road construction, and when he would finish a job we would move." She therefore made no connections in school only to say "hello" and "goodbye." Then she added, "My mother didn't care. She was off cheating on my dad. So you know...I didn't care." Youngsters like her, Frances believed, should remain

in school and receive “one-on-one” attention. She also suggested that “good” teachers reveal themselves as people and talk with students about their problems (Palmer, 1998). Giving an example, Frances remembered one teacher who listened to her and confessed that his parents had also parted ways when he was a boy. Frances also praised one of the CRC teachers for helping her individually and caring about her life. Small as it seems, that was all Frances really wanted.

### *Lena*

Very similar to Frances and the other parent/participants, Lena was under reconstruction. However, she was far from that goal. At 37 she had lost custody of her three children, ages 12, 14, and 16 years old. She explains that she left them with her sister when she moved out of town, because the youngsters wanted to stay in the same school. While Lena was gone her sister “went crazy,” drove to the school, and “threaten[ed] to kill” Lena’s children. Before that time, Lena seemed to have educationally advocated for her youngsters. “I told the teachers every year that my oldest daughter had to have one-on-one help, but they do not listen.” Early in her children’s lives, after they went to bed, Lena spent hours trying to figure out their schoolwork to little avail. Sadly, at the time of our interview, Lena was even unsure what grade her children were in.

Her own educational experiences were not much different. She had to “do over” the third and fifth grades. Lena argued that teachers knew her older disruptive sister and “held it against me.” One of Lena’s fifth grade teachers just “passed me to sixth grade just to get me out of there; I didn’t know the material. I was lost,” Lena explained. However, she did describe one history teacher who “actually listened....This teacher would work one-on-one with the student who needed the help,” even in subjects like math. He listened “to our questions and concerns,” she continued, and “he would explain it again and again if the students did not understand.” For Lena this was too little too late. A junior in high school at 18, she was already the mother of two, divorced, and remarried. Her mother would not keep her children while she attended school, so Lena dropped out. It took 11 years and 6 attempts to earn a GED, but she achieved her goal and hoped to become a licensed practical nurse.

### *Maggie*

At 31, Maggie was similar to our other participants but had enough innocence to tell us, “You must love what you do [helping students learn].” Maggie lived in a homeless shelter with three of her five children. She had given her twin daughters up for adoption. Maggie’s own school years were drab, but she recalled one teacher who “loved what she was doing....She cared about all of us. You don’t see her mad. If she had been we would have known, because you can see [how the teachers felt about you]. It’s in their eyes; the eyes tell everything,” she added (see Cooley, 1902).

Suspicion was a part of her everyday life. She had been raped and stalked and was so hypervigilant that when a man once looked suspiciously at two of her children she scurried them away. Desperately trying to get her life directed, a few years ago she got a job as a cook, but an altercation with a coworker led to dismissal. To receive DHS aid she had to attend the CRC for adult education classes. At least there Maggie saw acceptance in her teachers' eyes (Cooley, 1902).

### *Susan*

Susan was already reflecting at age 20 on how she became a high school dropout. "If I had it to do over I would enroll myself in school and finish." At 17, "I moved to a different town to live with my mom, [and] she never enrolled me in school. The days became weeks; the weeks turned into months; and then it just seemed too late to return." Before that time, Susan had been in special education. The struggle to learn became so unbearable that she "started not socializing with other students. I felt bad that the others got it, and...I never felt like I fit in anywhere. I was an outcast. I just never really had friends."

When we asked about her teachers, Susan flatly stated, "They didn't like me. When I was in fourth grade, my teacher would help everybody but me." Illustrating the stigma of poverty on identity development (Phillips, 2007), Susan continued, "But when it came to me, she would get all stuck up and mean. She would get mad at me if I didn't understand it. She didn't like it because it would take up her time." Teachers also brought bags of gifts for other students, Susan maintained, but never for her. There seems to have been one exception: "The math teacher was the best teacher I have ever had." According to Susan, this teacher knew "how to have fun. If you had a question, she would be right there to help you. She would take you to the board and show you. She would show us that she cared about us by buying things for everybody. No one was left out." Concurrent with our study, Susan voluntarily attended CRC classes to study for the GED test. "This is all for my daughter. She is my motivation... and I [also] want to go to college."

### *Alexandro*

Alexandro, a 22-year-old Hispanic, had a tumultuous and violent criminal past. However, his goal was to earn a GED and pursue a college degree, quite a noteworthy ambition given his childhood environment. He was brutalized by stepfathers and in the eighth grade defended himself against one of them in what could have been a death match. But Alexandro just stabbed his mother's husband in the leg. The older man responded by saying, "Don't wound what you can't kill." Alexandro continued to live by that code.

He learned similar messages from school but did not give up until his senior year. A crucible for Alexandro was his “no touching rule.” Despite teachers being keenly aware of this in elementary school, they poked him to wake him up and directed him physically in other ways. Even so, Alexandro was still reachable. He had one eighth-grade teacher who “respected me, and I respected her.” This teacher even stopped by Alexandro’s house to bring him homework when he missed school and took time to talk to him about his problems. Alexandro said he could really trust her and that she encouraged him to graduate.

Nevertheless, eventually he dropped out and supported his mother and siblings through illegal activities. One day he returned home to find his mother’s boyfriend beating his brother. Alexandro retrieved his gun and killed the man. “Don’t wound what you can’t kill” were words he had never forgotten, although the teacher who went to his home lived on in the heart of this broken young man.

### *Star*

A 19-year-old mother, Star was also working toward her GED. Her attitude had evolved substantially since her own school days. As a teenager she changed to a school where all the students seemed to belong to their own cliques. Star tried to “fit in” by moving from one group to another. Although a Native American herself, the Indian student clique excluded her, depriving Star of social nutrients needed for a healthy racial identity (Bryant, 1998). Ignominy turned to violence in the eighth grade. She even travelled to other schools to find someone new to taunt. Finally, “I found a White girl that I (became) friends with.” Although Star dropped out of school because she got pregnant, she still called this young woman her friend. Possibly she was the only one, because Star felt shamed by everyone else, especially when she became pregnant. When we met Star she had found a job in a daycare center, and, pregnant with her second child, had begun working on a GED.

### *Maria*

It seems like quite a contradiction that Maria, a 46-year-old mother of three, commented, “I loved school, but I left...before I graduated.” A Mexican American with a thick accent, Maria relished approval in her school’s Caucasian middle-class culture. She achieved this by never getting into trouble, and teachers often chose her to run errands and perform other bureaucratic tasks. Even so, at 19 Maria quit after she had her second baby. “I have to blame my son. I went into delivery right there” in school. Probably drawing attention to what had been a well behaved but imperceptible young woman, school officials told her she was too old to continue school. She enrolled in another institution for student parents but never graduated. Despite being marginalized

herself, Maria did not speak or correspond with her incarcerated brothers, because they were “dumb...I don’t even talk to my children. If they don’t call me; I don’t call them.”

Dedicated in other ways, Maria worked at a convenience store for four years but became disgusted with part-time workers who “wouldn’t pick up the slack.” She quit to become a clerk in the county jail and can keep that position if she earns a GED. But she has set her sights on more professional positions where she could capitalize on her bilingual abilities in Spanish and English. Perhaps she will find a border crossing between the two cultures after all (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993).

### *Beth*

Beth’s earliest educational memories went back to the third and fourth grades on the mainland and fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in Guam. They were not good. A Caucasian teenager, she was a minority among Pacific Islanders. She was teased and bullied and finally decided to fight one girl. For that she was suspended. Beth did make friends with two Black girls but still felt like an expatriate. The academic curriculum was also a challenge, because Beth struggled with reading and math. To her, the teachers seemed caring, but, she reasons, really did not help her much because she was quiet.

In the ninth grade, Beth got pregnant and dropped out. After a succession of violent episodes within her family, her mother relinquished custody, and Beth moved in with the baby’s father, a 21-year-old Pacific Islander. The relationship survived 10 years, and Beth bore two more children. She eventually moved off the island and is continuing her education at the CRC.

### *Paige*

Likewise, at 32, Paige was in the CRC program to make a better life for her two children. With no high school diploma, her employment opportunities had always been limited to low-level nursing home work, but she dreamed of becoming a registered nurse. She was highly involved in her 11- and 13-year-old children’s education and was hypervigilant about them being treated fairly. “[I just want] the teachers to teach, and that’s all,” she stated.

Her own school experiences were mediocre to bad. She was teased and bullied because she had shabby clothes, again substantiating that being perceived as poor inhibits positive identity development (Phillips, 2007). Giving an example, she explained, “Teachers were mean, and they had their little pets. If you didn’t do it just right, and if you needed extra attention, then you were put to the side.” Yet Paige remembered a third grade teacher who worked with her and seemed interested in her home life. As with the other participants, this was not enough. Forced into a motherly role at an early age, Paige dropped out of school in the tenth grade:

I was the one who took care of my younger brother and did the house cleaning, because my mother had a controlling husband...I was holding down a job and the house and school...I had to choose to either not do things around the house or work or not do school.

She proclaimed that she was now ready to earn a GED.

### *Sidney*

Like all of our participants, as a child Sidney was academically and socially needy. She said school officials attempted to retain her in fourth and eighth grades. By the second time around, she quit trying. She felt invisible, explaining:

One day in class, I had my hand up, and the teacher just kept bypassing me and acting like I was non-existent. She looked straight at me and straight bypassed me. When I took it to the principal, the principal told me I was just seeing things. It is remarkable that there were a couple of White students, and I'm not racist, she kept bypassing them too. She was only paying attention to the ones she thought would make it.

An African American herself, it appeared that class and aptitude trumped race in Sidney's case. However, Sidney's soccer coach listened to her struggles at home and seemed to care, but that was not enough to keep her in school.

Her life after school could be described as one tragedy after another. She was in violent relationships, did time in jail, and abused drugs and alcohol. At 32, Sidney was enrolled in GED classes and wanted to be a juvenile detention officer helping young people "not to go down the criminal path. I want to talk to the juvenile inmates while they are in jail. You can be one-on-one with them... If I can get through to one kid, it would make me happy." Sidney's criminal record will probably prevent her from accomplishing this goal, but that she even aspired to it was commendable.

## **Building Community Classrooms**

Reversing our participants' negative school experiences and capitalizing on a few of the good ones, we now recommend constructive ways that a teacher can forge and sustain a classroom community where identities evolve in context and students feel accepted. To do this we offer two fictional scenarios of class meetings that the interviews inspire—one in a third and one in a ninth grade class. We use participants' exact words or devise quoted remarks that reflect the context and spirit of their thoughts and beliefs. In addition, we place seven of our participants' former selves in either an elementary or high school classroom, based on the preponderance of primary or secondary school recollections in their interviews. Our fictional John Barnes, an elementary teacher,

and Bella Dupree, a secondary American history teacher, are composites of the few educators who touched our participants' lives in positive ways. The high school class meeting paved the way for a fictive restorative circle group in the high school classroom.

Related to symbolic interactionism, fictional research writing (FRW) guided our pen. FRW is a multigenred approach to presenting data that may be displayed in a play, poem, or short story, to name only three examples. Generally, such "dramaturgy is...the study of how human beings accomplish meaning in their lives" through acting out everyday encounters (Brissett & Edgley, 1990, p. 2; Goffman, 1959). The intent of our dramaturgies reflects a preference for "texts that imagine how the world could be different through presenting specific problems anchored in their historical, cultural, and biographical contexts" (Denzin, 2000 as cited in Spindler, 2008, p. 9). In our case, the conversations stem from the students' youthful experiences, but now the teacher guides the youngsters toward connectedness, not invisibility. In the elementary and secondary conversations we begin to see positive "I" to "me" (Mead, 1934/1937) reconstructions of each student's identity that reflect the group's collective mission to learn, grow, and appreciate each other.

### Scenarios

#### *Mr. Barnes' Third Grade Class*

Driving to school on a crisp Friday morning in November, John Barnes relives the telephone conversation he had earlier this morning with his ex-wife. He has not seen his children in two months, and this weekend's visit is cancelled. However, much of the frustration and pain melts when he pulls into the parking lot of a campus of buildings, an elementary, junior high, and high school. He smiles as he looks at them, then exits his car and walks to his third grade classroom. The children will soon come streaming in. After working in the corporate world for decades, Barnes left to be a teacher. For the first time in his life, he feels like he is making a social contribution (Palmer, 1998). He has become addicted to the smell, sounds, and tussle of that old but throbbing-with-life elementary school building.

Barnes is working on a master's degree with Bella Dupree, a high school teacher on the same campus. In their programs of study they have read many articles on restorative practices and learned that an appreciation for community building, effective teaching, classroom meeting, and social and emotional learning (SEL) literature leads to classroom climates crucial for restorative practices' (such as circle groups) success (Edwards & Mullis, 2003; Frey & Doyle, 2001; Landau & Gathercoal, 2000; see also CASEL, <http://casel.org/>). In the spirit of collegiality and working through traditionally isolated classrooms,

Barnes and Dupree visited each other's classrooms often. They decide that because many class sessions end with students' idle chatter, they would use a portion of that social time to create weekly community building and socially satisfying group dialogues. They reason that these encounters also complement Barnes's authentic constructivist curricula, including inquiry-oriented mathematics (Cassel, Reynolds, & Vaughn, 2002), science (Martin, 2006), English, and both Barnes's and Dupree's social studies curricula. In each subject, students make meaning through real world experiences and conceptual reasoning (Greene, 1988; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Stiller, 1991) which pave the way for academic success (Fuller, Wood, Rapoport, & Dornbusch, 1982).

An example of this type of teaching: Barnes greets all 20 of his students as they file in his classroom. Knowing what to do, the children scurry to a carpeted area of the largely linoleum floor and sit in a circle. Bradley has a difficult time getting there. With the medical condition of ADHD, he is easily distracted. Often, he shows Barnes "one more thing" before he gets settled. However, the teacher knows how devastated Bradley is since the student intern left and gently nudges him into the group. Soon they are both sitting in the circle where all the students are wriggling back and forth on their bottoms, eagerly anticipating hearing and being heard (Osterman, 2000).

Thinking of his own situation, Barnes says, "Today I would like to select the topic. I am upset and sad because...." He then picks up from the floor a wooden bear the size of a small chopping board. It signifies that he will be the first to share and then pass it on to the person on his right. He explains, "I am not going to see my children this weekend, and I am very disappointed." There is a moment of silence. Bradley is sitting next to Barnes, so he takes the bear from his hand. "I feel sad too, Mr. Barnes. I miss Ms. Brooks, that teacher from the college. She said she would come back to see me and hasn't yet. I think she has forgotten me." Lena then recovers the talking piece. "At least Ms. Brooks acted like she liked you. I am mad, because my sister's teacher don't like my sister, so she don't like me. I don't like her back." Taking her turn, Susan says, "I know what you mean Lena. Teachers don't treat everyone the same. Last year, Ms. Johnson brought treats for everyone but three of us. That's not right. I think it may be because I just don't have the right kind of clothes."

Unconsciously, some of the students begin to nod their heads in agreement. These symbolic gestures begin to dissipate many students' loneliness (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934/1967). Paige soon reaches for the bear, saying, "My clothes aren't always as nice as the other kids either." Barnes then allows, "I will say something the next time the teachers are all together. I won't mention any names. I'll be really cool about it," he assures them.

Alexandro, one of Barnes' more hostile students, then takes the bear and his turn. The preceding event has not quelled his anger. "I'm mad because teachers touch me. I've told the PE teacher, the music teacher, and all the rest of them that's my rule, but they just keep touching me. Last week a teacher touched me in the hall. Then she said a big word like I was 'uncontrollable,' because I got mad. Mr. Barnes goes by my rule, but he helps me with my work. You can do it both ways."

He pushes the bear toward Frances. Without touching Alexandro's hand she quickly passes it to the next person. Frances is a quiet loner. Barnes knows his students (Nichols, 2006) and says not a word, as Keisha takes the bear. Barnes has had several conversations with Frances about her parents' divorce and shared with her his similar experience. "Frances is about ready to talk," he thinks, as he smiles at her and then directs his attention to Keisha.

Keisha addresses Alexandro, "I think I kinda' know what you mean, Alexandro. I wish teachers would just do their jobs. I will be working in class and doing my thing when a teacher will come and get me to talk to my brother who is causing trouble." Scanning the circle with her eyes, she says, "When that happens you all quit callin' me 'goody two shoes.'"

Some of the students cast their eyes to the ground. Then several shake their heads up and down in agreement. "I am proud of you all," says Barnes. "You have explained your angry feelings without fighting. Do you see how some of you feel the same way?" he asks. Some say, "Yes," while Alexandro and a few of the others begrudgingly breathe deeply and say, "yeah, I see." Barnes comments to himself, "Man they've come a long way since September. They're beginning to understand that they're not alone" (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Greene, 1988).

### *Mrs. Dupree's American History Class*

That same morning, Bella Dupree walks into the high school and starts her ninth grade American history class with a group dialogue. This class extends two semesters with the same students. Her class is sitting on chairs they arranged in a circle. Seated among them, Dupree notices a slightly perceptible flutter in her stomach. It had come and gone ever since she first stepped into a classroom almost 20 years ago. These sessions remind her how important her job is to the school community and to the larger society as well. "These students will be tomorrow's adult citizens," she thinks. "I think they just might make a difference. This year they're beginning to put themselves in the others' shoes" (Landau & Gathercoal, 2000).

The history teacher has issues of her own today. She has a growth on her neck and does not yet know her biopsy results, but she takes a deep breath and begins. Many times she asks the students to select a topic, but, like Barnes, today she rhetorically requests, "Let's talk about fear today." Sidney, the student

to Dupree's left, begins, "I was afraid I was going to have to go back a grade. But my coach stood up for me and didn't let them hold me back a year." Dupree and other students purse their lips and slightly nod, because they also highly regard the coach. Matt has a similar experience. "I was afraid that I would be kicked out of school, too, but that new principal, Mr. Beeler, told me to go to in-school suspension, because he liked seeing me around the school," he adds. "Some kids don't get no help there, but a teacher was there to help me pass that math test. If I didn't get it, then I'd have to go back to ninth grade again next year," Matt explains.

Dupree is glad to hear these positive responses but has studied bullying and relational aggression in some of her graduate classes and wants to find out if students are getting support when that happens (Morrison, 2006). Dupree asks, "Do teachers help you when you are afraid of other students?" Pam, who had not said anything yet, blurts out, "There was this one girl that two girls picked on, and I knew how she felt so I stuck up for her. I fought those two girls. They tried to jump me in the bathroom, but I surprised them. Now everyone says, 'leave Pam alone.'" "Do you think you went too far, Pam?" asks Dupree. "Well I don't know. It's just better than being beat up or having your friends beat up." "Could Pam's story have gone another way?" Dupree asks the group. "Oh, I guess maybe it coulda' gone another way if someone like you, Mrs. Dupree, had seen it coming, and asked Pam and those other girls to come to your room and talk it out," says Paige. "Yeah," Beth says, "I liked it when I told a teacher I was being picked on, and she made them stop."

Star is listening intently but is always hesitant to speak. She wants to talk but instead looks down and wrings her hands as she contemplates her words. Dupree, who rightly assumes that Star has something to contribute, gently tries to engage her by first complimenting her newly manicured nails. Smiling, Star thanks her and tells the class, "this is a special type of design," as she dangles her hands in front of her. Then Star says, "Mrs. Dupree, I know you like my nails, but do you still like me even though I'm pregnant?" Not waiting for an answer, Star looked around the circle and admitted, "I'm scared all of you will hate me." "I don't hate you," Maggie assures her. "In this class everyone just gets treated the same. Just come here if you get afraid, girl. I can just tell Mrs. Dupree likes you too. You can see it in her eyes. The eyes tell everything," Maggie concludes (Cooley, 1902).

Maria had been thinking about Dupree's motivation for asking about fear and asks, "Mrs. Dupree, are you ok?" "Yes and no," Dupree admits, "I had to go to the doctor, and I didn't like it either. The waiting room had a lot of old magazines and a bunch of people who looked kinda' distant." "Don't worry, Mrs. Dupree," Maria reassures her, "my daughter went to the doctor and didn't

like it either. I was scared too, but it was alright in the end.” “What a responsibility Maria has,” Dupree thinks. “And yet here she is comforting me.” Dupree smiles at Maria and says, “Thanks, Maria.” These symbolic gestures are signs of trust where a student and teacher accept each other’s good intentions (Mead, 1934/1967; Freire, 1970).

## **A Successful Restorative Conference**

During the spring semester Matt and Maria have an altercation in Dupree’s class. Diagnosed as mentally challenged, Matt is struggling with one assignment, so he asks Maria to help him. He could have asked Dupree and usually felt free to do so, but this time he wants to show her he can do it without her. “I don’t get it either, Matt,” Maria says. Matt is frustrated and lashes out. “You dumb girl. You never know any of the answers. That’s why I don’t like to hang out with you. You’re dumb.” Maria shoots back, “All I want is to be accepted by people like you, and you’re no better than me, a stupid Mexican.” Dupree rushes into the fray and quiets the two students. She then reaches for her cell phone and texts Barnes, “I need your help with a couple of kids.” “I’ll be right there,” he responds. Then Dupree calls the principal to request a cover for their classes while they talk to Matt and Maria separately in empty rooms. Before deciding to create restorative practices in each of their classrooms, Dupree and Barnes had talked to their respective principals about the process. The administrators had agreed to do everything possible to enable this innovation. This included, whenever possible, providing a counselor or teacher with a planning period to supervise their respective classes while Dupree and Barnes prepared for a restorative circle encounter. As soon as Barnes’s substitute arrives, he walks to the high school building and Dupree’s classroom. Her replacement is already there, and the two friends and colleagues walk Matt and Maria into the hall. “Will you talk to Matt?” Dupree asks Barnes, “and I’ll talk to Maria?” “Sure,” Barnes answers.

Barnes and Dupree work with his and her respective students, encouraging them to remember the common feelings they had revealed in many classroom dialogues. Matt agrees to take responsibility for starting the argument, and both students agree to participate in a restorative circle. Running out of time before the bell rings, both teachers plan to direct the circle session the next day in Dupree’s history class. In graduate classes, each teacher has learned that even administrators at some of the nationally known restorative practice schools, found in at least 21 states, do not hold restorative circles within the classroom (Haney, 2008). Believing this alienates all those involved, Barnes and Dupree have decided, whenever possible, restorative conferences will be held in class.

The following day Dupree and Barnes are ready. They are eager to facilitate a real life restorative circle session. The two teachers and the students arrange the chairs in a circle. "Thank you for being here. You have all told me privately that you want to be part of this process," Dupree says to the group. "We are here today to discuss yesterday's disruption." Aware of Matt's low self-esteem at the beginning of the school year and the progress he has made, Dupree is direct but nonjudgmental (Umbreit & Coates, 2000). She resolves to do this although, as an African American, she is personally troubled by Matt's racism but has seen it lessen with time. "And, in the end," she ponders, "this class will come up with the solution to its own communal problem. I need to stay out of that. They will do fine." Dupree continues to engage the class, "We are not here to decide whether Matt is good or bad but to address what happened yesterday and come up ways Matt might make right what he did" (O'Connell, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 1999).

"Matt," she says, "what did you do yesterday that you've told Mr. Barnes and me that you regret?" "Well, I needed help with an assignment. I feel stupid a lot of the time, and I'm ashamed that I don't understand some things. The teachers seem to like Maria, so I asked her to help. When she didn't know either, I guess I just saw myself in the mirror, and it made me mad" (Cooley, 1902). "I called her a 'dumb girl,' and that was really wrong. She's a decent person. She's heard me knock Mexicans before, and she hasn't gotten in my face. Maria, I really dissed you bad. I'm sorry."

"Maria," Dupree then says, "what was the hardest thing about Matt's outburst for you to take?" (O'Connell et al., 1999). "It brought up all the feelings I had about Matt at the first of the year." Turning to Matt she explains, "You used to hurt my feelings, 'cause I knew what you thought about Mexicans. You don't know that even though the teachers like me, sometimes I have trouble keeping up with the class. I saw you were a lot like me, just mad at the world. We both just want people to accept us. Don't get me wrong. What you said was bad, but I shouldn't've yelled back at you."

"Pam, you are one of Maria's supporters. What would you like to say?" Dupree asks (O'Connell et al., 1999). Pam was painfully shy at the beginning of fall term but, learning to feel a part of something, when Maria asked her to be a supporter, Pam had agreed. "Matt," she tentatively begins, "I know that you're mad at kids who've jumped you in the hall, and I understand when you want to take it out on someone, but if you can't treat us right you won't have nobody on your side. We've been here for each other in the class all year. I felt hurt when you hurt Maria."

Matt had asked Star to be one of his supporters (O'Connell et al., 1999). They had both identified with each other's feelings of isolation, Matt because

he felt “dumb” and Star because her own racial clique of Native Americans had rejected her. As the dialogical conversations had evolved in Dupree’s class, Matt had realized that minorities were not all an amorphous group scheming to get him. Star was an outcast, too.

Star spoke. “What Matt did was wrong, but I know how he feels when we leave Mrs. Dupree’s class. I know what it’s like to be ignored, and sometimes you just want to hurt someone. None of us really have anyone to talk to at home. This is just all there is for us, this class.” Looking around the circle, she pleads, “We can’t let it fall apart.”

“Matt, what do you think about what has happened here today?” asks Dupree (O’Connell et al., 1999). “I feel bad I let you guys down,” he says. Looking down at the floor, Matt is fighting back tears of frustration and sadness.

Dupree then asks, “Mr. Barnes do you have anything to add?” “Well, yes,” he says, “what does this group think Matt should do?” (O’Connell et al., 1999). A bit of empathy is now surging within Maria’s heart, and she knows that Matt is devastated. She doesn’t want the other students to see him cry, so she makes a little joke, “Why don’t he say 10 Hail Mary’s?” The other students know she is Catholic, and a slight chuckle ripples through the room.

“Ok,” says Mr. Barnes, “we can put that on the list” (O’Connell et al., 1999). “What else?” “Why don’t he work with Maria on another assignment with Mrs. Dupree there to help them?” Pam asks. “That would show him that they can work together, and Matt don’t have to get mad when he don’t get it. Mrs. Dupree can help.” Then Sidney adds, “Maria, I know you’re sorry about yelling back at Matt. I think it would be a good idea for you two to work together and get it right.”

“Do we have other suggestions?” asks Dupree. Students just shake their heads “no,” and Dupree gives that decision time to sink in. “Ok, let’s take a moment to congratulate each other on a great meeting, and then we can get back to work” (O’Connell et al., 1999). “You know we are looking at the Civil Rights movement from several different perspectives. You each have one to study and write about, but why don’t you all work together today? I’ll put some of you at different tables and will walk around to help. Matt, you and Maria work together.” Dupree thinks, “We have made progress toward becoming a community, had a successful restorative circle group, and the students’ social studies assignment was born out of experience” (Greene, 1988; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Stiller, 1991). Addressing the group, Dupree says, “Thanks so much, Mr. Barnes, for being with us.” “You’re welcome.” he says. “I’ll be in again,” he tells the group, “but just to visit next time, right?” he asks them. “Right,” most of them respond. The others nod their heads and seem satisfied as well.

## What We Have Learned

As just illustrated, restorative school practices stress the importance of relationships over and above absolutist (retributive-laden) rules. Many schools have repaired their school communities after student infractions by implementing restorative circle group encounters where owning responsibility takes precedence over placing blame and providing punishment. To achieve this goal, a culture of respect, inclusion, and accountability are paramount. But if a perpetrator never feels membership in the school community s/he cannot experience the necessary restorative practice of “reintegration”—thus the need for our study.

Our 14 formerly disaffected students gave us profound insights into student offender-victims. They shared compelling tales of invisibility. The interviews were heavily laden with negative “I” to “me” symbolic interactions (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934/1967): “I don’t get one-on-one attention from teachers;” “I got jumped by Black guys, because I am White, so I hate all African Americans;” “students and teachers put me down or ignore me, because I don’t have the right clothes;” “Teachers have their favorites;” “My stepdad beats me, so I isolate myself from others;” and “I had a baby, and I want to make life different for him than it was for me, in school and at home.” A few of the participants’ caring teachers guided us to construct positive solutions. These educators interacted with them in affirming ways and remained close to their hearts. Even if they were not aware of the theory that supported such actions, they practiced it. Of course even the most concerned teachers cannot solve all youngster’s problems, but our participants showed us the way to envisage situations that could have made a difference (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2008), the chance to see inviting reflections of self in another’s eyes (Mead, 1934/1967). Without such teacher-led dialogical sessions, relational knowledge of each other (students and teachers) are impeded, and teachable moments remain illusive. The situation then goes from bad to worse when a retributive (punish the offender and isolate the victim) classroom becomes the only recourse.

While cognitive behavior and other psychological course work are necessary to undergraduate teacher education curriculum, preparing our fictional classes for later restorative circle encounters convinced us that another cadre of theory and practice is also crucial. Teacher education and continuing professional development must emphasize theory and practice that emphasizes relationships that lead to healthy community building. They are represented in the broad areas of study that inspired Barnes and Dupree (see CASEL, <http://casel.org/>; Edwards & Mullis, 2003; Frey & Doyle, 2001; Landau & Gath-ercoal, 2000) and the more pedagogical calls for contextual learning in any

number of academic areas (Cassel, Reynolds, & Vaughn, 2002; Fuller et al., 1982; Greene, 1988; Martin, 2006; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Stiller, 1991). The holistic teaching vision inspired by the above scholars and many others offer fledgling and seasoned educators alike a magnifying glass to highlight the hidden spaces wherein connected identity development can flourish—a place where wide-eyed enthusiasm and a hunger for community brings the desire to feel and know with the passion to see (Greene, 1988). Armed with that type of teacher and continuing professional education, our teachers, Mr. Barnes and Mrs. Dupree, encouraged students to feel they mattered to the group, which in turn promised to meet their needs (McMillian & Chavis, 1986).

We understand that teaching and administration can be an arduous task, and it is difficult to know the intimate details of each student's life. But it is crucial that educators try. School administration must support occasional scheduling modifications, giving time for all classroom members to participate in restorative circle groups (Haney, 2008). Moreover, any recalcitrant educators must commit or perhaps recommit to the fact that without belonging, nothing else worth learning can happen in schools (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). To do this educators must be aware that some students do not feel membership in the school community for any number of reasons, and, like Barnes and Dupree, have faith that educators can reverse this by providing opportunities for students to see themselves in others. Once individuals feel they have a relationship with the group, the restorative goal of reintegration into the community can be achieved. If we commit to just try, what do we have to lose?

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# **Predictors and Outcomes of Parental Involvement with High School Students in Science**

*Lee Shumow, Elena Lyutykh, and Jennifer A. Schmidt*

## **Abstract**

Demographic and psychological predictors of parent involvement with their children's science education both at home and at school were examined during high school. Associations between both types of parent involvement and numerous academic outcomes were tested. Data were collected from 244 high school students in 12 different science classrooms using surveys, the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), and school records. Results revealed low overall parent involvement. Demographic characteristics predicted parent involvement at school, but not at home, while student reported interest in science predicted both. Different dimensions of parent involvement affected outcomes differently. Among the most pronounced influences were those that parent involvement at home had with student efficacy, interest in science, and motivational states in science class.

**Key Words:** parental involvement, high schools, students, science, ESM, experience sampling method, parents, family, home, interest, efficacy, motivation, homework, predictors, outcomes

## **Introduction**

Scholars and educators have directed far less attention toward parent involvement during high school than in the earlier grades, especially as it pertains

to specific subject areas. The present study focused on science classes. Although science education and achievement is currently a national priority, little is known about parental involvement with science education. Thus, it is important to describe parental involvement specifically as it relates to science.

First, this paper describes parental involvement with students enrolled in high school science classes. Second, parent and student characteristics expected to predict parental involvement with school are investigated. Finally, contributions of parental involvement to students' academic adjustment in science are examined controlling for characteristics related to parental involvement.

A national poll conducted by Public Agenda (2006) indicated that the vast majority of high school students' parents are content with their children's science education and are not concerned about it despite the substantial number of students who are "lukewarm" about science and struggle to succeed at it. Combined with parents' perceptions that they are unable to help their children with science (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004) and the fact that school science tends to be highly specialized and knowledge changes rapidly, parents might not be very involved in their children's high school science education.

It is important to recognize that parental involvement with schools is a multidimensional construct, which has made it difficult to compare studies and draw conclusions about it (Hill & Taylor, 2004). A number of scholars have identified parental involvement at home and at school as distinct dimensions of involvement (Jeynes, 2007), so both are considered in this study. Parental involvement at home includes help with and monitoring of homework as well as establishing rules and routines conducive to school success. Parental involvement at school includes interacting with teachers and attending events (Hill & Craft, 2003).

Possible predictors of parent involvement with their children's science education during high school are tested in this study. It is important to identify characteristics that predict parental involvement both at home and at school for both scholarly and practical reasons. Scholars have previously made cogent theoretically grounded arguments about why parents become involved based on either Bandura's (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) or Bronfenbrenner's (Eccles & Harold, 1996) theories. In designing the present study, we drew upon Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological system theory which posits that parental and student demographics as well as psychological characteristics should predict parental involvement. Understanding what predicts parental involvement increases our understanding of how this important process operates. It also identifies which groups to target and which dispositions to encourage in efforts to increase parental involvement. Furthermore, in analyses examining the

contributions of parental involvement to student outcomes, background differences associated with parental involvement should be controlled.

In terms of parental demographic characteristics, we investigate parental education, low-income (free and reduced lunch), minority group membership, and immigrant status. Those with higher education might be more efficacious, knowledgeable, and intentional about being involved (Lareau, 2003; Shumow & Lomax, 2002). The increased difficulty of the high school curriculum may advantage more educated parents to assist directly with schoolwork at home (Patrikakou, 2004; Simon, 2001). According to Hill and Taylor (2004), parental involvement functions differently in different racial and ethnic groups. For example, African American parents often are more involved in school related activities at home than at school, whereas Euro-American parents often are more involved in the actual school setting than at home (Eccles & Harold, 1996). This tendency to be more involved at home than at school may be especially true for ethnic minorities whose primary language is not English (Garcia Coll et al., 2002). Native-born parents are likely to have greater knowledge of how the U.S. school system works so they may be better able to navigate at-school involvement. There is some evidence, though, that many immigrant parents of high school students have high expectations (Goldenberg et al., 2001) and are deeply involved at home in fostering and encouraging academic success (Strickland & Shumow, 2008), even though they tend to be minimally involved at school (Turney & Kao, 2009).

Student demographic characteristics investigated include gender and freshman status. At least two prior studies suggest that at-home and at-school parental involvement with science education is greater for boys (Carter & Wojtkiewicz, 2000; Miller, 1988), but those studies used data collected during a previous generation, and attitudes toward women in science have changed. Thus, we investigate gender as a possible predictor of parental involvement. Much attention has been focused recently on the serious difficulties many students experience during the transition to high school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Taylor & Dounay, 2008; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). Although, overall, parents of high school students tend to be less involved during high school than the earlier grades, parents of freshmen might be more involved than parents of students in subsequent grades because of transition issues, or they might be less involved due to lack of familiarity with the school.

Possible psychological predictors of parental involvement in science include parental expectations for the student's educational attainment, student interest in science, and student's difficulty in learning science. Parents with high expectations are more likely to be involved than those with low expectations. Hoover Dempsey and colleagues (2005) have noted that students often initiate

parental involvement. Those students who are interested in science would seem to be more likely to instigate involvement, a conjecture we test. Rogoff (1990) has noted how difficult it is for parents to watch their children struggle, so students who are struggling might precipitate involvement. On the other hand, Shumow and Miller (2001) have found that parents of middle school students react to student success with more involvement at school and react to student struggle by more involvement at home, which suggests that those associations should also be tested for high school students.

Most studies of the effects of parent involvement have focused on achievement outcomes. Some have found that parents continue to have a significant positive impact on student achievement whereas others have found negative associations between student performance and parental involvement with adolescents. Type of involvement may be an important factor in explaining these contradictions. Studies with middle school students (Shumow & Miller, 2001) have found that at-school involvement is associated with positive outcomes whereas at-home involvement has been associated with lower achievement but greater school orientation. We extend those studies to high school and test the association between parental involvement and overall GPA and science grades, controlling for differences in characteristics that predict involvement.

We also test whether parental involvement predicts the amount of time students spend on their science homework because homework is related to their concurrent and future success. There is some evidence that parental involvement during high school is associated with an increase in the amount of time students spend on homework and the percentage of homework completed (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

In addition, we investigate the impact of both dimensions of parental involvement on student motivation and attitude. Although many models of parent involvement assume that student motivation and attitude is a prime way that parents influence their children's school adjustment, relatively few studies examine that proposition. Only a few studies (Miller, 1988; George & Kaplan, 1998) have investigated parental contributions to adolescent students' attitudes toward and engagement with science. Gonzales and colleagues (2002) surveyed students about parental involvement and their motivation during high school. Results showed that when parents were involved, students were more likely to report seeking challenging tasks, persist through academic challenges, and experience satisfaction in their schoolwork. We examine the impact of parental involvement on students' motivation during science classes using students' in-the-moment reports of how skilled, hard working, interested, and invested they are in their class work using the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), a highly valid means of assessing student engagement and motivation

(Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987; Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007; Zuzanek, 1999). In addition, we test whether parental involvement predicts students' long-term academic expectations and sense of scientific efficacy.

Thus, in this study we consider students' demographic and psychological characteristics in relationship to two distinct dimensions of parent involvement in high school science, involvement at school and at home. Based on reviewed literature, we expect to see differences in patterns of involvement for males versus females and for freshmen. Further, we expect low income, minority group membership, and immigrant status to negatively predict parent involvement at school while more parent education, high expectations for the student's educational attainment, student interest in science, and student's success in learning science to positively predict parent involvement. Different patterns of association between parent involvement at home and at school and a number of achievement and motivational outcomes in science are expected to emerge.

## Method

### Context and Participants

Data were collected in 2008-2009 in 12 science classrooms in a single comprehensive high school serving students from a diverse community located on the fringe of a large metropolitan area. Thirty-three percent of students in the school were considered "low income." The school serves 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders and had an enrollment of approximately 3,300 in 2009. Average class size was 23.6 students, and teachers in the school district had an average of 11.5 years' experience. The graduation rate was 74%.

The sample consisted of students from 3 general science, 3 biology, 3 chemistry, and 3 physics classrooms ( $n = 244$  students; some,  $n = 12$ , did not complete the school year). These classes were drawn from the "average" or regular track. The study was designed to oversample students in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade: 43% were in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 21% in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 34% in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and 2% in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The overall student participation rate across all classrooms was 91%, with half of the classrooms studied having complete (100%) participation. The sample was 53% male and 47% female. The student sample was 42% White, 37% Latino, 12% African American, 2% Asian, 1% Native American, and 6% multiracial. According to school records, 43% of students in the sample were eligible to receive free or reduced lunch.

## Procedure

Researchers visited each classroom for 5 consecutive days in both fall 2008 and spring 2009. Data used in this study were collected from surveys, the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), and school records.

### *Student Surveys*

Students completed one-time surveys during both the fall and spring data collection periods pertaining to student characteristics (grade, age, gender, ethnicity); family background; educational background as well as students' future academic aspirations; science beliefs and learning; homework completion; and parental involvement in science education.

### *Experience Sampling Method*

During two waves of data collection, students' subjective experience in each science classroom was measured repeatedly over a period of 5 consecutive school days using a variant of the Experience Sampling Method (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987). Participants wore a vibrating pager which was used to signal them unobtrusively using a remote transmitter at 2 randomly selected time points during each day's science class. To minimize the disruption to class flow and maximize the variety of classroom activities recorded, the pool of participants in each classroom was divided in half, with each half following a different signal schedule. In response to each signal, students completed an Experience Sampling Form (ESF) in which they briefly recorded their activities and thoughts at the time of the signal, as well as various dimensions of their subjective experience. The ESF took approximately 1-2 minutes to complete. In an open-ended format, students provided brief descriptions of their thoughts and activities at the time of the signal. Responses were coded by trained coders using detailed coding schemes. Inter-rater reliability on these items was high with percent agreement between 2 independent coders at 91.8% for primary activity, 89.3% for secondary activity, and 90% for thoughts.

Using Likert scales, students used the ESF to report on multiple dimensions of their subjective experience. By the completion of the study, each participant had reported on multiple aspects of subjective experience on as many as 20 separate occasions. In total, 4,136 such responses were collected. In the fall semester, 2,139 responses were collected, for an average of 9.2 responses per participant (92% signal response rate). In the spring semester, 1,997 responses were collected, for an average of 9.1 responses per participant (91% signal response rate). Participant non-response was nearly entirely attributable to school absence.

The method has a high degree of external or "ecological" validity, capturing participants' responses in everyday life. There are indications that the internal

validity of the ESM is stronger than one-time questionnaires as well. Zuzanek (1999) has shown that the immediacy of the questions reduces the potential for failure of recall and the tendency to choose responses on the basis of social desirability (see Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987, and Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007, for reviews of validity studies).

### *School Records*

Public records describing the school organization and curriculum were collected by the researchers. A school employee with access to student's individual records provided a file with students' science grades and "free lunch" status.

## Measures

### *Parental Involvement*

The student survey, completed in the Spring of 2009, included 14 items pertaining to parents' involvement with participants' schooling and their science education. Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation indicated that there were four factors which accounted for 59% of the variance. One of the factors had four dichotomous items pertaining to *parent involvement at school* (Cronbach's alpha = .77): attending school events, coming to school to watch them perform, talking to their science teacher at school, and knowing their science teacher. Another factor was comprised of four items pertaining to *parent involvement at home* (Cronbach's alpha = .75): checking science homework, helping with the science homework, finding someone to help with science homework, and limiting the amount of time the student watches TV or plays video games. Students reported the extent of parent involvement at home on a four point scale from 0 = never to 3 = often. The other two factors, *parent involvement in educational planning* (two items) and *parent student discussion about science topics* (four items) are not included in the present study.

### *Predictors of Parent Involvement*

Family income was estimated from the report of free and reduced *lunch* obtained from official school records. Parent education (*Parent*) was the highest level of education of either parent. It should be noted that 17% of the students did not know either parent's level of education (all analyses reported in this paper were done with the parent education variable in the model because it is such an important factor. Analyses also were done without parent education because of the missing data; the relationship between other variables and parental involvement and outcomes were unchanged on a practical level). Those who reported being born outside the test country and/or having one or both parents born outside the test country were considered *immigrants*. *Academic*

*expectations of mother* were assessed by asking the students how far in school their mother wants them to go (a separate item asked about father's expectations; there was high agreement with mother's expectations and more missing data from fathers, so the mother's expectations were used in analyses). Two variables: *student finds science fun and interesting* and *student reports difficulty with science* were measured by asking students to respond on a scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. *Freshman* indicated that the student was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade vs. another grade.

### *Academic Adjustment*

There were multiple indicators of student's school adjustment. The first indicators were obtained from the ESF average from the days signaled. Students indicated how they felt about themselves and their activities at the moment when they were signaled. On a 4-point scale (0 = not at all, 1 = a little, 2 = somewhat, 3 = very much) students indicated "how skilled you felt at what you were doing" (*skill*), "how important that activity was to you" (*imp you*), "how interesting the activity was to you" (*interest*), and "how hard you were working on the activity" (*hard work*).

The second set of indicators was obtained from student surveys. *Science Efficacy* came from four items on the survey (Cronbach's alpha = .93). Students rated their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale with the following statements "I feel confident in my ability to learn this material," "I am capable of learning the material in this course," "I am able to achieve my goals in this course," and "I feel able to perform well in this course" (1 = not at all true to 7 = very true). *Total hours spent on homework* is the cumulative number of hours students reported doing science homework in and outside of school. *Student academic expectations (StAcadExp)* was a one-item student report of how much education the student expected to attain. The third indicator was the student grades obtained from official school records.

## **Results**

Table 1 displays the average parental involvement at home and at school for the entire population and by characteristics investigated. Overall, the level of parent involvement is low. Parent involvement at school and at home are correlated .28.

Demographic characteristics, such as income, level of education, immigrant status, and race were associated with parental involvement at school but not at home in univariate analyses. Parents of those students who received free or reduced lunch were significantly less likely to be involved at school than those of the students who do not qualify for free or reduced lunches. Further, there

was an important trend in the relationship between parent education level and parent involvement at school—a gradual increase in parent involvement at school with the increase in parent education level. Significant gains in at-school involvement appeared when comparing those parents who did not finish high school with high school graduates and with college graduates. Finally, immigrant parents as well as non-White parents were less likely to be involved at school when compared to non-immigrant and White groups, respectively.

Table 1. Parental Involvement at Home and School by Predictors of Involvement

	Involvement at Home Mean (SD) Significance	Involvement at School Mean (SD) Significance
All	.94 (.78)	.45 (.38)
Free or Reduced Lunch		
	$t = .19$ NS	$t = 5.6^{***}$
No	.95 (.78)	.58 (.37)
Yes	.93 (.79)	.30 (.34)
Parent Educational Level		
	$F = .19$ NS	$F = 9.3^{***}$
< HS Graduate	.92 (.77)	.17 (.31)
HS Graduate	.82 (.76)	.37 (.33)
Some College	.87 (.78)	.48 (.40)
Undergraduate Degree	.89 (.72)	.66 (.36)
Advanced Degree	1.01 (.80)	.62 (.35)
Immigrant		
	$t = -.08$ NS	$t = 5.1^{***}$
Yes	.96 (.84)	.30 (.35)
No	.95 (.76)	.50 (.37)
White		
	$t = .00$ NS	$t = -5.9^{***}$
Yes	.94 (.75)	.65 (.36)
No	.94 (.80)	.33 (.35)
Gender		
	$t = .54$ NS	$t = 1.1$ NS
Male	.97 (.79)	.48 (.38)
Female	.94 (.80)	.42 (.39)
Freshman		
	$t = -2.1^*$	$t = 1.8^{\wedge}$
Yes	1.1 (.82)	.40 (.37)
No	.85 (.75)	.49 (.39)
Acad Expectations Mom	.94 (.78)	.45 (.38)
Sch Science Fun, Interesting		
	$F = .56$	$F = 3.7^{**}$
Strongly Disagree	.46 (.77)	.37 (.33)
Disagree	.64 (.55)	.43 (.39)
Agree	.99 (.78)	.50 (.38)
Strongly Agree	1.3 (.76)	.54 (.41)
Science is Difficult to Learn		
	$F = .81$ NS	$F = .11$ NS
Strongly Disagree	.95 (.75)	.53 (.39)
Disagree	.97 (.77)	.47 (.37)
Agree	.84 (.78)	.47 (.39)
Strongly Agree	.77 (.70)	.44 (.41)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses; NS = not significant,  $\wedge p < .10$ ,  $*p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ ,  $***p < .001$ .

There were no demographic characteristics that predicted parent involvement at home. The only factor that had bearing on parent involvement at home was student’s reported interest in science. Those who agreed with the statement “I find school science fun and interesting” also reported higher levels of parent involvement at home than those who disagreed.

Table 2 displays the OLS regressions predicting parental involvement at school and at home. Each equation explained a significant amount of the variance. Parent education, academic expectation, and students’ interest in science positively predicted and receiving free or reduced lunch and immigrant status negatively predicted parental involvement at school in these multivariate analyses. Mothers’ academic expectations, student interest in science, and being a freshman student were the only predictors of parental involvement at home. Importantly, lunch status, parent education, immigrant status, and student report of difficulty with science did not predict at-home involvement. Gender and race were not predictors of parental involvement.

Table 2. OLS Regressions Predicting Parental Involvement at School and at Home from Parental and Student Characteristics

	Parent Inv School	Parent Inv Home
Lunch	-.16*	-.03
Parent Education	.20**	.03
Gender	-.05	-.07
Immigrant	-.17*	.04
White	.13	-.03
Academic Exp Mom	.20**	.17*
Stdnt Sci Fun & Interesting	.17*	.30***
Stdnt Report Sci Diff for Me	-.03	.06
Freshman	-.04	.14^
R <sup>2</sup>	.34***	.15***
Adj R <sup>2</sup>	.30	.11

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The OLS regressions presented in Table 3 test the relationship between parent involvement at home and at school with student outcomes, controlling for background characteristics associated with parent involvement. As can be seen, each equation explains a significant amount of the variance. Controlling for the predictors of parent involvement, at-home and at-school involvement have different patterns of association with outcomes.

Parent involvement at home is related positively to students’ interest and hard work in class, to how important students think the science work is, and to

Table 3. OLS Regressions Predicting Student Outcomes from Parent Involvement and Predictors of Parental Involvement

	Feel Skillful in Class	Science Class Import to You	Interest During Class	Hard Working During Class	Science Grade	Cumulative GPA	Student's Academic Expectation	Student's Science Efficacy	Hours Science HW
Lunch	.03	.12	.15 <sup>^</sup>	-.03	-.10	-.18*	-.10	-.21**	-.06
Parent Ed	-.11	-.20	.11	-.11	.09	.08	.17*	-.19*	-.03
Immigrant	-.04	-.06	-.01	-.11	.09	.06	-.17 <sup>^</sup>	-.08	-.08
Academic Exp Mom	.03	.04	.16*	.08	-.01	.05	.16 <sup>^</sup>	-.02	.13
Student Sci Interest	.32***	.41***	.30***	.33***	.08	.10	-.06	.51***	.07
Freshman	-.16*	-.14 <sup>^</sup>	-.10	-.10	.13	.03	.03	-.04	-.22*
P Inv Home	.05	.16*	.25***	.16*	-.10	-.10	-.17*	-.03	.18*
P Inv School	.30**	.10	-.01	.03	.26**	.27**	.17 <sup>^</sup>	.17*	-.32**
R <sup>2</sup>	.23***	.29***	.26***	.17**	.11*	.17***	.14**	.31***	.13*
Adj R <sup>2</sup>	.19	.25	.22	.13	.06	.13	.09	.28	.08

Note. <sup>^</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

the hours of homework they do. At-home involvement is negatively related to students' academic expectations. At-school involvement is related positively to how skilled students feel during class, to their grades and long-term academic expectations, and their science efficacy. Parent involvement at school is negatively related to the hours spent doing homework.

## Discussion

Based on the students' reports, overall, parents of high school students were minimally involved in their high school students' science education. This is consistent with the body of research literature showing that the level of parent involvement declines by secondary school (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Patrikakou, 2004; Simon, 2001). Nevertheless, based on our findings, parent involvement remains an important multidimensional factor contributing to students' adjustment during high school.

Differentiating between parent involvement at school and at home is useful in order to build a more nuanced understanding of characteristics associated with parental involvement and of the ways in which parental involvement contributes to students' school experiences. We found that demographic and psychological factors influence parent involvement in different ways.

The way in which parents' demographic characteristics such as income, level of education, immigrant status, and race influence parent involvement during high school depended on the type of involvement. Parents with lower incomes and education levels as well as those from immigrant and minority groups were less likely to be involved at school. This finding is aligned with previous research findings that parents from non-majority backgrounds often do not feel comfortable enough to be actively involved at school. Low academic efficacy, a sense of alienation, as well as language and cultural barriers have been suggested as factors that are likely to prevent these parents from participating in school events or communicating with the teachers at school (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Patrikakou, 2004; Simon, 2001). Conversely, higher income, White, native-born parents and those who have higher levels of education are more likely to interact with teachers, volunteer at school, and attend school events. Numerous studies have shown that parents who are familiar with and have been successful at school feel more comfortable, efficacious, and affiliated with educators (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Lareau, 2003). Educators should make efforts to understand reasons for differences in parent involvement and consider ways to encourage parent involvement in high school science education with a special focus on those groups who are not fully involved. Other studies have shown that invitations

from teachers have a considerable impact on parent involvement at school during the high school years (e.g., Simon, 2001).

Parent demographic characteristics, however, have little bearing on parent involvement at home. Parents from traditionally marginalized groups are involved at home to a very similar extent as are parents who are White, native-born, and relatively more affluent and educated, a pattern that also has been observed among parents of middle and high school students in studies using a large national data set (Shumow & Miller, 2001; Strickland & Shumow, 2008). These findings are extremely important to communicate to educators who are likely to think that those parents who are not involved at school are not engaged or interested in their children's education.

Parents of freshman were marginally more involved at home than parents of students in higher grades. This might reflect parental awareness of the increased academic pressure that students encounter in transitioning to high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Together with the fact that parents of freshman were less likely to be involved at school, this suggests that parents of freshman might need more encouragement to become involved at school and guidance about the ways in which they can be involved.

Gender of the student did not predict parent involvement with science education. Several studies conducted with data collected from a previous generation found that parents were more involved with the science education of their sons (Carter & Wojtkiewicz, 2000; Miller, 1988). Our findings suggest that the current generation of parents do not perceive science to be more important for their male children.

The only psychological factor that predicted involvement was student reported interest in science. It was a strong predictor of parent involvement at home and also predicted parent involvement at school. Interestingly, and against our expectations, students' reported difficulty with science did not predict parent involvement. Hoover Dempsey and colleagues' (2005) model of parent involvement predicts that students exert considerable influence on parents' decisions and actions regarding involvement. Our findings indicate that the parents of these high school students responded more to the positive (interest) than to the negative (difficulty) response of their children to science. Using a more robust measure of academic adjustment, Shumow and Miller (2001) found that parents of middle school students who struggled in science and mathematics were more involved at home than parents of successful students. It may be that parents think that high school students should be focusing more on their interests and on subjects that come easy to them during high school as preparation for choosing their postsecondary path. Given the difference in measures, however, we do not know whether our finding indicates

a development or grade related change in parental decision making about involvement or whether parents respond more to behavioral than attitude cues that their child is struggling. The finding needs to be explored in future studies.

Overall, judging from the percent of the variance explained, parent involvement at home appears to be understood to a lesser extent than parent involvement at school. This warrants further study to identify other potential factors affecting parent involvement at home.

Parent involvement at home and parent involvement at school predicted student outcomes differently. What is most intriguing is that whereas parent involvement at school predicts academic success as measured by student's science grades and overall GPA, it is parent involvement *at home* that is positively associated with students' interest, perceived value of the activity, and diligence during science class, as well as the time that students spend doing homework.

Few studies have examined whether or what type of parent involvement is associated with student motivation in science and fewer still have investigated that issue with high school students. Our finding aligns with that of Gonzales and colleagues (2002), who found that parenting style during high school predicted motivation as measured through survey items. The use of the ESM in the present study allowed us to examine how parent involvement influences student motivation and engagement during class. This connection between parent involvement with in-the-moment attitudes about science while the students are in class establishes an important empirical connection that has previously been assumed but not tested.

Interestingly, controlling for background factors including the parent's academic expectations for the student (as reported by the student), parent involvement at home was associated with lower long-term student academic expectations and was not significantly related to school success. This may suggest that parents are more involved at home when students are struggling academically and/or that students interpret parents' at-home involvement during high school as a sign that they are not on a successful path. Future studies should attempt to ascertain the meaning that students attribute to different types of parent involvement during high school and the messages or reasons that parents might be communicating to the student. For example, perhaps parents warn their children about possible failure when they help with homework or restrict their media use. The fact that parent help with homework did not pay off in better grades has been found in numerous studies, suggesting that parents might be able to provide more effective help with homework. Educators, who hold professional knowledge about teaching, could provide guidance for parents about homework help.

The association between parent involvement at school and grades may suggest that parents who establish better relationships with teachers and who

come to school positively influence teachers' opinions of their children's performance. Standardized science test scores were not available in the present study so it was not possible to test the association between parent involvement and achievement, but at least one other study (Miller & Shumow, 2001) with middle school students showed that parent involvement at school predicts grades but not achievement test scores. Parent involvement at school also might expose them to the expectations and standards of the teacher(s) which, in combination with their own cultural capital (since the social backgrounds of those who are more involved suggest they have more experience and knowledge about succeeding in school), is information that they can then use in providing guidance to their children.

Even though the evidence from this study is not conclusive, the observed powerful contribution of students' interest in science to parent involvement and to positive students' experiences in the science classrooms suggests that fostering student interest in science might be a promising undertaking. When controlling for characteristics that predicted parent involvement, student general interest in science remained a strong predictor of students' in-the-moment feelings about their science experiences in the classrooms and their global sense of efficacy. Student expressions of interest did not, however, predict success in class as measured by grades. Teachers might enlist parent involvement by working to pique student interest and parent partnerships by providing resources, opportunities, and suggestions that would contribute to academic success for those parents whose children are especially interested in science. It has been previously suggested, for example, that establishing a collaboration with a local university or trained professionals from local industry can enhance the enthusiasm and experimental design of science fair projects, thus stimulating participation and the scientific thought process of high school students (DeClue et al., 2000). Schools could also alert parents about opportunities for families or students to participate in activities at local museums, nature centers, or with community groups related to science. Providing resources, opportunities, and suggestions that would contribute to academic success for those parents whose children are especially interested in science will likely strengthen teacher–parent partnerships.

Science education has been a national priority, yet there has been little focus on how parents are and might be involved in promoting science learning. This study suggests that pursuing a deeper understanding of parents' involvement in and contribution to their children's science learning will help teachers in finding creative ways to establish more fruitful partnerships with parents in science. Science teacher educators will be able to use that understanding during teacher preparation programs in order to promote parent involvement in science education.

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# Family Involvement for Adolescents in a Community Poetry Workshop: Influences of Parent Roles and Life Context Variables

*Angela M. Wiseman*

## Abstract

While adolescents benefit from the involvement of caring adults who participate in their schooling experiences, their families' participation in school events decreases incrementally as they progress through their education. There is still much to be understood about how to develop supportive relationships that encourage families to contribute and support students' literacy learning as they progress through school. This article describes how eighth grade students' attitudes and ideas about their families played a strong role in influencing involvement within a poetry program developed and funded as a way to involve families in the school. Using qualitative ethnographic research methods, data collection consisted of classroom and poetry coffeehouse observations and focus group interviews. Findings indicate that two different factors, the students' perceptions of parents' roles in school and the life contexts of the families, affected the way students encouraged family participation for this poetry program. Insights from students in this study provide important considerations regarding parent involvement in a family literacy program. To bridge connections between home and school, it is important to listen carefully to young adults and community members to meet the needs of adolescent students.

Key Words: adolescents, parents, families, family, involvement, literacy, learning, poetry, junior high schools, roles, life, context, students' perceptions, participation, adolescence, influences, community partnerships, collaboration

## Introduction

*The ringing bell signals the end of second period in the junior high, and after a few minutes, the students walk in to Ms. Martin's eighth grade English classroom from the hallway. As they find their seats, Theo walks into the classroom with his boombox and a folder with copies of music lyrics for the students to read. Theo is a community member from a local nonprofit who is teaching poetry in this classroom. Students and their families attend coffee-house-style poetry nights in a program designed to encourage family participation in the school. After setting down his equipment, Theo walks around the room, talking about a football game with a few of the boys, asking one girl if her parents were going to the church event coming up that weekend. Theo leans over to Shantee, who had been absent on the day he taught his poetry writing workshop last week.*

*"We missed you last week," he tells her.*

*"I had a funeral to go to," Shantee tells him.*

*"Well, I want you to know that I missed you!" He replies.*

*Theo hands out some of their poems from last week with notes to the students about their writing. The students take their poetry and begin looking over his comments, rereading what they wrote. While they are looking over their work, Theo greets them and begins talking about the upcoming coffeehouse and anthology.*

*"Okay, there are two more sessions between now and the coffeehouse. You might need to do some work over the weekend. Who took the time to show your work to a mentor or guardian?" Theo looks a bit disappointed as he surveys the room and finds that only four students raise their hand. "To those of you who admitted that you didn't show your parents, I appreciate the honesty. However, you can't not give your parents an opportunity to write with you and then wonder why they don't get involved."*

This vignette occurred during a poetry program in an eighth grade English classroom designed to create connections among families, community members, students, and teachers. While adolescents are developing independence as they move towards adulthood, research demonstrates that family involvement is still important for children at this age (Nurmi, 2004). It is important to note that adolescents benefit from caring adults that participate in their education, yet family involvement decreases incrementally as children move beyond elementary school (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002). There are two intertwined and, in some ways, competing factors that affect family literacy for adolescent students. First, adolescents' view of literacy reflects their personal and

social development, which is characterized by an increase in independence and autonomy. Secondly, family participation is particularly relevant during the adolescent years, despite the fact the students are becoming more self-reliant.

Adolescents often discourage their families from participating in school events because they have become increasingly peer-oriented, more independent, and their relationships have changed in many ways (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). Much of the research on family involvement is presented from the adult's perspective (see, e.g., Auerbach, 2007; Epstein, 1996), and there is very little research that describes how adolescent students perceive and affect their own families' involvement in their own words. In this article, I describe how adolescent students' relationships with their families played a strong role in influencing involvement in a family poetry program.

### **Related Research**

Families have a significant impact on children's development at any age. During the adolescent years, the family plays a strong role in how children define their life goals and interpret their personal experiences (Nurmi, 2004). Mentorship from caring adults can lead to increased student achievement, motivation, and self-esteem while having a positive impact on behavior and attendance in school (Cassity & Harris, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Thompson, 2003). While most of the literature and current research on family involvement addresses children in the early grades, it is important to consider how families impact student learning when their children reach adolescence. Unfortunately, there is a misperception that as children develop their autonomy, they need less adult guidance and involvement. For instance, Gonzalez-DeHass and Willems (2003) found that family involvement significantly impacts future goals and decisions for high school students.

Studies have demonstrated that adolescents often want their families to be involved, but the school practices and family events must support their self-perceptions and independence (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002) as well as be accessible and relevant to their needs (Schmidt, 2000). Many adolescent children have increased responsibilities at home and make more decisions about their daily lives; we know that in many cases, adolescents take responsibility and broker relationships between their school and family (McGrew-Zoubi, 1998). Due to their increased autonomy, students can have a strong influence in the relationships between their families and school. Specifically, adolescent students often have more influence in communicating about events and encouraging the participation of their caregivers. As a result, there is still much to be understood about how to develop supportive relationships that encourage

families to contribute and support students' literacy learning at this age (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Walker et al., 2005). Activities that are designed to promote involvement should be developmentally appropriate and different than the activities that were encouraged in elementary school (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002). In addition, they should address the social component of involvement by creating environments where families feel welcomed (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Parent participation is affected by many factors, including: educational and financial resources, motivation and beliefs that parents can help their child succeed at school, time constraints, and relationships or policies promoted by the schools (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Swap, 1993; Walker et al., 2005). The ways that involvement is defined reflects the inequities of society, cultural variances, educational experiences, and economic opportunities of families (Green et al., 2007). It has been found that some families define involvement as interactions within the home context, such as discussing educational experiences, goals, or achievements with their children. These behind the scenes supports have been described as "invisible strategies" (Auerbach, 2007) and can be very important for adolescents' social and emotional development as well as the attainment of their future goals (Lareau, 2000; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). For adolescents, support "from the sidelines" can be a significant factor in how students understand and view the world. In Auerbach's study (2007), she described and analyzed some of the ways parents are involved in their children's schooling and found that some of the most significant work may not be perceived by teachers and school administrators. Guidance from adults that occurs outside of school has been found to be a strong determinant of good grades and positive life choices (Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006).

Involvement is often further complicated for parents of color who may feel alienated from schools by cultural and racial issues; past experiences may have resulted in feelings of mistrust in educational contexts (Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008). In a study conducted by Johnson (2003) where she administered a questionnaire to 129 African American parents, she found that more than half of the families felt that racism existed in their child's school district and that 30% reported that their children had experienced racism at school. Johnson (2003) believes that, "In order to improve parents' and guardians' satisfaction with the public school system and to improve relations with them, educators must improve the racial climate in schools. This means that both individualized and institutional forms of racism must be addressed" (p. 18). It is important for schools and families to work together and develop methods for communicating in order to support students (Ingram, Wolfe, &

Liberman, 2007). It often takes an intentional approach for educators to reach out to families who have different cultural or linguistic backgrounds than their own (Colombo, 2006).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Walker et al., 2005) describe three primary sources of motivation for parents to be involved: (1) beliefs about parenting roles and efficacy for supporting children in school; (2) the way that parents perceive invitations for the school from both their children and others; and (3) life context variables such as parents' skills and knowledge as well as the time and energy that they have for involvement. Through conversations and observations with adolescent students, I examined how students perceive these points within a literacy program that was developed to encourage families to participate in various ways at the school. The question my research attempts to answer is: How do adolescent students' attitudes, actions, and feelings affect their families' participation in a poetry program designed to improve family involvement?

### **The Classroom**

This research took place in an eighth grade English classroom in an urban public junior high school, Douglas Johnson Junior High (all names and locations in this article have been changed to pseudonyms), which is located in a major metropolitan city in the Northeastern part of the United States. The school is located in a neighborhood where 97% of the school population qualified for free or reduced lunch. Of the 22 students in the classroom, 17 were African American, 1 was Asian, and 4 were Hispanic; 9 were male, and 13 were female. The teacher was a White woman in her second year of teaching. The poetry program was designed to provide families with a variety of opportunities to become involved in their children's school experiences.

English instruction in this classroom was a balance of skills instruction and service-based projects; Pamela was the classroom teacher, and her collaboration with Theo was one of several projects that linked the students' classroom learning to experiences within the community. Pamela was accountable to testing objectives and curriculum standards, and there was pressure to focus on skills and rote memorization for standardized tests. However, she integrated projects that fostered experiential learning in the community. Students explored racial tensions in the community through interviews, focused on the customs and traditions of family members in reports, wrote autobiographies, and created portraits of community members. The projects focused on understanding community members of different races, learning about the customs and traditions of people in their community, and encouraging students to use their families as resources to develop stories and ideas. One of Pamela's main

initiatives was to improve family involvement because, “That’s a negative thing about our school. We don’t have enough partners, and we don’t have enough people involved.”

### **The Poetry Program and Community Poet**

The poetry program began because Pamela was looking for a way to connect students’ learning in the classroom to the events, history, and people of the community. She heard about the idea of evening poetry coffeehouses and thought it might motivate students to write and speak while also promoting family involvement. A community based nonprofit organization, Urban Voices in Education (UVE), was involved in designing the poetry program and introduced Pamela to a community poet named Theo. UVE secured grant money from the Ford Foundation to improve parent involvement, and they used the funds to pay Theo a stipend for two years. Pamela arranged to “loop” with her students and teach them for both their seventh and eighth grade years so both she and Theo could continue their involvement with the same students.

Theo, the community poet, was an African American male in his mid-30s who taught poetry to youth in out-of-school settings. He was the director of teen programs at a nonprofit organization called Janet’s Kitchen, which was located two blocks from the school. Janet’s Kitchen was designed to provide low income and homeless people of the city with support through various programs. Part of his job was to coordinate an afterschool program for teenagers of the community to go to “hang out” and receive homework assistance. Due to Theo’s role in the community center, he had relationships with students at Douglas Johnson Middle School, and he knew many of the families from the community. Having an opportunity to work within the classroom provided another connection between his programs and the children at Douglas Johnson Junior High School. His involvement in the school prompted many students to begin attending his afterschool programs.

The poetry writing workshops lasted approximately 45 minutes once a week. Theo designed his lessons based on topics he believed were relevant to the students. He often used songs as a model for the poetry workshops he conducted. In a typical lesson, he would distribute copies of the lyrics, play the songs, and teach a writing lesson that related to the song either thematically or stylistically. His instruction usually lasted about 15 minutes, and then students were encouraged to move to a comfortable place to collaborate together and write poetry. As students wrote and read, Pamela and Theo would circulate through the classroom providing further mentorship and guidance. The workshop concluded with an opportunity for students to read their poetry to the class.

During the school year, three evening poetry coffeehouses were held as part of the program, and on average, ten students attended with six family

members. Within the class, 12 out of the 21 students (six boys and six girls) participated in the evening coffeehouses across the school year. Eight of the 12 participating students invited a guest to come; six students brought family members to the coffeehouses, and two students brought another caring adult or friend to attend. In addition, there were many community members in attendance that either knew about the program through UVE or were friends of teachers and students.

Pamela assumed most of the responsibility for organizing the coffeehouses. She recruited the school art teacher to design flyers in both Spanish and English, and she let students decorate to make the room look more comfortable and inviting. Pamela distributed the flyers, bought snacks with her own money and solicited donations for pizza, and met students early to set up the classroom. Pamela explained, "We were so happy with the parent turnout the first year. In a weird way, it did achieve [parent involvement], but it never increased." Explaining that "studies show that parent involvement helps," she looked forward to encouraging participation in her classroom. However, Pamela knew about the backgrounds of many of the students and recognized that it was unrealistic to expect them to bring their families to the coffeehouses. Understanding that parents experienced barriers to participation, she realized that not all of the families could participate in school events. Transportation, time, and financial resources have been cited as major factors that affect a parent's ability to participate (Cassity & Harris, 2000); Pamela was well aware that these factors impeded the participation of her students' families.

Because the program was funded by a grant to promote family involvement, the teacher, poet, and community leader often discussed and evaluated how many families were coming to the coffeehouses. Theo and Pamela tried to encourage students to get their families involved because they realized that funding for the poetry program might depend on how many adults showed up for the coffeehouses. During one coffeehouse, Pamela wondered aloud if the students were showing the flyers advertising the coffeehouse to their parents. She made an announcement to the people in attendance, questioning whether parents were receiving information about the events: "We never know how much information you have. We don't know who gets flyers and information that we want you to have." Hypothesizing that parents were not coming to the coffeehouses because the students did not distribute the flyers or invitations to the events, Pamela identified the problem of communication between students and their families as being a barrier to coffeehouse attendance.

Both Pamela and Theo deemed the program a success because the students improved their writing over the school year and also they responded well to the opportunities to work with various caring adults who were involved in the

program. Elaine, the grant administrator from UVE, felt differently about the program's success and wanted to see increased numbers of parents come out. Some of the coffeehouses did not have the level of attendance that Elaine was hoping to see; therefore, she began to question her support of the program. It was in this context that I organized student focus groups designed to explore and discuss students' feelings and experiences regarding family involvement in their education, particularly as it related to this program.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This research is part of a larger ethnographic study that documented many aspects of the poetry program, including the literacy learning that occurred in this classroom as a result of the partnership between the community poet, the teacher, and the students (Wiseman, 2007). I became familiar with the program during the first year of its implementation and visited the classroom while the students were in seventh grade. However, my role as a researcher documenting this program began during its second year, while the students were in eighth grade. This article focuses specifically on the students' perceptions of their families' involvement and also juxtaposes some of the ideas and beliefs behind the program. My research utilizes a broadly qualitative and descriptive approach (Maxwell, 2005). As a researcher and former teacher, I was both a participant and an observer with this classroom, using ethnographic techniques of participant observation and descriptive analysis to document the poetry program and the classroom interactions (Creswell, 2008). I attended poetry workshops, regular English class sessions, field trips during the school day and after school, poetry events, and I also met participants for interviews and member checks in the community. Interviews were conducted with Theo, Pamela, and Elaine. Data for this article were generated from observations, interviews, out-of-school poetry events, focus groups, and collections of poetry written by students.

I became involved in this poetry program because of my interest in learning opportunities that connected literacy practices of the community with classroom learning. My role evolved from observing and taking notes to working with small groups, assisting students, and discussing their writing and experiences. In addition, I held focus groups with several groups of students to discuss topics related to their experiences within the poetry workshops. My rationale for interviewing students in groups is that they are often more comfortable speaking with their peers, and the interactions among the students enhance the conversations (Kruger & Casey, 2009). From January to May, five students participated in a focus group that met during lunchtime for approximately 45 minutes each session for a total of 4 sessions. The focus group

included two Hispanic boys and three African American girls. These students represented a range of parent involvement and relationships, writing abilities, and experiences outside of school. The students in this group were selected with the help of the community poet and classroom teacher; they felt that this was a group of students that would accurately reflect the experiences of this particular class. In addition, another group of 5 students met with me for one session for a focus group that addressed parent involvement and poetry writing. I used primarily open-ended questions such as, “Tell me about your family participation in the poetry coffeehouses,” or “Tell me about the poetry you wrote today,” and from there, I moderated the discussion while students discussed their ideas and thoughts (Seidman, 2006). At times, Pamela and Theo suggested discussion topics for the focus groups based on their observations and interactions with the students.

Classroom lessons and individual and group interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Themes were established inductively and data were used to generate theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). My own identity as a researcher affected my understanding of this classroom. I am a former classroom teacher who has worked and lived in diverse urban and suburban settings. In addition, I am White and middle class and not from this school community. My goal was to create a story of this classroom that represented students’ experiences in a way that was sensitive to their knowledge and understanding; therefore, member checks and peer debriefings were a significant aspect of my research and were conducted with students throughout my data collection and analysis. Special attention was given to the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Furthermore, the students in the recurring focus group provided me with validity checks and also read through significant parts of my data analysis to provide verification.

### **Poetry in the Classroom: Students’ Views on Family Involvement**

Students expressed varying levels of comfort sharing their poetry and also described different types of relationships with their families. Although most of the students did not hesitate to express their feelings and emotions to the class, some students were resistant to invite their family to a venue where they read poetry from class workshops. Findings of this study demonstrate that students took an important role in determining whether their families should be a part of the poetry program. Two factors that influenced involvement included the students’ perceptions of their families’ roles in school and the life contexts of the families (Green et al., 2007; Walker et al., 2005). The first finding reflects the students’ beliefs about their parents’ roles within the school as revealed by

describing and analyzing the different levels of comfort that students had with their families coming. The second finding reflects life context variables and how they affected family participation. In the next section, I will describe how these two different factors affected family participation in this poetry program.

### **Students' Beliefs About Parents' Roles**

Students' relationships with their families, their confidence in their poetry writing, and the topics they wrote about influenced whether they shared their poetry with their families. While several students found that their families' participation was a source of strength and support, some students did not have a relationship with their families that encouraged them to share the personal topics that they wrote about during the poetry workshop.

The students in this classroom who experienced the most involvement in the poetry coffeehouses were comfortable sharing their writing and used their writing as a way to communicate with their families. Sherie and Ashley were two students who enjoyed sharing with their families and had parents participate at the coffeehouses. Sherie's father and grandmother attended two of the three coffeehouses, and she told a focus group that her grandmother and father "worked hard to come to the coffeehouse," and this was both encouraging and important for Sherie. She explained, "It feels good to have support. And they're always saying to do your best at everything. And when you do your best, you've got someone there to encourage you." Sherie was comfortable sharing her life experiences with her family and her classmates. She described poetry as a way to communicate what she was thinking, and it was an important mode of expression and communication for her.

Ashley also told the focus group that she enjoyed having her mom come to the coffeehouses, and she often shared her poetry with her whole family at home. "I do it regularly [share poetry]," she explained to the focus group, "and they kind of give me pointers on how to improve my work. I practice that way." Theo described Ashley as having strong family participation in her education and indicated that the coffeehouses did not change the support she already had, that it just gave her another avenue for communication. Theo explained, "We just gave her an outlet that tapped into something. But the nature of the relationship was already in place. We didn't create that for them." Both Sherie and Ashley wrote poetry regularly and described their writing as a comfortable medium that increased communication. The participation and involvement in the poetry program extended their families' support and guidance.

Taniqua and Terrence described different familial relationships from Sherie and Ashley, and they also had different experiences with their families' participation. They did not tell their parents about the coffeehouses and felt

uncomfortable sharing poetry with their families. During the first year that the poetry workshop was implemented, Taniqua did not read any of her poetry out loud. Describing herself as “shy” and “reserved,” she explained to a focus group that she was initially anxious about getting up in front of the class. During her eighth grade year, she gradually became more comfortable sharing her written ideas with peers, but she was still not comfortable reading poetry to her parents. The teacher and I both noted how she began to open up and share her poetry as a result of her increasing confidence and the encouragement of her peers. Despite her increased confidence with classmates, she explained how she worried about making mistakes in front of her mother because, “...what would happen to me when I got home? Would she say something good about me? What if I mess up?”

Participation was affected by the nature of the relationships that students had with their caregivers. Terrence lived with his father and expressed that while his relationship with his father was supportive in certain ways, he felt uncomfortable sharing his feelings with him. Although Terrence expressed an interest in attending the coffeehouses, he explained that he did not attend because he worked in his father’s store in the evenings. When I asked Terrence about inviting his father to the coffeehouse, he expressed that he was uncomfortable asking him.

I keep trying to tell my father [about his poetry], but then I have to tell him that I need to make more changes. I be scared. We close, like about lending some money or something, but I still love my father. But I am more close with my mother than my father.

Terrence’s response illuminates one aspect of the program that might discourage students from encouraging their families’ attendance. The poetry writing created a space for students to explore serious topics; yet the serious topics caused Terrence to exclude his father, because he could not share his feelings with his father in the way he could share with other students in the class.

Taniqua and Terrence were uncomfortable involving their family in this type of venue because the nature of the parent–child relationship made it difficult to share such personal topics. They both reflected sentiments of other students in this class who tended to rely on support from peers. Specifically, the goal of the poetry program was not consistent with the way these students interacted with their families. For some students, there was a direct relationship between their desire to involve their families, their choice to share their poetry, and their perceptions of the roles of their families; these three factors affected whether they provided information on the evening coffeehouses to their families. In focus groups, the comfort level between child and parent was

the most discussed topic about parent involvement when I asked about factors that led to their family's participation. It was clear that involvement in this type of program was contingent on a relationship where children were comfortable sharing personal topics with their families.

### **Life Context Variables**

Illustrating that family involvement is linked to the "broader inequities that affect students" (Auerbach, 2007, p. 251), some students said that their families did not come to the coffeehouses because their life circumstances prevented their attendance. These students often attended the events on their own, even choosing to bring another friend or caring adult instead of family. Hector, Carlos, and Desiree were students who did not invite their parents because of busy schedules or stress at home. During the school year, none of their family members attended the evening coffeehouses, yet these students attended each of the coffeehouses. In the focus groups, they explained that they had intentionally kept information about the coffeehouse from their families because they perceived their mothers, in particular, as overwhelmed.

Hector shared his poetry with his mother at home, but he was concerned about burdening her already overloaded schedule with extra activities. Therefore, he did not invite her to the evening coffeehouses. During a focus group session, Hector described how he assumed responsibilities in order to alleviate his mom's obligations, such as earning money for his own clothes. Pamela, the classroom teacher, actually confirmed these observations, stating that Hector was quite involved in the raising of his nephew and that he had many responsibilities at home. It was apparent that his mother was involved in his life, and they had a relationship where he shared his writing with her. However, he recognized her hardship as a single mom working to provide for her family. Therefore, Hector took on a protective role; she was not informed of the coffeehouses, and he chose to attend alone or with his girlfriend. He attended all of the scheduled coffeehouses and was enthusiastic about performing his poetry among his peers and reading his poetry to his mother at home.

Hector was not the only student who did not inform his mother about the coffeehouse because he thought she was too busy. Carlos was also hesitant to ask his mother to attend school functions because she worked at nights. When I asked him if he wanted his mother to come to the coffeehouse, he responded that he had not asked her because "...she works nights, and I feel like she is supporting me. She does her job to support us." Carlos did encourage his mother's participation in a project initiated by the classroom in which they created a community mural featuring interviews and painted portraits of people in the neighborhood. She was interviewed, and her portrait was painted on the

side of the school. Carlos was selective in choosing the activities that he encouraged his mother to participate in based on what time of day they occurred and how busy his mom was at the time.

Desiree was another student who did not tell her mother about the coffeehouses or poetry because she thought that her mother was too busy and stressed. In a focus group, Desiree explained,

It's not the fact that she's lazy. She's stressed out. I know that's the best time to write... And then she's busy, and when she's home, I'm not home. When she does get home, my mother sleeps. There's not time to explain it to her.

Desiree reflects the concern that students have when they see their parents working hard and holding down several jobs. Indicating that it was hard to communicate with her mother because of her mom's busy schedule, she also recognizes her own responsibility for providing her mother with information about school events. Despite the fact that the teacher employed various methods such as phone calls or letters sent via postal mail, Desiree's comments allude to the idea that parents may not receive information about the coffeehouses because their children are making decisions not to extend invitations. Desiree acknowledged that she was a main factor in the contact between her mother and the school.

Hector, Carlos, and Desiree had determined that their parents had too many responsibilities in their daily life to attend the coffeehouses. Certainly, family demands also affect whether a parent could attend a particular school function. These students illustrate how adolescents can act as gatekeepers, and they were deliberate in portraying their mothers in a positive light and in explaining their rationale for not inviting these family members to the coffeehouse.

## **Expanded Views of Parent Involvement**

An important aspect of this poetry program was the collaboration between the community member, teacher, students, and families. Understanding Theo's perspective provided a different way of thinking about how involvement is structured and evaluated in this program. In the coffeehouse and poetry workshop, both Theo and Pamela emphasized the importance of providing support for students and recognized that many factors had to be in place in order for the families to attend the coffeehouse. The parents have to be able to come in the evenings, have the energy to attend the event, and be willing to write and to participate in a school activity. As the school year progressed, it was apparent that this goal could not be achieved for all students. Once Elaine, the administrator of the grant, began to question whether the program was a success,

Theo's response reflected the tension between the adults involved in the project. Theo expressed that Elaine may not be in a position to evaluate because she did not have a similar racial identity and was not part of the school community. In one interview, he explained:

We are not in the position to educate parents. That's not what we do. If I can get a feel of what a student is going through at home and she can talk about it at school, then that's my victory right there.

He thought that adolescence was an important age to receive support from adults, and the poetry program presented a way that family could become involved. However, since he was involved with students outside of the classroom, he recognized the diverse forms of family involvement from his knowledge of family interactions outside of school. This was the case with Hector, who made a recording with Theo by converting some of his poetry into lyrics and then performing them at a recording studio. Theo knew from his interactions with Hector that his mom was involved even though she did not attend the coffeehouse. He explained how:

We [Theo and Hector] made that song together in the studio, and then he had me drive him straight home. I asked if he wanted to stop and get something to eat or go hang out, and he said that he wanted to go straight home. He said, "I want my mother to hear this. All I want is for my mom to see that I have talent." So, how offended would he [Hector] be if he knew that some people did not consider his mother as involved?

Theo explained that it was important to consider involvement from the students' perspective. He explained that poetry could be one way to bridge communication between children and important adults in their lives, but that there were other methods of involvement. As the program was evaluated and Elaine realized that the involvement was not improving from a quantitative standpoint, Theo suggested that family involvement be expanded to include adult mentoring, particularly with willing community members who were attending the poetry coffeehouses.

This suggestion of expanding involvement to community members was a logical one because such partnerships already existed as a result of the program. There were several community members in attendance at the coffeehouses due to the collaboration and interest from different organizations. In addition, we also noticed that some students were initiating invitations for the involvement of community members on their own accord. This was evident when students were given invitations to send to an adult to encourage them to come to a coffeehouse, and we saw that several students chose to invite people outside of their family. David, who was not part of my focus group but participated in

the poetry program, was one student who did this; when asked to address invitations, he thought about it for a while and decided to invite Steven, the art teacher's boyfriend. They had met at a coffeehouse the previous year. Upon receiving the invitation from David, Steven actually took time off work to attend, wrote and performed poetry with the class, and explained aspects of his job to an enthused table of boys before and after the poetry was read.

As the poetry program was evaluated for family participation, it became evident that the nature of the poems and the act of writing were not in alignment with how many students and their families interacted. Furthermore, there were indications that both the teacher and community member could evaluate and understand families because they identified themselves with the local community, yet it was clear that there were many unanswered questions about how to improve family participation.

### **Educational Significance**

Successful parent involvement initiatives change the methods of approaching relationships, increase resources for parents, and gather information from parents as to how to develop relationships (Swap, 1993). It is important to recognize the perspectives of adolescents and the role that they take in influencing and inviting their families to the school. In the focus groups, the students brought up two main points that affected whether they included or excluded their families from participating. First, students were most comfortable encouraging some type of involvement, including reading their poetry to their parents at home, if their relationship supported this type of literacy event. Since the poetry was usually quite personal in nature, the students were affected by whether they shared these types of personal responses with their parents in general. For those students who were comfortable, their experiences with poetry and performance as well as their emotional development were often enhanced by bringing in poetry performance into the relationship they already had with family members. For students who did not have that type of relationship with their parents, they prevented their parents from attending the coffeehouses because they were not comfortable sharing such personal topics. For some students, the poetry workshops were the only places where they could safely express their feelings and explore some of the major experiences they were facing in life while receiving support from peers and adults. However, for other students, involving families in a program where they were encouraged to do important identity work provided them with an opportunity for guidance and mentorship that expanded their modes of communication.

Second, and closely related to the first point, when there was alignment between the literacy event and family's ways of interacting, the students were

more comfortable inviting them to the coffeehouses. Some of the students' families wrote and performed with them; this certainly made it easier to be involved. While none of the students admitted that their parents did not feel comfortable writing and performing, this may have affected whether the parents attended the coffeehouse. This could particularly be the case for families learning English or who had negative associations from their own school experiences. And finally, students' perceptions of their parents' stress level sometimes caused them to keep information about the coffeehouses from the parents. Students played a role in brokering invitations and deciding what to let their parents know about based on perceived responsibilities and duties.

### **Implications**

Overall, this study demonstrates how insights from students and community members provide important considerations regarding parent involvement in a family literacy program. In this particular setting, eighth grade students played an important role in brokering the communication and relationship between home and school. Certainly, as Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) have found, invitations to become involved in schools are mitigated by parenting roles, perceptions, and intentions of invitations, as well as life context variables. This research demonstrates how adolescent students interpret these factors through their own understandings and then make decisions that affect the relationships between their family and their school.

Definitions and feelings regarding parent involvement illustrated how perceptions can vary based on experiences, identities, and background. There was much to be learned by simply asking, "What constitutes parent involvement?" or "What were your own experiences with parent involvement?" Because the intent of the program was to increase parent involvement, this topic became a focal point and an evaluative measure in the spring semester of this study. In many ways, the participants' views of how their families should be involved represented a touchstone that reflected the multiple ways of thinking about the participants of this study. The attitudes of the participants of this study also reflected the range of research findings. For instance, it has been found that family involvement can have a positive impact on the growth and development of adolescents (Nurmi, 2004) which implicates the importance of family literacy programs such as this poetry program. The positive outcomes associated with family involvement motivated the classroom teacher to develop partnerships and support programs that would encourage families to participate. However, by listening to the voices of students and the community member, we see how family support at home can be a significant aspect of support for students. This finding supports research that documents the importance of

“invisible strategies” that happen outside of the school walls and are often not recognized in school settings (Auerbach, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

In order to bridge connections between home and school, it is important to listen carefully to young people to understand the most effective and appropriate ways to provide them with support. As students mature, they can take a stronger role to facilitate or block communication between home and school. Since students affect how their families are involved, our understanding of family literacy programs would improve if we involved more voices in designing programs. These students have insider information about their families’ schedules, types of activities they would participate in, and activities that would be conducive to family participation. If school programs were designed more collaboratively between adults and youth, increased student ownership might increase the participation of their families. More research regarding the attitudes and experiences of adolescents and how their families affect their schooling is necessary for understanding how to design programs that have an impact on student and family literacy.

Theo’s questioning of the administrator’s evaluation, which he felt was limited due to her identification as a White woman from another neighborhood, warrants further exploration. His perspective was that her understanding was limited because she was an “outsider” in many ways. While Theo and Pamela had lots of input into how the program was designed and executed, the grant administrator held quite a bit of power since she was responsible for the budget. The program was collaborative, and Theo provided an important perspective because he was an African American and had relationships with many of the families outside of the school. The perceived difference in control and insider status represented a tension that was affected by cultural identity and power.

In the same vein, the limits of this study are affected by my own identity and how that was perceived in this classroom community. While students articulated during focus groups that there were issues with racism in the schools, they never openly described how issues of racism, attitudes about the schools, or issues with language discrimination might affect their family’s participation in this poetry program. This represents a possible limitation of my own role and how it was perceived by the students. Would students discuss issues of race, language, and identity more with someone whom they perceived as part of their community? Or would students have discussed issues of race, language, and identity differently with someone whom they might perceive as more connected to their own culture or background? This program was innovative in that it was built on collaboration among community members, teachers, students, and families. However, my suggestion is to increase collaboration with community members even further so that research is conducted

and analyzed collaboratively. Despite the fact that I conducted member checks, I was still presenting my interpretations to students and community members, and it was clear that there were some complexities and gaps regarding program design and evaluation that were affected by race, class, and cultural identity. Further research to understand collaborative relationships among schools, communities, and families is necessary for better understanding and representation of children and their families in educational research.

While this study illustrates how students' attitudes and experiences affect family participation, more research is needed to learn about family involvement for adolescents. Specifically, exploring this topic from the families' perspective would provide important insight as to why they did or did not participate in the coffeehouses. A more expansive view of involvement might be the key to creating supportive mentoring programs for adolescents. Also, further investigations about the impact of culture and gender on participation in school events would provide important understandings about why some families are involved. As we continue to learn about the factors that support family literacy at the adolescent level, we also need to develop our understanding of how to connect and build on the ways of learning that also have been shown to positively impact students' growth and development. To bridge connections between home and school, it is important to listen carefully to adolescents and community members to expand our thinking and understand what strategies can provide them with support.

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# Theoretical Factors Affecting Parental Roles in Children's Mathematical Learning in American and Chinese-Born Mothers

*Jessica H. Hunt and Bi Ying Hu*

## **Abstract**

This introductory qualitative study sought to explain American and Chinese-born mothers' personal beliefs and experiences with mathematics, views of U.S. mathematics curriculum, and how these factors influenced motivation regarding roles played in their children's mathematical learning through expectancy–value and attribution theories. The following eight themes were revealed from interview data with 11 mothers: (a) nature of math; (b) knowing math; (c) importance of math; (d) teaching math; (e) teacher competency; (f) parent competency; (g) parent as resource provider; and (h) parent as monitor/motivator. The authors argue that similarities and differences between American and Chinese-born mothers regarding their parental roles can be explained through the context of parental views of the importance of the subject and their involvement, through expectations for successful outcomes as a result of their involvement, and by feelings concerning the ability to control their children's successes.

Key Words: parents, perceptions, mathematics, teaching, parental support, American, Chinese, immigrant, mothers, roles, learning, expectations

## **Introduction**

Parents' roles and involvement in their children's mathematical learning can lead to heightened performance in mathematics (Cai, 2003; Huntsinger &

Jose, 1997; Siegler & Mu, 2008). However, little evidence exists to show how mothers from different cultures support their children's elementary mathematics learning and, perhaps more importantly, *why* that support might differ. For instance, more research is needed to show the differences in (1) perceptions of the importance of mathematics learning, of the nature of mathematics, and of curriculum held by mothers from various cultural backgrounds (Gonzalez & Wolters, 2006; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Tsui, 2005) and (2) how these perceptions are linked to ways in which different mothers support their children's elementary mathematics learning (Cai, 2003; Wang, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine Chinese- and American-born mothers' beliefs about mathematics learning, curriculum, and their roles in their children's mathematical learning through the lens of expectancy-value and attribution theories. The following review presents prior research on parental roles in mathematics as well as theories supporting factors that might increase involvement. First, a summary of research relating to how parents have been found to support their children's elementary mathematics learning and explanations for why that support might differ is given. Next, expectancy-value and attribution theories are reviewed as a means to elaborate on how parents' involvement with mathematical learning is likely to be influenced. Then the present study and its research questions are introduced.

### **How Does Parental Involvement Support Children's Mathematical Learning?**

The notion of parental involvement has been described through a three-fold definition of parental roles in children's elementary learning: (1) parental behavior, (2) personal involvement, and (3) intellectual involvement (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). *Behavior* was related to the amount of time spent in the school environment. *Personal involvement* entailed the act of relating to and providing for a child's "affective environment" (Klein, 2008, p. 96) while learning takes place. Lastly, *intellectual involvement* involved making relevant learning opportunities available to children. Prior research illustrates this definition. For instance, preparation time and effort spent on academics with respect to mathematics homework and home-based support has been widely documented in the literature (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Klein, 2008; Ma, 1999). This is both the personal and the intellectual involvement described by Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994). Chinese American children spent four times as much effort on homework as did other American children (Huntsinger & Jose, 1997). Additionally, Chinese-born parents were found to spend more time on homework, structured their child's time more efficiently, and showed encouragement for

mathematics-related activities, much more than American-born parents (Huntsinger & Jose, 1997; Huntsinger, Jose, Liaw, & Ching, 1997). The differences proved to be important with respect to children’s successes in mathematics. Thirty-seven percent of the variance in Chinese American children’s school success was predicted by parents’ intellectual involvement and commitment to their learning. Thus, the “how” is important when considering parental roles in children’s learning of mathematics.

Cai, Moyer, and Wang (1997) expanded on the “how” when they identified the parental roles of resource provider, monitor, content advisor, and learning counselor in elementary school children’s mathematics learning (see Table 1).

Table 1. Parental Roles as Identified in the Parental Involvement Questionnaire\*

Parental Role	Description
Motivator	Parents provide emotional support for students’ learning.
Resource Provider	Parents provide an appropriate place to study, relevant reference books, or access to the library.
Monitor	Parents monitor child’s learning and progress.
Mathematics Content Advisor	Parents provide advice to their children on math content.
Mathematics Learning Counselor	Parents understand their child’s current situation, learning difficulties, potential, needs/demands, and provide appropriate support.

\*Cai, Moyer, & Wang, 1997

Cai, Moyer, and Wang’s (1997) research provided clear definitions for the “how” regarding ways parents help their children learn mathematics. Perhaps most importantly, Cai’s later cross-cultural research suggested the parental roles of *motivator* and *monitor* contributed the most in both U.S. and Chinese students’ problem solving performance, a widely used criterion for establishing mathematics proficiency (Cai, 2003). However, reasoning concerning *why* parents might become involved in these ways remains unclear. Thus, factors that have been offered as affecting varying parents’ involvement in mathematics are reviewed, namely, perceptions of teachers and curriculum and culture.

## Why Might Involvement in Mathematics Differ Among Parents?

### Perceptions of Curriculum and Teachers

Perceptions and/or knowledge of curriculum may impact the roles parents play in their children’s learning of mathematics (Gal & Stoudt, 1995; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Sheldon

& Epstein, 2005). In investigating reasons why parents may *not* become involved in children's mathematics learning, changes in the school's curriculum from more traditional to reform-based instruction has been cited as an obstacle (Gal & Stoudt, 1995; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). "The emphasis on conceptual understanding is new to most parents who are products of a school system that previously emphasized rules and procedures" (Jackson & Remillard, 2005, p. 70). However, reasons connected to mothers' perceptions of newer curricula as a disruption of support may go beyond a lack of resources. Previous research has shown parents helping students with mathematics homework rooted in reform versus traditional curriculums produced a change in the help offered (Shumow, 2003). Assistance was provided in both situations, but the task given produced different types of help (e.g., reform-based curricula resulted in less directed help; traditional curricula resulted in more step-by-step assistance).

### **Culture**

Types of help offered to children by their parents in mathematics have also been explained through culture. Previous research showed American parents tended to attribute success in mathematics to those who possess a special talent as opposed to those who worked hard and practiced (Hess, Chih-Mei, & McDevitt, 1986; Stevenson et al., 1990). As a result, American-born parents concluded mathematics success is more about innate ability and the success of the school setting. In contrast, Chinese and Chinese American parents believed mathematics success is about effort and practice (Hess et al., 1986; Huntsinger et al., 1997; Whang & Hancock, 1994). They provided their children earlier structured exposure to mathematics concepts and practice of skills through a formal, direct mode of instruction (Chao, 1994; Huntsinger et al., 1997). Thus, Chinese parents tended to attribute their child's successes and failures in mathematics to controllable factors. Perceptions of the importance of mathematics have also been shown to vary widely across cultures. American parents did not view the study of mathematics in elementary grades as important as the study of other subjects such as reading, language, and everyday skills (Cannon & Ginsburg, 2008).

### **Explaining the "Why": Expectancy-Value and Attribution Theories**

Culture and perceptions of curriculum begin to provide explanations why some parents may become more meaningfully involved in their child's learning of mathematics than others, yet leave many unanswered questions relating to *why* culture and perception motivate parental involvement in different ways. For instance, views of the importance of mathematics is expected to influence

the support offered to children as they learn mathematics, but underlying reasons that cause the differences that occur have not been widely discussed outside of the explanation of culture. Furthermore, while it has been stated that differences exist in how American and Chinese-born parents view aspects of ability and effort as it relates to mathematics, the knowledge of why these differences affect parent's motivation to support children in learning mathematics is not clear. Lastly, more needs to be known about why the perceptions of mathematics curriculums cause a difference in parental motivation to help their children. As underlying motivators caused by perceptions and culture become clearly defined, aid can be given to parents to change their views and thus increase their motivation to help their children in meaningful ways as they learn mathematics. Expectancy–value theory and attribution theory are based in the notion of motivation and could explain differing parents' motivation to help their children learn mathematics in ways identified as meaningful in previous research (Cai, 2003).

### Expectancy–Value Theory

In expectancy–value theory, individuals' expectancies for success and the value placed on succeeding are deemed important determinants of motivation to perform different tasks (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). All parental involvement in mathematical learning is likely to be influenced by parents' perceived importance of mathematics (value) and an expectation of success that may result from their involvement (expectancy). Expectancies and values are assumed to be positively related to each other and are linked to psychological and social/cultural factors.

#### *Expectancy*

There exists a connection between the expectation to do well in a given situation and one's belief in his or her own ability and perceptions of others' abilities in expectancy–value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). *Ability beliefs* are defined as broad beliefs about competence in a given domain and tend to include an individual's comparative sense of competence along with beliefs about his or her own ability. For instance, a mother who views herself as inadequate and the teacher as adequate may act differently than one who views the teacher as inadequate and herself as able to help.

#### *Value*

*Task values* are determined by influences such as the features of the task, the importance of success or failure to the individual, and the believed probability of success. Generally, expectancy–value theory outlines four areas that constitute task value: attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value, and cost.

Attainment value involves the personal importance of doing well, while intrinsic value involves the enjoyment the individual gets from performing the activity (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). Utility value is determined by how much a person values a particular task with respect to future plans or goals, and cost is defined as the negative aspects of engaging in a task. Variables are influenced by individuals' perceptions of other peoples' attitudes and expectations for them, by their affective memories, and by their own interpretations of their previous achievement outcomes. Many of these variables are also evident in attribution theory.

### **Attribution Theory**

Attribution theory suggests parental involvement in mathematics depends heavily on the controllable or uncontrollable factors involved in the task and the connected need for achievement (Weiner, 1972, 1988). The notion of controllability separates causes under a person's control from causes one cannot control. Ability, for instance, is classified as a stable, internal cause, while effort is classified as unstable and internal. Attributing an outcome to a stable cause such as ability or skill has a stronger influence on expectancies for future success than attributing an outcome to an unstable cause such as effort. This is an important point when considering parental roles and why certain parents become more involved than others, as one's beliefs about the cause of children's successes or failures have important implications for what the parent may choose to do or not to do regarding the child's achievement.

Moreover, attribution models, like expectancy–value models, include linkages between ability and effort and the need to achieve. Weiner (1988) explains:

Individuals high in achievement motivation perceive that effort is an important determinant of outcome (high effort produces success and low effort results in failure). On the other hand, persons low in achievement needs perceive that outcome is only weakly influenced by how hard they have tried. However, they do believe that personal failure is caused by a lack of ability. (p. 96)

### **The Current Study**

The current study will expand understanding of the nature of involvement in students' mathematical learning by explaining the influences of mothers' perceptions and beliefs toward mathematics and their knowledge of the curriculum on their motivation to assume varying parental roles through expectancy–value and attribution theories. Specifically, this research answers

the following questions: (1) What are Chinese- and American-born mothers' personal experiences in learning mathematics and views of their child's mathematics curriculum? and (2) Why might their views and experiences influence parental motivation to engage or not engage in meaningful parental roles supporting their child's mathematics learning?

## Methods

### Setting

The study took place in a metropolitan area of central Florida. Researchers identified two sites that would serve well for participant recruitment. First, a Chinese church was selected to recruit Chinese-born parents because it serves primarily Chinese-born families and individuals who live in the Central Florida area. There are approximately 20 Chinese families and 30 individuals who attend the church on a weekly basis. Out of these 20 families, approximately 15 of them have children who are currently attending public schools in central Florida. Second, a community clinic was selected to recruit American-born parents because it regularly offered free diagnostic testing services in mathematics to school-aged children. There are about 15 families per year who use the clinic services offered 3 times per year. Every family who uses clinic services has at least one child attending public school in central Florida. Families who use the clinic services do so to obtain information on their child's mathematics aptitude. The testing could be provided for any child, from gifted to normally achieving to one who is struggling. We knew that many of the families who used the clinic services resided in areas in close proximity to the Chinese church, which was another reason the clinic was utilized for recruitment.

### Participants

Mothers needed to meet certain criteria in order to participate in the study. Chinese-born mothers had to have been a parent of at least one elementary-aged child (Grades 1–6), received their primary education in China, and immigrated to the United States (acculturation). American-born mothers had to have been a parent of at least one elementary-aged child (Grades 1–6), received their primary education in the United States, and had American citizenship. The criteria were used to identify a comparative group of parents who received their education in two distinct cultural settings. Further, we wanted to ensure that teachers who served the children of the parents we interviewed had comparable backgrounds with respect to degree earned and years of teaching. The equity sought in these characteristics was important because we did not want to obtain answers based on the quality of teaching and pedagogy given

as opposed to parental preferences and beliefs regarding their child's learning of mathematics. All teachers of the sampled mothers' children were found to hold bachelor degrees in education and had teaching experience of 4–7 years.

### *Sampling Procedure*

We used a purposive sampling procedure in recruiting participants. The sample was purposive in that we needed mothers whose children were taught by teachers of comparable backgrounds (see above) and who lived in areas serviced by the same schools, thereby assuring more control of similar curriculums and teaching experience being used in classrooms. The first author worked with a representative from the clinic to identify potential participants. She telephoned the potential participants and explained the purpose of the study. Once mothers expressed interest in participating in the study, she arranged interviews times and mailed consent forms to interested parents' homes. The second author received permission from the leader of the Chinese church to recruit study participants. She contacted all qualified participants ( $n = 5$ ) in person and everyone volunteered to participate. Together, the researchers recruited a total of 11 mothers of elementary-aged children (M child age = 9 years) for the current study.

### *Demographics*

For the American participants, we attempted to obtain a relatively diverse sample of mothers. American-born demographics are made up of exactly one-third Caucasian ( $n = 2$ ), one-third African American ( $n = 2$ ), and one-third Latina ( $n = 2$ ) parents. English was the primary language spoken in all but one participant household, where Spanish was the primary means of communication. Each participant was her child's primary caregiver. The mothers noted their occupations as (1) accountant, (2) special education teacher, (3) housewife, (4) administrative assistant, (5) general education teacher, and (6) research assistant/associate, with all reporting middle socioeconomic status.

Demographic variables for Chinese mothers reflected similarities and differences with American participants. All Chinese participants reported being middle socioeconomic status except one parent who self-identified as low socioeconomic status. All participants reported Chinese as the primary spoken language in their homes. Each participant was her child's primary caregiver. Mothers listed their occupations as (1) software engineer, (2) manager, (3) bookkeeper, (4) housewife, and (5) professor. Table 2 further summarizes participants' demographics for both participant groups.

Table 2. Participant Demographics.

Characteristic	Immigrant Chinese-born parents ( $n = 5$ )	American-born parents ( $n = 6$ )
Mean Acculturation	14.1 years	32.4 years (natives)
Mean Educational Level	Master's degree	4-year college degree
Mean age of children	11-0 (years-months)	7-0 (years-months)

### Author-Researcher Perspectives

The identification of a researcher's positionality in a qualitative research project is important because the researcher becomes the instrument by which data is collected and analyzed (Glesne, 2006). The first author spent a good amount of time reflecting on her own subjectivity regarding this research project and what that meant to her position as a researcher. As a former mathematics teacher, she was confident in her knowledge of mathematics. Her experiences with her own parents and what they assigned as mathematics homework included a wide variety of applications, drills, and concepts that were often embedded into situations in daily life. In regards to data collection and analysis, she expected her inquisitive nature to result in the reporting of themes and voices of participants, even though they may have differed from her own.

The second author speaks Chinese as her native language, and she also attended the Chinese church regularly that was selected as one of the study sites. She was born and raised in China and came to the U.S. to study exceptional education at the age of 21. The second author also loves learning and teaching aspects of mathematics. She remembers how by first grade she had mastered the multiplication facts table and won the first prize in a math competition. She loved playing math games and solving math problems. She found such tasks interesting and engaging. Her math teachers were good at explaining problems and made them understandable to her even though her elementary school was poor and math manipulatives were not available for teachers or students. She later found out that most of her peers grasped conceptual understanding of math concepts naturally through a combination of didactic discussion, drawing pictorial illustrations, and making references to daily materials. Currently, the second author is the mother of an early elementary student. She is actively involved in her son's mathematics learning through (1) teaching math concepts by connecting to daily life applications and using concrete materials as well as drawing pictorial illustrations, (2) reinforcing declarative knowledge by playing instructional board games and online computerized games, (3) challenging him to solve mathematical problems in order

to foster a love for learning mathematics, and (4) building his self-confidence by doing all the above consistently and habitually.

Throughout the course of this study, the researchers have attempted to acknowledge their own feelings about mathematics and the teaching of mathematics and have tried not to inflect their position into research data. Efforts were taken to interpret all research data in full awareness of the researchers' "lens" by using various verification strategies (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Verification of data analysis, resulting codes and themes, and guards against external threats to validity were achieved through a variety of means. First, three independent coders reviewed transcripts at stages two and three of data analysis (Grbich, 2007). Codes were deemed to be reliable if the three coders achieved 80% agreement or greater. Coders reached consensus on their disagreements. Second, reliability of source information was obtained through the use of verbatim translation (Grbich, 2007). Finally, participants were shown results of the analysis as a means of member checking to ensure consistency in data reporting (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 2006; Grbich 2007).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Interviews were the primary data collection method employed in the study to gain an in-depth understanding of the research questions. We wanted mothers to experience comfort and freedom to express their opinions freely and thus generate a range of issues and thoughts expressed in response to interview questions. Each mother participated in one interview session focusing on parents' perceptions of mathematics teaching and learning and questions relating to each mother's perceived roles in her child's mathematical learning. After agreeing to take part in the study, a time to complete the interview session was arranged. Each interview session took from 20 to 50 minutes to complete.

The first author held all individual interviews with American-born mothers. The second author held all individual interviews with Chinese-born mothers in the church. Chinese participants all elected to be interviewed face-to-face in Chinese at the Chinese church on a Sunday after lunch. Interviews with Chinese-born mothers took two Sunday afternoons. All American participants chose to utilize telephone interviews to adhere to individual schedules except one mother, with whom the first author conducted a face-to-face interview at the clinic. The Spanish-speaking mother was interviewed in Spanish by the first author with the aid of a translator.

An interview protocol was utilized during the interview process (see Appendix). Questions used were largely open-ended, allowing participants to supply researchers with as little or as much information as they felt necessary to express their thoughts on questions posed (Glesne, 2006). The interviews

began with questions designed to elicit participants' perceptions of mathematics as a learning entity; the mothers were asked to reflect on their own learning of mathematics and their current perceptions of its importance in life. Next, questions were posed inviting participants to reflect on their views of their children's learning of mathematics pertaining to the school and curriculum. Lastly, participants were asked about the roles that they played in their children's mathematical learning.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis of interview data involved several stages of identifying, sorting, and analyzing. First, all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim; the tapes were then destroyed (Grbich, 2007). Interviews not conducted in English were translated into English before being coded. Transcripts were entered into Microsoft Word in an effort to organize the data. The research team then reviewed the first two interviews of both immigrant Chinese-born and American-born participants concurrently to discuss possible codes and early emerging themes (Grbich, 2007). Identified codes were given definitions, and a list of codes and definitions formed the first version of the study's codebook.

Second, the research team independently analyzed the next two sets of interviews and met to discuss and agree on findings. Certain themes and codes were added or deleted during this stage until researchers reached a consensus on the information, which produced a revision of the original codebook formulated in the first round of analysis (Glesne, 2006; Grbich, 1997).

Finally, each researcher analyzed the last three sets of transcripts, first independently and then again as a group, to reach consensus and make any necessary changes. Thus, a total of three versions of the codebook were developed from these processes. Final checks among the research team were performed on all codes to ensure accuracy and consensus (Grbich, 2007). Related codes (e.g., importance of math and perceptions of math) were condensed. Final numbers from the analysis process produced a total of eight interrelated themes.

### **Results**

Table 3 provides an overview of the eight themes uncovered in the study: (a) nature of math; (b) knowing math; (c) importance of math; (d) teaching math; (e) teacher competency; (f) parent competency; (g) parent as resource provider; and (h) parent as monitor/motivator. Indicator categories include codes uncovered in both immigrant Chinese and American parents' responses.

Table 3. Eight Themes of Mother’s Perceptions of Mathematics, Curriculum, and Parental Roles

Interview Themes	Indicators	
	<u>Chinese-Born Mothers</u>	<u>American-Born Mothers</u>
Nature of Mathematics	Regimented Verbal Strategy Practice Memory	Regimented Verbal Steps
Importance of Mathematics	Responsibility Good at It Accomplishment Interesting/Useful	Better Things to Do Can’t; Don’t Fun The “Challenge”
Knowing Mathematics	Motivation Hard Work Application Interest Gift	Talent Right Background Practice Basics
Teaching Mathematics (Mother’s Beliefs)	Memory Practice Application and Integration	Memory Practice Steps/Basics
Teaching Mathematics (Actual)	Lack of Depth Lack of Application No Practice Too Simple No Mastery	Effective/ Blind Belief No Focus Exposed to More
Teacher Competency	Not Competent Not as Good as Mine	Competent
Mother Competency	Good	Poor
Mother as Resource Provider	Provide Additional Supplies Make Up Problems	Games Tapes
Mother as Monitor/ Motivator	Enforce Additional Practice Meaning/Extension	Make It Fun The Child’s Responsibility

## Parent Perceptions of Mathematics

### Nature of Math

The first theme uncovered relayed parents' perceptions of the nature of mathematics. This theme revolved around ideas and memories of parents' own learning of mathematics and parent's perceptions of the learning process. Mothers born in China emphasized that they related mathematics to terms such as practice and a "mental knowing." They reported the learning of mathematics being filled with practice and memorization. However, their recollection of mathematics tended to include a richer and more involved mathematics along with a restating of facts—parents often spoke of math as strategy and a way of flexible thinking that extended from one subject to many others.

American-born parents emphasized mathematics as regimented and somewhat teacher led. Many reported their learning of mathematics as a series of steps. Indications of mathematics being more streamlined and less flexible were apparent throughout American parents' responses, suggesting that the learning experiences of American and immigrant Chinese-born parents possessed similarities yet also important differences, as few American-born parents spoke of mathematics as an application of reasoning.

American-born Mother: I remember learning math primarily as the teacher was writing on a chalkboard. And they would show you, um, the different steps...the different steps to get to the answer.

### Importance of Math

Further differences in perceptions concerning mathematics began to emerge as parents discussed the importance of mathematics, which revolved around parents' appreciation of mathematics as a learning phenomenon as well as the relevance of mathematics to life events. Chinese-born parents emphasized feeling responsible towards the learning of mathematics and an interest in succeeding in its understanding.

Chinese-born Mother: I feel it is kind of my responsibility to learn math well since the teacher was teaching you. I like math a lot. I think it is very interesting. Especially I would feel glad when I solved difficult problems.

Similarities and differences were apparent in American-born parent responses. Most American-born parents indicated an overall uneasiness about mathematics, ranging from a general discomfort to an inability to understanding or comprehend mathematics. Along with expressing their dislike regarding the subject, other parent responses indicated that mathematics did not hold importance in their life.

American-born Mother: ...ugh, no. Can't grasp it...don't grasp it....

American-born Mother: I have better things to do than think about numbers...

### **Knowing Mathematics**

Knowing mathematics refers to parents' views on what it takes for someone to come to know and excel at mathematics. Chinese-born parents believed that to be good at math, one must show interest.

Chinese-born Mother: I think you need to increase your interest in learning mathematics....Regardless of learning styles, practice is critical if you want to be good at mathematics.

Chinese-born Mother: First, one should practice a lot. Practice will make one become gradually more and more interested in math.

In contrast, most American-born parents believed that one had to possess talent to obtain mathematics achievement.

American-born Mother: I think that you have to be somewhat number oriented...and not get a mental block about it. I think that happens a lot, where kids don't understand, so they push it out.

## **Parent Perceptions of School, Teachers, and Curriculum**

### **Teaching Mathematics**

The fourth theme revealed thoughts concerning how mathematics should be taught as well as on the effectiveness of the teacher and the school mathematics curriculum. At odds with their own beliefs about how mathematics should be taught, Chinese-born parents viewed the U.S. school curriculum in math as weak and lacking depth, practice, and mastery learning.

Chinese-born Mother: I think math education in the U.S. is inadequate. It seems that it is covered very broadly, and the child is learning about a variety of everything. Yet the child did not learn to master any of them.

Chinese-born Mother: I feel that the schools here do not provide enough time or items for the child to practice. If you want your child to be good at mathematics you have to teach him yourself at home.

Chinese-born Mother: I feel there is a significant lack of practice. They rarely ask students to practice. Very little homework. That's why I have to check the amount of homework and come up with more for my child to practice.

In disagreement with their counterparts born in China, some American-born parents saw the curriculum for math as generally effective, but listed vague or few specifics as to why they felt that way.

American-born Mother: They always prepare the kids well for mathematics because they...they have to...the school right now must do well on the FCAT testing.

Alternatively, specific reasons mentioned by some American-born parents for seeing the U.S. curriculum as low included a lack of focus and an emphasis on other content areas like reading.

American-born Mother: Right now I really don't see that much of a focus on math; I still see more of a focus on reading intervention or pull out for reading more than math.

### **Teacher Competency in Math**

The fifth theme addressed each mother's feeling about her child's teacher and the teacher's ability to teach mathematics to the child. The responses show differences between varying parents' perceptions of teacher effectiveness. Overall, Chinese-born parents did not report being confident in the level of math knowledge exhibited by the teacher. Often times, mothers felt more prepared in understanding mathematics and gave measurable attributes that were seen as lacking, such as knowledge of problem solving and concepts.

Chinese-born Mother: Sometimes, my son brings home math problems, and the teachers do not even know how to solve them. I solved them, but the teachers did not even know how I reached the conclusion.

In contrast, it appeared that American parents trust teachers' competencies.

American-born Mother: I know that she [the teacher]...I have heard of people talking about her strengths and what she's done. How it's her passion (math), and I think that's a good influence...a good way to open someone's mind up to a positive way of thinking about math.

## **Parent Roles in Child's Mathematical Learning**

### **Parent's Competency in Math**

The last three themes dealt with parental roles in children's mathematical learning and factors that might have influenced these roles. The sixth theme uncovered related to parents' feelings of competency regarding their own knowledge of mathematics and their ability to act as a resource for their children's learning. Chinese-born parents reflected a basic comfort with mathematics.

Chinese-born Parents: My math training is more than enough to teach her.

Unlike Chinese parents, most American-born parents seemed less sure as to how much they could help with mathematics.

American-born Mother: I don't feel prepared at all. It's a very scary road for me, actually. Math isn't my favorite subject. I will...take the necessary steps for her to grasp what she needs.

### **Parent as Resource Provider**

The seventh theme involved parents as resource providers for their children. Many Chinese-born parents reported that they did not feel that American schools provided enough homework for their children and seemed to be aware of more strategies and ways to help their children by supplementing the teaching and often re-teaching or extending the topics taught. Parental support came across as systematic and connected to the child's learning process with the *parent* as the main resource to their child.

Chinese-born Mother: I, then, show her the relationship through drawing...number line...basically, using pictures to illustrate the concept. Once I draw the picture and explain it to her, she can understand it... you have to illustrate it in a way that she can understand.

In contrast, American-born parents saw *teachers and others* as resources for their children over themselves. While basic resources were cited, most American-born parents relied on resources that were detached or external to their own support structures.

American-born Mother: They all do homework in the afternoons. They all pretty much, like there's all these...at least on my son's school website...they have a lot they can go on and play the math games.

American-born Mother: Getting help from their dad or seeking the help of their teacher.

### **Parent as Monitor/Motivator**

The final theme dealt with a mother being a monitor and motivator of her child's learning process. As viewed in other themes, differences between parents were uncovered. In general, immigrant Chinese-born mothers responded in rich and various ways related to monitoring and motivating their children's learning of mathematics.

Chinese-born Mother: I reward them with money, like one dollar. But, I don't give them cash. Instead, I write them a check. They also have a

check book to keep track of how much money they have earned. So they know how much money they have in their bank account. Of course, I am the bank.

American-born parents seemed to defer motivating and monitoring to others, trusting more in the aptitude of the child's teacher or another source.

American-born Mother: I would not have a problem going to the teacher or emailing the teacher for extra help for them, or, like I said, driving them in the morning early or in the afternoon.

American-born Mother: You know what I mean, if they didn't get it with their teacher that day, what makes me think they are going to get it with me at home?

## Discussion

Although caution should be used when interpreting the results of the findings due to the small number of parents interviewed and a limited means of data collection, the results of this study suggest that similarities and differences between American and Chinese-born mothers regarding their parental roles in mathematics can be explained through the context of perceptions of importance of the subject, expectations for successful outcomes as a result of their involvement, and feelings concerning the ability to control a child's successes.

Apparent in the results was the difference in the importance of mathematics between mothers. According to expectancy-value theory, perceptions of task utility (important or unimportant) could be influenced by a person's interpretations of their own past performance in mathematics and their affective memories (e.g., a person who remembers performing poorly in mathematics may not value it, while parents who remember doing well may value it more; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Indeed, many mothers that we interviewed who remembered doing well in math seemed to value the subject more than those who remembered doing poorly or who attached a negative connotation to the subject. This valuing or devaluing could prove to affect the support given to children or the type of support given (e.g., monitors and motivators), as task value's ultimate significance is the impact on a person's choice to engage in the task through attainment value, intrinsic value, or utility value (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002).

A belief particular to Chinese-born mothers was the importance of practice, not only in learning mathematics, but also in increasing one's interest in the subject (e.g., intrinsic value). This alludes to the possibility that, while Chinese-born mothers believe that talent is a precursor to success in advanced

mathematics, they believe they can push or train their children to become interested in and good at math through practice, a belief not made apparent by American-born mothers' comments (Hess et al., 1986; Huntsinger et al., 1997; Whang & Hancock, 1994). This explains and expands notions of earlier research reporting that Chinese-born mothers tend to attribute their child's successes and failures in mathematics to controllable factors (Hess et al., 1986; Whang & Hancock, 1994).

Tied to interpretations of past performance and the effect on valuing roles are the beliefs that mothers' hold in their own ability to help their children. According to attribution theory, captivating beliefs about a person's own mathematics ability or efforts may lead to feelings of controllability or uncontrollability on the part of the parent, thus leading them to become more or less involved in their child's learning or to become involved in qualitatively differing ways (Weiner, 1972). Many mothers who expressed a comfort with mathematics described assigning extra work for their children or brought mathematics into daily life routines, while mothers who seemed uneasy with mathematics seemed to forgo the responsibility to other people. Thus, the convergence that occurred in many parents who did not remember doing well in math and who did not feel they could adequately assist their child led to a difference in assistance received by their children (Cannon & Ginsburg, 2008; Hess et al., 1986; Stevenson, Lee, & Stigler, 1986). Interestingly, Chinese-born mothers seemed to appreciate homework that was more practice driven because they felt apt enough in the content to provide the applications and connections necessary in math through their own teachings. In contrast, American-born mothers seemed to appreciate homework that was "fun" or more "self-guided" applications or extensions of instruction done in the classroom, perhaps because they were more unsure of how to help.

The interaction of expectancy and ability beliefs (both about one's own ability as well as the ability of another) may have also affected the reported roles mothers played in their children's learning of mathematics. A parent deciding how to help a child may establish their expectancy for success in doing so based on their observations of other's ability (e.g., the teacher's ability) along with knowledge or beliefs concerning their own ability (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Observing the teacher as good at teaching and understanding mathematics and oneself as better may produce one type of expectancy and corresponding role, while observing a teacher as bad at teaching and understanding math and oneself as worse by comparison may produce another type of expectancy that one will do well as a helper, producing a different type of role. The comparison could also work to influence parental roles in mathematics if beliefs about their ability to do math are poor and they place more value in the teachers' ability as

opposed to their own (or the opposite). Most American-born mothers viewed the curriculum and the teaching of mathematics as fairly adequate, despite the absence of concrete factors supportive of their opinions. It seemed from our limited information that American-born mothers are more apt to believe in the competence of the teacher and of the curriculum than Chinese-born mothers. Although cultural differences may also explain the findings (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Hess et al., 1986; Huntsinger et al., 1997; Whang & Hancock, 1994), perhaps the view of the U.S. mathematics curriculum is a contributing factor to the propensity of some mothers to monitor and motivate their child more than others (Cai, 2003).

Our study also suggests the possibility that three distinct conclusions are reached by parents who hold certain views of teachers and their competence in comparison to their own. First, some parents believe that even if the teacher is inadequate that they cannot do anything to assist their child because their ability is worse or that they simply do not understand the curriculum (Gal & Stoudt, 1995; Grolnick et al., 1997; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Supporting evidence for this conclusion is found throughout responses indicating some of the mothers' reliance on computers, tutoring programs, or other outside sources for assistance. Second, parents may see an inadequate teacher and respond with increased assistance because they perceive their own ability as better than that of the teachers, as evidenced by many of the Chinese-born mothers' responses. Finally, some parents view the teachers' knowledge as "good," leading to either an unquestioned support of the dominance of the teacher and a lack of their own support (as evidenced by one parent's feeling unable to help if her child did not learn from the teacher) or to lending support in other, non-academic ways (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

As mentioned previously, little is known concerning why the perceptions of mathematics curriculums cause a difference in parental roles taken or in the type of support given outside of views of varying mathematical tasks (Shumow, 2003). The link between ability/effort and the need for achievement also holds implications for parental roles (Weiner, 1972, 1988). The results of this study suggest the possibility that Chinese- and American-born mothers view the mathematics curriculum in the United States in very different ways. If one has a high need for achievement, then their attribution of success will correlate more with effort than ability. In other words, a mother needs to succeed in her support of her child's learning (perhaps because the school or teachers are failing them), so they believe they *will* succeed. On the other hand, individuals who are low in achievement needs are more likely to perceive that failure is due to their ability deficiencies. Or, mothers who view teachers and curriculums as adequate may have a subsequently low need to help their children and may not even believe they can do so (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Weiner, 1988).

As evidenced by the responses, some mothers saw the curriculum as not meeting their expectations for their child's learning and, to compensate for this gap, they compiled extra assignments and practice opportunities for their children to complete. The perception of an inadequacy in instruction influenced the roles that mothers played in their child's learning of mathematics, perhaps because it heightened the mother's need for achievement and her subsequent belief that her effort will matter in her child's learning. This finding also may better explain past research findings that Chinese American children spend four times as much effort on homework as did European American children (Huntsinger & Jose, 1997). It may also explain the propensity for some parents to become motivators and monitors of their child's learning in mathematics, more so than others who may see the curriculum as adequate (Cai, 2003).

### **Limitations of the Research**

The results of this analysis depict important differences in how parents view mathematics, teachers, curriculum, and their own abilities, as well as the subsequent impact on parenting roles. However, there are several important limitations that should be noted. First, due to the length of the interview sessions, limited information was obtained, which makes it difficult to say differences observed between mothers apply to all Chinese-born and American-born mothers. A second issue is the small group of participants interviewed. This affects the ability to make broad statements about the themes uncovered. Next, the sample size in the current study is not big enough to examine whether gender, SES, or other parent characteristics predicted parents' beliefs or responses. This is an important issue, as "it has been pointed out that inconsistencies in linking parent involvement to academic achievement are related to the failure of studies to fully assess differential effects by socioeconomic status" (Tam & Chan, 2009, p. 85). Many inconsistent findings appear in the literature relating to how parent's income, job status, and related factors affect support given to their children, and this is a definitive limitation to the present study. Lastly, the information was all self-reported by the mothers; the nature of the study (i.e., pilot study) and available resources (i.e., time and money) made a more encompassing amount of data collection difficult.

Future research should address these issues. First, a larger sample of mothers from varying socioeconomic statuses should be included in future studies to improve the findings. Observational data, lengthier interview sessions, and additional forms of data analysis would also be helpful to provide richer and more applicable information. Future research could also utilize information from the children of parent participants and observe the impact of parental roles

on student achievement and student efficacy in mathematics. If it is found that the findings from this study are representative of larger groups of parents, then future research needs to address the view of these mothers as teachers. Additionally, we would need to explore practices and programs that could aid in mothers increasing their understanding and involvement in their children's journey to mathematics success.

## Implications for Teacher Educators and Parents

The results of the present study extend previous research literature in two important ways that hold implications for teacher educators and parents. First, the use of attribution and expectancy–value theories offered unique perspectives on the reasons parental support offered in mathematics to children may differ that have not been previously discussed. Previous research identified “how” support is offered by different parents; notions of mothers' need for achievement in parental roles that are tied to views of teachers and curriculum offers important new insights explaining the “why” behind the “how” support is offered.

Additionally, although the sample size was small and means of data collection were modest, the study leaves open the door for important future research regarding the possible improvement of parental involvement in mathematics learning. For instance, applications of attribution theory from the standpoint of teacher preparation or parental support may aid parents in changing their causal beliefs about their ability in mathematics and thus change their actions and roles in helping their own children learning mathematics. For example, educators might be prepared to aid parents through a refocusing of the parent's ascription of poor ability in mathematics to the “rules” that the parent is using to reach that conclusion (Weiner, 1988), calling attention to possible erroneous thinking or alternate explanations instead of simply trying to convince them their ability is the result of bad luck. This, in turn, may result in a different causal ascription and increased parental involvement. Methods courses or other education courses might also be extended by adding a component on communication with families regarding content and curriculum.

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*(please see next page for Appendix)*

## Appendix. Interview Protocol

1. Ask all demographic information—the parent (acculturation, education, income, job status, number of family members, etc).
2. How do you remember learning about mathematics when you were a child?
3. Do you like mathematics yourself? Why or why not?
4. What words best describe mathematics?
5. Do you think mathematics is an important subject? Why is it important for your child to do well in mathematics? Can you relate mathematics to your life experiences?
6. What do you think it takes for someone to be good at mathematics?
7. What do you think is more important in mathematics teaching—discovery and real world application or a high knowledge of procedures, memorization, and practice opportunities? Why do you feel this way?
8. “I think that the way mathematics is taught in classrooms today is effective”...what are your thoughts on this statement? Why or why not?
9. What’s your impression of the average school’s preparation in mathematics for its students? Is it low, midrange, or high? Why do you think this?
10. What do you think about your child’s mathematics teacher’s competences in teaching and their knowledge and skills in mathematics?
11. How apt do you feel in monitoring you child’s progress and motivating your child to do well in mathematics? Why do you feel this way?
12. Describe your involvement in helping your child learning mathematics? For example, how much time do you spend with him/her doing math homework each day? What kind of learning resources/materials do you acquire for him/her? Do you hire private tutors?
13. What do you feel your role is in communicating clear goals and expectations to your child for their mathematical learning?
14. How prepared do you feel to help your child with their learning of mathematics? Why?
15. What strategies do you use at home to help your child with mathematics?

# Examining Preservice Teacher Knowledge and Competencies in Establishing Family–School Partnerships

*Michael M. Patte*

## Abstract

A research study including 200 preservice teacher candidates in their junior and senior years of study at a public state university in Pennsylvania examined their knowledge and competencies in establishing family–school partnerships. The study found that preservice teacher candidates were aware of the many positive outcomes and barriers associated with establishing family–school partnerships, that their knowledge and competencies in establishing family–school partnerships was limited, and that their perceptions of family–school partnerships were traditional in nature. The results suggest an inconsistency between current federal and state legislative initiatives and accreditation standards requiring greater levels of family–school partnership practices and the scant time and resources offered to address the topic in one teacher education program.

Key Words: preservice, teachers, candidates, pre-service, knowledge, competencies, skills, university, college, preparation, family–school partnerships, family, families, home, schools, collaboration, practices, education, parents, students, Epstein, framework

## Introduction

According to Hiatt-Michael (2006), in the United States, many major initiatives woven into the fabric of our educational system at the local, state, and national level, designed to promote positive outcomes for children, focus

on family–school partnerships. For example, the importance of such partnerships was accentuated by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2002), along with guidelines from professional associations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2003, 2005), the Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2002). These legislative initiatives and guidelines provided parents with the right to know what is happening in schools (Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, & Raimondo, 2004). However, despite these initiatives and a wealth of evidence documenting the positive outcomes associated with establishing family–school partnerships, research suggests that most college and university teacher education programs do little to prepare teachers to understand and establish relationships with families (Black, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Graue, 2005; Kirschenbaum, 2001; Martinez, Rodriguez, Perez, & Torio, 2005; Nieto, 2002; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005).

One can argue that the content espoused by teacher education programs speaks to the value placed on certain topics and competencies. Scholars examining the importance afforded to family–school partnerships in teacher education programs paint a bleak picture (Harris & Jacobson, 2005; Weiss et al., 2005). For example, with the exception of early childhood education and special education, few teacher education programs provide any meaningful coursework or projects on issues relating to family–school partnerships (Epstein, 2001; Hiatt-Michael, 2001). Further, in California, issues surrounding family–school partnerships are rarely explored in teacher education programs and are often only considered after teachers are on the job. Even then, only a select few schools that adopt the Beginning Teacher Support Activities (BTSA) program are encouraged to consider family involvement issues. Therefore, many new teachers are ill prepared to resolve the cadre of issues they are sure to face as new teachers dealing with family–school partnerships. Lacking adequate content knowledge and teaching competencies focused on establishing family–school partnerships, preservice teacher candidates draw upon what they already know, which often mirrors their own personal school experiences (Epstein et al., 2002; Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003; Hiatt-Michael, 2001).

My own personal undergraduate teacher education program in the early 1990s offered no specific coursework and very little content on developing meaningful relationships with families. I recall the overwhelming fear experienced during my initial interactions with families. This fear was born of ignorance. As a result, during the first few years of my teaching career I did little to engage families in meaningful ways. It was as if I was hiding under my

desk trying not to make any major mistakes that might raise the ire of families. Instead of building bridges with families, I was building a wall to insulate myself from them. At that time, the majority of my interactions with families were scripted and traditional and included common activities like parent–teacher conferences, meet the teacher night, and open house.

When I began graduate studies in early childhood education, I enrolled in two courses: *The Educational Role of the Family*; and *Families, Schools, and Community Resources*. Both drastically altered my approach to understanding and engaging families. I remember thinking that if I had explored such content and competencies as an undergraduate, my first few years engaging families would have been more meaningful and productive, a finding supported by Uludag (2008). In response to my own personal experiences and feelings of inadequacy in engaging families as a new teacher and the current research documenting the shortcomings of many teacher education programs to adequately prepare teacher candidates to establish family–school partnerships, I conceptualized a research study to unearth preservice teacher candidates' knowledge and competence in establishing family–school partnerships.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Benefits of Establishing Family–School Partnerships**

When parents and schools work well together the results are impactful (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Developing and sustaining family–school partnerships has been associated with positive outcomes for students and improving satisfaction for both parents and teachers (Epstein, 2005; Forlin & Hopewell, 2006). These findings have remained steady despite the fact that families and schools have transformed over time.

The positive outcomes associated with fostering family–school partnerships include: (1) higher academic achievement (e.g., Cox, 2005; Henderson et al., 2004; Jeynes, 2005); (2) student sense of well being (Berger, 2008; Mendoza, 2003); (3) better student school attendance (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007); (4) better student and parent perceptions of classroom and school climate (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005); (5) positive student attitudes and behaviors (Christenson, 2004; Henderson et al., 2007; Jeynes, 2007); (6) student readiness to do homework (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Shumow & Harris, 2000); (7) increased student time spent with parents (Henderson et al., 2007); (8) better student grades (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007); (9) higher educational aspirations among students and parents (Grant & Ray, 2010; Henderson et al., 2007); and (10) increased parent satisfaction with teachers (Grant & Ray, 2010).

Further, Carter (2002) examined research over a decade on the effectiveness of school-based family–school partnership programs impacting student outcomes and family behaviors and summarized twelve key findings: (1) family involvement has a significant positive impact on student outcomes across the elementary, middle school, and secondary years; (2) the student outcomes improved through family involvement varied according to family culture, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic background; (3) family involvement at home has a more significant impact on children than family involvement in school activities; (4) the nature of family involvement that is most beneficial to children changes as they reach adolescence; (5) family involvement in early childhood programs helps children transition well to kindergarten and elementary school; (6) family assistance with homework can be beneficial, but parents may need guidance to work effectively with children; (7) the ways in which culturally diverse families are involved in their children’s education may be different from those of other families; (8) promising outcomes in both mathematics and literacy are realized when children’s families are involved in the educational process; (9) the most promising opportunity for student achievement occurs when families, schools, and community organizations work together; (10) to be effective, school programs must be individualized to fit the needs of the students, parents, and community; (11) effective programs assist parents in creating a home environment that fosters learning; and (12) teachers must be trained to promote effective parent/family involvement in children’s education.

There are many factors influencing the development of family–school partnerships, and school practices are among the most important (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Although school-level efforts to increase family involvement are a step in the right direction, there is growing evidence that connecting families and schools will be a formidable challenge if preservice teacher candidates receive little to no instruction on fostering family–school partnerships in their teacher education programs (Uludag, 2008). The literature reveals a variety of barriers that impede family–school partnerships from reaching their full potential (Redding, 2005), but this paper focuses on those addressing inadequate preservice training.

### **Lack of Preservice Training**

Research investigating preservice teacher candidates’ beliefs about the importance of family involvement and their confidence in effectively involving parents indicate that many teacher preparation programs are not highly effective in helping to develop the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that empower new teachers to confidently and competently engage families in the process of educating children (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Flanigan, 2005;

Giallourakis, Pretti-Frontczak, & Cook, 2005). In short, it seems that all too often, preservice teacher preparation has not equipped student teachers to translate effectively what they have learned about engaging families into the professional repertoire they bring to their classrooms.

Although most educators agree that family involvement is important, few enter their profession knowing how to develop excellent partnership programs. In recent years, researchers have stressed the importance of providing preservice teacher candidates with focused education and high quality experiences in preparation for their work with families (Abrego, Rubin, & Sutterby, 2006; Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Graue, 2005). This involves not only focusing preparation efforts on the skills and strategies needed as teachers strive for mutually beneficial relationships with families, but nurturing the essential dispositions necessary to accomplish this goal (Swick, 2004). These dispositions include developing a positive attitude toward families and the family, embracing an empowerment perspective of parents and families, engaging them as partners, valuing and supporting the cultural and social diversity of parents and families, committing to effective communication, and envisioning the teacher as a lifelong learner.

Preservice teacher candidates must know why family involvement in schools is vital to their learning before entering the workforce and also realize that family involvement now may be very different from the time when their parents were involved in schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Further efforts are necessary before teacher educators can feel confident that their preparation in working with families is adequate or, preferably, exemplary.

### Family–School Partnerships Defined

The research used to support policies throughout America to strengthen partnerships between home and school center on the idea of parent involvement. Prominent in this field of study is researcher Joyce Epstein and her framework of six types of parent involvement which provides a comprehensive scaffold for understanding the various ways parents can be involved in the educational process (Epstein, 1995). The six specific types of involvement outlined in Epstein's framework include *basic obligations of families* (Type 1), *basic obligations of schools to effectively communicate with families* (Type 2), *involvement at the school building* (Type 3), *family involvement for learning activities at home* (Type 4), *decision making, participation, leadership, and school advocacy* (Type 5), and *collaborations and exchanges with the community* (Type 6).

Due to its broad appeal, many scholars have used this framework as an analysis tool in their respective research studies, and I follow in their footsteps. Overall, Epstein's framework of parent involvement incorporates a broad array

of activities encouraging meaningful partnerships between home and school ranging from general support to active involvement. Further, this framework describes roles that are comprehensive, well defined, and concrete.

## Methods

This research study was conducted at a public state university located in Pennsylvania. Participants responded to four open-ended questions created by the researcher. The questionnaire was used to generate data on preservice teacher candidates' knowledge and competencies in establishing family–school partnerships.

### Participants of the Study

Participants of the research study included exactly 200 preservice early childhood, elementary, and dual early childhood/elementary education teacher candidates from a public, state, rural university located in Pennsylvania. The vast majority of students, 90%, were seeking the dual early childhood/elementary education certification, with 5% seeking early childhood certification, and 5% seeking certification in elementary education. Further, 60% of the participants were in their senior year of study, while 40% were considered juniors. A majority of the participants, 92.5%, were female, while 7.5% were male. In addition, 97% of the participants were Caucasian, 2% were Latino, and 1% were African American. While many studies in the research literature focusing on family–school partnerships (de la Piedra, Munter, & Girton, 2006; Flanigan, 2007; Hindin, 2010; Jones, 2003; Sutterby, Rubin, & Abrego, 2007) highlight minority/diverse populations and those taking place in urban/suburban school settings, this study sheds light on an often neglected group and setting in the literature, majority preservice teacher candidates from rural settings. While our world and country continue to become more diverse and greater numbers of families continue to migrate to urban centers, it is important not to marginalize those populations and geographic environments not representing these current trends.

All of the students were enrolled in classes taught by the researcher and were selected to participate in the study due to that fact. Further, all participants completed the questionnaire during the first one hour and fifteen minute class of the semester, prior to any discussion concerning family–school partnerships.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire containing four open-ended questions was developed by the researcher and sought to unearth preservice teacher candidates' knowledge

and competencies in establishing family–school partnerships in four specific domains: the positive outcomes associated with establishing family–school partnerships, the barriers impeding family–school partnerships, the specific content knowledge and teaching competencies in establishing family–school partnerships gained in recent coursework, and practical strategies to employ as new teachers in creating such partnerships. The research questions included:

1. What are the most positive outcomes associated with establishing family–school partnerships?
2. What are some barriers impeding family–school partnerships?
3. What specific content and competencies have you learned in your undergraduate coursework for establishing family–school partnerships?
4. As a new teacher, what would you do to promote meaningful family–school partnerships?

### **Data Analysis**

Strauss and Corbin (1990) define the analysis of data as the operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized, and reconstructed in new ways. Responses to the four questions were used to generate data in an attempt to understand preservice teacher candidates' views and beliefs concerning several aspects of establishing family–school partnerships. Data analysis proceeded in five phases: (1) initial reading; (2) second and third readings to begin to extract themes and patterns; (3) creation of meaningful categories and subcategories; (4) construction of data displays; and (5) reporting of initial findings.

During the initial reading, all data were read in their entirety in order to develop a holistic sense, as well as to check for information that might have been missing. The responses to the four questions were all read a second time to begin to extract themes and patterns. Epstein's conceptual framework was used to assign units of meaning to the descriptive information collected during the study. The codes used included Epstein's six distinct types of parent involvement. Then data were cut into segments, each containing potentially important aspects, and labeled by broad category. Next, the themes and patterns were examined within each category. Similar responses were counted to identify the prevalence and consistency of occurrences of specific topics. Various data displays and concept webs were constructed and altered by the researcher throughout the course of analysis to help view the findings in context.

At the completion of the analysis phase, an outline was developed to frame the study in an effort to develop a clear picture of the preservice teacher candidates' perceptions of family–school partnerships. The findings formed the foundation for the outline. Data were then cross-referenced to the outline and that provided the primary conceptual structure for the study.

## Results

Preservice teacher candidates' responses to the four questions have been synthesized here into tables denoted by the questions that head each section.

### 1. What are the most positive outcomes associated with establishing family–school partnerships?

Although the participants were not familiar with the research literature highlighting the positive outcomes associated with fostering family–school partnerships, their responses mirrored what many research studies had found. Two themes found in responses to the first question were that the vast majority of positive outcomes identified by the participants were non-academic in nature, instead highlighting attitudes, behaviors, self-esteem, aspirations, perceptions, and school attendance. Further, the teacher candidates articulated positive outcomes across an array of stakeholders including children, parents, and teachers. A summary of their responses is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Positive Outcomes of Establishing Family–School Partnerships

Positive Outcomes Associated with Establishing Family–School Partnerships	% of Preservice Students Mentioning this Outcome
Positive Student Attitudes and Behaviors	100%
Improved Relationships with Parents	96%
Higher Levels of Academic Achievement	84%
Higher Levels of Parent Satisfaction with Teachers	75%
Student Sense of Well-Being	74%
Positive Student/Parent Perceptions of School	69%
Student Readiness to Complete Homework	66%
Higher Levels of School Attendance	34%
Higher Educational Aspirations for Students	14%

### 2. What are some barriers impeding family–school partnerships from taking place?

Preservice teacher candidates identified various barriers that kept family–school partnerships from reaching their full potential. The barriers identified emanated from both the home and the school and were both logistical and psychological in nature. Logistical barriers are defined as external circumstances faced by both teachers and parents that stand in the way of developing family–school partnerships. On the other hand, psychological barriers include a variety of internal feelings and personal experiences that affect the attitudes

of both parents and teachers concerning family–school partnerships. Again, although not familiar with the research examining the barriers impeding home–school partnerships, the barriers identified by the participants mirrored many identified in the literature. Table 2 summarizes the barriers identified by the preservice teacher candidates.

Table 2. Barriers Impeding Family–School Partnerships

Barriers Impeding Family–School Partnerships	% of Preservice Students Mentioning this Barrier
Pressed for Time (both parents & teachers)	95%
Lack of Training & Professional Development (teachers)	64%
Cultural Differences (between parents & teachers)	56%
Lack of Transportation & Child Care (parents)	50%
Language Barriers (between parents & teachers)	43%
Intimidation Factor (between parents & teachers)	35%
Socioeconomic Status (parents)	28%
Past Negative School Experiences (parents)	27%
Education Levels (parents)	10%

**3. What specific content or competencies have you learned in your undergraduate coursework for establishing family–school partnerships?**

Just over 40% of the preservice teacher candidates in their junior and senior years of study reported learning no specific content or teaching competencies concerning the development of family–school partnerships in any of their classes. On the other hand, nearly 60% of the participants explored some basic strategies highlighted in Epstein’s Type 2: Communicating and Type 3: Volunteering categories. However, preservice teacher candidates offered strategies that were general, vague, and traditional in nature. For example, when describing what they would do to encourage parent involvement in the Type 2: Communicating category, participants shared “keep open communication,” “parent conferences,” “keep parents informed,” “open and end on a positive note,” “send home letters,” and “be mindful of your words.” In a similar vein, the preservice teacher candidates found Type 3: Volunteering activities to be a vehicle for engaging families, but few specifics were offered beyond “encourage volunteering.” Table 3 summarizes the percentages of participants who explored specific strategies for developing family–school partnerships throughout their teacher education coursework.

Table 3. Students Identifying a Strategy/Competency Learned by Particular Type of Parent Involvement

Epstein's Parent Involvement Framework	% of Students Identifying a Strategy/Competency Learned in a Particular Type of Parent Involvement
Type 1: Parenting Basic Responsibilities of Families	0%
Type 2: Communicating Basic Responsibilities of Schools	59%
Type 3: Volunteering Involvement at and for the School	59%
Type 4: Learning at Home Involvement in Academic Activities	0%
Type 5: Decision Making Participation and Leadership	0%
Type 6: Collaborating with the Community	0%

**4. As a new teacher, what would you do to promote meaningful family–school partnerships?**

It is not surprising that the participants, having had limited training in establishing family–school partnerships, also espoused limited strategies for engaging families as they planned to enter the teaching profession. Fully 100% of the preservice teacher candidates mentioned involving families through Type 2: Communicating and Type 3: Volunteering activities similar to the ones summarized in question three. These opportunities may reflect the involvement histories of the preservice teacher candidates themselves as they traversed through the educational system. In addition, 39% of the participants planned to engage families in Type 4: Learning at Home activities through “sending home projects for the family to work on together” and “assigning consistent homework to reinforce what is learned at school.” Table 4 summarizes the types of involvement that preservice teacher candidates would employ to encourage family–school partnerships.

Table 4. Students Identifying a Strategy They Would Employ as a New Teacher by Particular Type of Parent Involvement

Epstein's Parent Involvement Framework	% of Students Identifying a Strategy to Employ as a New Teacher in a Particular Type of Parent Involvement
Type 1: Parenting Basic Responsibilities of Families	0%
Type 2: Communicating Basic Responsibilities of Schools	100%
Type 3: Volunteering Involvement at and for the School	100%
Type 4: Learning at Home Involvement in Academic Activities	39%
Type 5: Decision Making Participation and Leadership	0%
Type 6: Collaborating with the Community	0%

## Discussion

An analysis of the preservice teacher candidates' responses to the four research questions posed in the study highlight a disconnect between the perceived positive outcomes associated with fostering family–school partnerships and the lack of necessary skills and competencies required to actualize such positive outcomes. Emerging from this research study are several recommendations for preservice teacher candidates and teacher preparation programs training such candidates to establish family–school partnerships.

### Altering Teacher Preparation Program Curriculum

The lack of training on working with families for preservice teacher candidates is a cause for concern (Ministry of Education, 2005). Altogether, over 40% of the participants reported learning no specific skills or competencies concerning the development of family–school partnerships in any of their coursework. This was not surprising as there was no specific course focusing on the topic offered to the preservice teacher candidates. Therefore, many of the participants espoused limited views of family–school partnerships.

However, on a positive note, nearly 60% of the study participants reported learning skills to encourage effective communication between home and school and ways to encourage involvement through volunteering. Although

communicating and volunteering are necessary components in a comprehensive family involvement approach, they are considered traditional in the research literature. Therefore, due to the limited and traditional views espoused by the preservice teacher candidates, it could be argued that a course exploring family–school partnerships would prove beneficial (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Some might view this suggestion as naïve due to the course load already required in many states, but in January of 2010 the Pennsylvania Department of Education mandated changes to the state certification system for all early childhood, elementary, and special education students. The new certification guidelines now require all undergraduate early childhood and special education majors to enroll in a three-credit class focusing on home, school, and community relations.

Coursework focusing on family–school partnerships has the potential to positively influence preservice teacher candidates' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward engaging families. For example, Katz and Bauch (1999) found that new teachers who received formal training through coursework felt well prepared and engaged in a wide variety of parent involvement practices. It is imperative that teacher educators ensure that issues of family involvement are effectively embedded within subsequent courses. Embedding these important concepts throughout teacher education programs of study ensures that the transformation of preservice teacher candidates' beliefs about families will continue (Deslandes & Lemieux, 2005).

An additional necessary component of any coursework exploring family–school partnerships is fieldwork. To help preservice teacher candidates address their concerns and become more comfortable interacting with families, they should take an active role in a variety of field placements (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002). For example, in a study including 223 preservice teacher candidates, Uludag (2008) found that candidates reported that their perceptions about parent involvement were most influenced by their experiences in the field. Until student teaching, most preservice teacher candidates have little contact with parents. The quality of fieldwork can be enhanced by initiating contact with parents, writing newsletters, planning and implementing a family activity, and participating in parent–teacher conferences. Although these activities typically occur during student teaching, trying them out sooner can prove valuable (Tellez, 2004).

### **Reflection on the Role of Family–School Partnerships**

Reflection on identity is an expanding field of study in teacher education, and this work asserts that what preservice teacher candidates learn in their teacher education program is influenced by several factors including past

experiences, personal beliefs, and the content and experiences in the professional preparation program (Graue, 2005). For this reason, Graue and Brown (2003) believe that teacher education programs focusing on family–school partnerships must include what the preservice students know, think, and feel about establishing partnerships. Becher (1986) also stressed the importance of putting students in touch with their personal feelings concerning family involvement by stating, “It is only when teachers become aware of their own fears, concerns, and negative feelings that they are able to rationally eliminate them and to develop more effective strategies” (p. 109).

In order to develop mature beliefs and attitudes about developing and sustaining family–school partnerships, preservice teacher candidates need ample time for the transformation to occur. When the topic is not explored, afforded sporadic coverage, or put off until the completion of a program, we forfeit a vital opportunity for students to struggle with their strongly held beliefs and practices. In the absence of reflection, students may never move beyond engaging families in more traditional involvement roles of general support similar to Epstein’s Type 2: Communicating and Type 3: Volunteering categories.

### **View Family–School Partnerships Through a Broad Lens**

Often teachers and schools view family–school partnerships from the self-centered perspective of “what can you do for me.” In their book, *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family–School Partnerships*, Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies (2007) grapple with the political nature of family–school partnerships. The authors believe that teachers and schools encourage or discourage certain forms of involvement depending on the immediate “payoffs” the various participants are attempting to achieve. For example, if teachers are concerned with encouraging family involvement aimed at improving student achievement, they would encourage activities taking place at home. Whereas, teachers concerned with boosting their image and the image of their school would encourage activities taking place at school. A formidable challenge facing university faculty is shifting preservice teacher candidates’ self-centered views of family–school partnerships to a more collaborative view of families as their child’s first and most prominent teacher. Families need to be involved in ways that are beneficial to teachers and schools but also in ways that are meaningful to children and parents as well.

Results from the study suggest that the preservice teacher candidates espoused somewhat limited and traditional views concerning the establishment of family–school partnerships. This was not surprising due to the scant amount of instructional time given to the topic throughout the required coursework, a common problem highlighted in the literature (Epstein & Sanders, 2006;

Ministry of Education, 2005; Uludag, 2008). Suggested content to assist preservice teacher candidates in viewing family–school partnerships broadly may include: historical and philosophical perspectives of family–school partnerships; critiques of prominent family–school partnership conceptual frameworks; traditional and non-traditional views of family–school partnerships; assumptions, attitudes, and professionalism concerning family–school partnerships; positive outcomes associated with family–school partnerships; barriers impeding partnerships; federal and state legislation impacting family–school partnerships; national and professional organizations and accrediting body standards addressing family–school partnerships; and a variety of strategies for establishing and maintaining family–school partnerships.

In addition, preservice teacher candidates should be required to explore a variety of activities like designing family action plans, developing a philosophy of working with diverse families, designing an electronic community resource directory, creating a web-based workshop relating to family–school partnerships, developing a file of articles beneficial to families, and analyzing a variety of teaching cases related to family–school partnerships.

## Final Remarks

Despite the fact that many of the study participants had little to no coursework on developing family–school partnerships and the fact that they espoused somewhat limited and traditional views and strategies for establishing such partnerships, I was struck by the fact that they possessed positive, professional attitudes and motives for engaging families as highlighted in Table 1. This was encouraging because it suggested that many preservice teacher candidates were preconditioned to engage families even prior to entering the field. Just imagine the possibilities if, in addition to offering a course on the topic, the importance of establishing family–school partnerships was infused throughout the entire teacher preparation program. Perhaps then the vital relationship between home and school would be transformed from competing spheres of influence to mutually complimentary ones (Epstein, 2005).

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# Maternal Recollections of Schooling and Children's School Preparation

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## Abstract

Parents are the primary managers of children's development during their early years and greatly influence how children are primed for school. Therefore, understanding children's school preparation should involve appreciation for the unique developmental histories and perspectives that parents bring to the relationship with the child, with the teacher, and with the school. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore mothers' memories of their own schooling and how those memories currently influence their behaviors in preparing their children for school. Forty mothers with preschool-aged children participated in a semistructured interview on their school-related histories. Analyses of the interviews revealed four themes related to mothers' own memories as the most meaningful in guiding their behaviors in preparing their own children for school: (1) intergenerational influences, reflecting how they, themselves, were primed for and supported through school, (2) transitions between school settings or grade levels as sensitive periods, (3) school settings, including characteristics of schools they attended and goodness of fit, and (4) diversity, particularly lack of diversity or an appreciation of diversity in their own schooling. Findings underscore the importance of understanding parents' educational histories in order to better understand children and highlights the types of memories that may be most lasting and influential for mothers as they prepare their children for school. We discuss implications for educators to strengthen family connections, as well as implications for future research.

Key Words: school experience, academic socialization, intergenerational influences, transitions, family–school connections, mothers, family, preschool, kindergarten, memory, memories, readiness

## Introduction

Children's school readiness has gained significant attention at both national and local levels. In attending to this issue, there is growing interest in the role of the family, and how the family may promote or hinder early school success for children (Barbarin et al., 2008; Pelletier & Brent, 2002; Ricciuti, 1999). Although there is limited research on parents' own memories of school, the way parents remember their own school experiences may influence the way in which they think about their children's schooling and the learning-related behaviors they engage in with their children (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, 2004). This study explores maternal recollections of schooling and how memories influence mothers' thoughts and behaviors in preparing and supporting their children in school. Connecting parents' stories to their cognitions and behaviors as they prepare their children for school helps strengthen our understanding of parents' learning-related involvement. Findings from this study amplify the importance of understanding parents' educational histories to better understand students and their home environments. Our findings also highlight the types of memories that may be most lasting and influential for mothers as they prepare their children for school.

The transition to kindergarten is an influential developmental period, as patterns of achievement and behavior presented in the early school years can profoundly impact children's developmental trajectories for school success or failure (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). This period of change, for both children and their families, requires significant support in order to prevent negative outcomes (McAllister, Wilson, Green, & Baldwin, 2005; McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger, 2007; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). School transitions take place in an environment driven by transactions between the child, school, classroom, family, and community (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Preparing children to be successful in school requires an understanding of the processes that may influence parental behaviors and successful transition practices. Parents' activities to prepare children for schooling may themselves be embedded in the parents' own development and experiences (Taylor et al., 2004). Therefore, an exploration of children's school preparation should involve exploring the unique developmental histories and perspectives the parents bring to their relationships both with their child and with school staff.

Understanding how parents conceptualize their own school experiences may enrich our understanding of parental cognitions about schooling and their learning-related engagement with their children. This understanding is critical for practitioners, given that parents are the primary managers of their children's environment and are responsible for children's learning outside of school (Machida, Taylor, & Kim, 2002; Mapp, 2003). Establishing a junction between recollections and parenting practices may enhance conceptual models of in-home learning and parental school involvement, ultimately highlighting important targets for interventions aimed at maximizing the positive contributions that parents make to children's school readiness and general school success (Barnett & Taylor, 2009). In this study, we explored how mothers' personal, social, and academic experiences in school influence their thoughts and actions about their children's future schooling.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) believed that children should be viewed within the complex systems of their changing environments. Children's development, as well as family development, is shaped by the extended family, religious community, school, friends, organizations, government, and culture. It is the interaction of these various systems that influence family processes. Children's learning takes place reciprocally with other individuals and within a social context; therefore, many scholars endorse that school readiness may be best understood through an ecological perspective (Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000; Machida et al., 2002; Pelletier & Brent, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Taylor et al., 2004). By using an ecological approach to investigate parents' ideas, beliefs, and perspectives about school readiness, we are able to appropriately incorporate the influences of social, economic, and political factors that shape experiences of "readying" children for school (McAllister et al., 2005). Taylor et al. (2004) proposed a conceptual model of academic socialization and achievement, which supports the central ideas of ecological theory and suggests that children's socialization evolves under the broader context of socioeconomic and cultural contexts. This model extends our understanding of child development by emphasizing how parents' school experiences shape their beliefs about schooling and their academic socialization practices.

As adults recount their childhood experiences, their stories are exposed by way of their own interpretations, and the events selected for sharing are ones that they have come to see as formative in their lives (Lapadat, 2004). Memories do not constitute precise truth, but a type of personal truth upon which belief systems and daily actions are built, and they provide an abundance of insight into the factors that contribute to parental behaviors (Rothenberg, 1994). It is suggested that memories of childhood experiences in school are reactivated as parents prepare their own children for similar experiences (Taylor et

al., 2004). Parents' recollections of schooling contribute to the formation of a more general attitude towards education and children's learning (Raty, 2007); in fact, impressions of those school experiences may be more influential than the details of the actual experiences.

Thinking about children's academic socialization in terms of intergenerational influences provides a way to consider parents' developmental histories and their current behaviors. Parents describe how their own parents' level of participation in their education was a major influence on why and how they were involved in their children's educational development (Mapp, 2003; Taylor et al., 2004). Mapp's (2003) research on school-family partnerships looked at *how* and *why* parents were involved in their children's education. Eighteen actively involved parents participated in interviews as part of the study, and many reported that their own experiences and history influenced their level of involvement. The amounts and ways in which their own parents were involved in their learning influenced their own drive to be involved, and in some cases, the way they chose to be active. This finding suggests that working with today's parents on how they can assist in their children's academic development may have long-range effects: How parents are involved today creates a model for how their own children will be involved in the future.

Barnett and Taylor (2009) also found intergenerational influences quite striking in their work using structured interviews with 76 mothers of a diverse sample whose children were approaching kindergarten age. They concluded that mothers who recalled school involvement on the part of their parents more positively reported engaging in academic transition activities with their own children, even after controlling for income and current self-esteem and self-efficacy. The authors propose that positive recollections of schooling could support the notion of intergenerational continuities in education. They also suggest that parents' own experiences in school may shape their current confidence in helping their children succeed academically (Barnett & Taylor, 2009). This perspective may help explain lower levels of parental involvement, especially in school-based activities, among low-income parents (Lareau, 1996), who may feel more intimidated by the school environment and by teachers because of their own past experiences and therefore feel less confident in engaging with schools. Pianta and colleagues (1999) suggest that contextual factors, such as neighborhood poverty level and family ethnicity, may influence transitions into the school setting and simultaneously lay the foundation for future family-school relationships.

Researchers repeatedly spotlight the importance of high quality family-school connections in optimizing outcomes for children (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Hill & Taylor, 2004; McCarthey, 2000).

In a school community, this requires addressing barriers that obstruct the process of communication and coordination efforts between the home and school (Christenson, 2003). It also requires schools to acknowledge that all children and families are different, and outreach must be sensitive to context-specific issues and flexible (Kohl et al., 2000). Families bring unique backgrounds and experiences that need to be acknowledged in forming and sustaining these fundamental relationships.

## **Purpose**

Parents' internal working models of school result from personal school recollections, their attitudes, values, and beliefs about school. These internal models of school, in turn, impact parents' academic involvement, as well as their satisfaction with their children's school (Mapp, 2003; Raty, 2007; Taylor et al., 2004). The purpose of this study was to explore maternal recollections of schooling and to identify main themes that inform mothers' thoughts and practices on preparing their children for school entry. The guiding questions were (1) What do mothers remember about their experiences across their primary and secondary school years? and (2) How do recollections of schooling influence how mothers think about preparing their children for school? By employing an ecological perspective, as well as a conceptual model of academic socialization (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Taylor et al., 2004), we considered how the experiences of one generation may influence the next, with a concentration on school preparation within the family unit. This theory and model support the interconnectedness of lives between parents and their children in preparing for school.

We aimed to identify the most robust themes across school memories to gain insight into how they may contribute to maternal cognitions about school, learning-related activities, and children's preparation for formal education. Unlike previous research in the area, our approach was to step away from a dichotomization of experiences as simply positive or negative. Instead, we uniquely explored deeper descriptions of schooling, emotions that mothers assign to these experiences, and how their past recollections inform how they think about their children's school beginnings.

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

Data for this student-led project were collected as part of a larger university-funded study of maternal and home environment predictors of neurocognitive

development and school readiness ( $n = 48$ ; Dilworth-Bart, PI). Participants were recruited in a small Midwestern city through child care providers, mailings, community centers, and local events. The sample consisted of 40 mothers of children aged 4½ to 5½ years old. The age of mothers ranged from 23 to 50 ( $M = 35.27$ ,  $SD = 7.33$ ), with reported household incomes from \$0–\$200,000 ( $M = \$59,690$ ,  $SD = \$44,740$ ). A large portion reported their highest education level to be a college degree (42.5%), with fewer reporting some college (17.5%), a graduate degree (12.5%), high school completion (10%), less than high school (2.5%), vocational training (12.5%), and other (2.5%). Most mothers identified as White/European American (70%), and fewer identified as African American (22.5%) or Multiracial (7.5%). A complete summary of mother characteristics is offered in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics ( $N = 40$ )

Variable	Frequency	%	Mean (SD)	Range
Mother age (years)			35.27 (7.331)	23–50
Household income			\$59,690 (\$44,740)	\$0–\$200,000
Mother education				
Less than high school	1	2.5%		
High school/GED	4	10.0%		
Trade/Vocational school	5	12.5%		
Some college	7	17.5%		
BA/BS	17	42.5%		
Graduate degree	5	12.5%		
Other - AA degree	1	2.5%		
Mother race/ethnicity				
Black/African American	9	22.5%		
White/European American	28	70.0%		
Biracial/Multiracial	3	7.5%		
Mother marital status				
Single/Never married	7	17.5%		
Married	30	75.0%		
Living with a partner	3	7.5%		

### Procedure

This study was conducted in collaboration between a graduate student (Miller) and a faculty mentor (Dilworth-Bart). Although the larger study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate parenting behaviors and

child outcomes, we used a qualitative research design and thematic approach to investigate maternal responses to a one-on-one, semistructured interview. Two doctoral-level graduate students administered the interviews at the beginning of a home visit protocol. Mothers were asked to explore both academic and social memories of their schooling, such as how they recalled themselves as students, quality of teaching instruction, consideration given to individual needs, how fairly students were treated, and their social involvement. They were also asked to consider how their own school experiences may or may not currently influence how they are preparing their children for school or thinking about their education. Interviews ranged in length from 14–45 minutes, reflecting the amount of information parents were willing or able to share within the structure of the home assessment (most interviews clustered around 30–45 minutes, with only 2 interviews falling in the bottom range). The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data were collected from Fall 2008 through Summer 2009.

### Analysis

Our research team included three graduate students and two upper-level undergraduate students. Our membership consisted of three White, one Taiwanese, and one African American student; all students were female. Members of the research team summarized the raw data from the transcribed interviews into the form of outline summaries. Outlines were presented and discussed at weekly meetings to identify emerging themes from the data. Based on group discussions, we developed deductive and inductive codes from the research questions and from the data itself. Codes were applied to a subset of interviews to address definitional concerns and comprehensiveness of the coding manual. As coding and meetings proceeded, we identified four main memory-oriented themes that were continuously linked to mothers' current behaviors and practices: (1) intergenerational influences, (2) transitions, (3) school setting, and (4) diversity. The team refined a coding scheme based on these themes and subthemes that clustered within them (Boyatzis, 1998).

For the purpose of reliability, each transcript was double coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994); codes were applied to each transcript by two separate coders. They then addressed discrepancies in their coding until they reached consensus. The team continued to meet weekly to collectively code transcripts and discuss concerns or definitional clarity in the process. Coded materials were reviewed by the first author, and the data were organized for full analysis using NVivo08. Finally, the team focused on each theme and discussed characteristics and patterns across the data. We selected specific samples from maternal interviews that elucidated our central themes, as presented under findings.

## Findings

Based on our research team's thematic coding and group analysis, a variety of themes emerged across interviews. Four themes were identified as the most pronounced and meaningful in guiding mothers' cognitions and behaviors related to their children's schooling. While these themes will be presented independently, it should be noted that many memories straddled several of the themes simultaneously. It was common for themes to operate in tandem as demonstrated by a number of quotes. Also, mothers were asked to consider how their own experiences influence how they think about preparing their children for school; however, responses were not limited to the transition into kindergarten. In fact, mothers frequently discussed how they would support their children's ongoing education through the years and at different stages based on their own educational history. This is reflected in our findings.

### Theme 1: Intergenerational Influences

Mothers commonly reflected on how they, themselves, were primed for school as they considered their involvement in preparing their children for school entry. They described that their parents' level of involvement, or lack of involvement, presently influences their behaviors with their own children. This theme split across two subthemes: *intergenerational continuity*, and *intergenerational discontinuity*. When mothers assessed that certain parenting strategies were effective, they planned to continue with those strategies. Conversely, when parents viewed their parents' interactions unfavorably, they planned to avoid them.

#### *Intergenerational Continuity*

Mothers reporting positive memories of their parents' educational participation voiced a desire for intergenerational continuity and a replication of these practices with their own children. For example, a 25-year-old, African American mother of four children applauded the structure her mother had created for her during her childhood. Her mother raised her with a consistent routine that she now employs with her own children.

I do it the same way that I was taught....When you come home, you sit down, and you do your homework. And then if there's time left, you know, take care of your business. They're not old enough, but I make them come do a little wind-down and do like five pages [worksheets]. It's so they know it already, when they start to have homework. So it would be them not thinking, oh I'm going to play basketball after school. No, it's, "I'll catch you later. I gotta get to the crib and do my homework."

With seven to eight individuals living in the house at any given time, including three generations, it is important for this mother to facilitate organization and structure for her children. It is a habit that she acquired through her own upbringing and is consciously passing on to the next generation.

Not all mothers were cognizant of intergenerational continuity prior to the interview. In fact, some mothers only noticed intergenerational similarities as they revisited their educational histories. In these cases, they were unaware of recycling their parents' behaviors. A 36-year-old, White mother of three children made this connection during our visit. As this mother reflected on her upbringing, she recognized how much her own learning-related involvement, as well as the making of educational decisions, paralleled that of her parents. "You know, looking back, I mean it seems like we're kind of following the same course." She and her husband were sending their children to the same type of schools, creating similar routines, and supporting extracurricular involvement in a congruent manner to how they were raised. This mother described a positive school experience for herself and wanted the same for her children; she estimated that what worked for her would serve them as well.

### *Intergenerational Discontinuity*

The majority of responses clustered around the subtheme of intergenerational discontinuity. Mothers desired to correct what they judged as unfavorable from their pasts. A number of mothers identified a lack of involvement or awareness on the part of their parents. They viewed these experiences or circumstances as disadvantageous and expressed motivation to make things different within their own families.

A 33-year-old, Biracial mother of three children remembered her mother's lack of involvement. She recalled her mother being around but not strongly investing in her education.

I don't remember my mom going through my backpack or doing homework with me...so it's important for me when she comes home from preschool—we go through her backpack. We talk about her day. She has a journal, and she shows us the picture just so I can be connected with that school piece.

She remembered her mother taking her to the library but then leaving her on her own to explore the shelves. Her parents gave her everything she needed and transported her places, but she perceived it as going through the motions. For that reason, she and her husband have made their children's learning top priority. They both work part-time jobs in order to spend more quality time with their children, connect with their children's teachers, and offer their children greater involvement.

For the mothers that recalled limited involvement on the parts of their parents, they did not express resentment or harbor negative feelings towards their parents. Rather, they identified both social and economic constraints that hindered their parents' school-related connectedness. Some mothers cited a lack of time or hectic work schedules, and others framed it as limited knowledge in the area of child development and the school system.

A 30-year-old, African American mother of one child regretted the amount of involvement displayed by her mother. Her mother was working numerous jobs when she was a child, which precluded school support and involvement.

[I want] to be involved, you know, in whatever she wants to do, or like being in PTA, different things like that...field trips. Since I never had that. And to make sure she knows it's important to have an education.

A 26-year-old, African American mother of two children wished she received more communication from her mother about the importance of school. She remembered her mother "kicking her out of the house" each morning to attend school, but her mother never discussed *why* it was important. This mother cited many negative components of her schooling experience, such as fighting, expulsion, and a general anger towards individuals at the school. It was not until she was pregnant with her first child as a teenager that she participated in a parenting class that helped her put things in perspective. She stated that she now understands the positive impact of ongoing communication with her children about school and stresses its importance.

A 38-year-old, White mother of three children discussed the unique experiences she faced as a daughter of immigrant parents and learning to navigate the school system on her own.

They were hands-off. I think they just come from a different, I mean, they come from a poor, a very, very poor country where survival is really truly, you know, first priority....So, they didn't get involved like other parents did. I think I grew up too fast because of that. I had to make choices early on about school and education and so forth...I certainly would have liked a little more guidance.

This mother further discussed her decision to leave her corporate career so that she could spend more quality time with her children and give them the necessary guidance they needed to begin and excel in school.

In addition to social influences, responses often named historical context or time as a dominant factor in the parenting they received. "They didn't know what we know now" was a common thought expressed by participants, or that the norms and expectations of their parents' generation did not call for the type of involvement that is endorsed today. While mothers often pardoned these

unfavorable memories, they still recognized that it was a component of their own upbringing that they actively desired to avoid with their own children.

Memories of intergenerational involvement emerged across interviews and exposed a variety of ways parents remembered the role of their parents in their education. Whether mothers expressed motivation to discontinue or continue practices, how parents were parented appeared to make a profound impact on how they currently think about engaging with their own children. These passages support the idea of an intergenerational dynamic of learning-related involvement (Mapp, 2003). As the data present, evaluation of one's own upbringing informs the upbringing of the next generation.

## Theme 2: Transitions

As mothers revisited their K–12 years, they recalled changes in school settings or grade levels as sensitive or memorable times. Most mothers reported difficulty associated with these transitions; however, a few remembered their transitions as liberating in offering a fresh start or new environment. Transitions fell into three subthemes: *geographic transitions*, *between-school transitions*, and *public-private shifts*. As mothers reflected on these periods of transition, social perils related to friendship and adjusting to a new school environment were most troubling; however, some academic struggles also surfaced, such as finding themselves behind in academic skills and content.

### *Geographic Transitions*

The first subtheme, geographic transitions, involved mothers' memories of their families relocating across cities or states. It was a disruption that required them to bring closure to some friendships and subsequently seek out new friendships in a new environment. It also forced them to learn the culture and norms of each new school system and negotiate how they fit into their new setting.

One of the participants, a 35-year-old, White mother of two children, devoted most of her interview to detailing the numerous transitions she faced as a child and adolescent.

I moved a lot. My dad, when I was young, was in the military, and when I got older he was in the business world, and we moved quite a bit. So, that made it hard, that really made it hard. I changed schools a lot, which certainly, I think, shaped my education and my perspective of how things work. And even when we weren't moving, just the switch from the elementary school or the preschool—I remember those switches. So, it seemed like we changed a lot. So, I would say that shaped my perception.

Later in her interview she acknowledged that moving around can teach individuals how to interact with a variety of people, but she never wants to put her kids through a similar series of transitions. She expressed gratitude that her employment as a preschool teacher and her husband's position with the police department granted them some geographic stability.

### *Between-School Transitions*

Between-school transitions were another subtheme described by mothers. Mothers recalled being promoted into a new school and/or grade level (elementary, middle, high school) as an important component of their schooling. Mothers reflected on this phase of readjustment in facing a new structure or system of learning, and in many cases, interacting with a different assortment of students. A 38-year-old, White mother of one child even recalled her first day of kindergarten as a painfully memorable transition.

I remember kindergarten for me being terrifying. I still remember clinging to my mom...the experience of transitioning was terrifying. And I am going on 40, and I still remember that! I mean, so I don't want his [her son's] experience to be like that. And I just remember holding onto my mom and just going, "What are you doing? Are you leaving me in this place?"

In addition, this mother recalled several other fragile transitions during her schooling which made a lasting impact on her experience. Given her troubles surrounding school changes, this mother reported being "nervous" about her son's transition into kindergarten from preschool. In order to prepare him for the transition and remove any potential fear, they visited the school on several occasions to meet teachers and to familiarize him with the building. Currently, she makes a habit of pointing to the building when they are driving in the area and telling him, "That is your school." As a divorced parent, she regrets that the child's father is not reinforcing some of her transitioning efforts, but she is being as attentive to the process as possible.

### *Public-Private Shifts*

The third subtheme, public-private shifts, captured transitions across school sectors. Mothers documented a marked shift in the culture and values of these environments. Many mothers remembered a distinctive difference in school climates and that it was sometimes an uncomfortable process of adjustment. In some cases, they suffered a stressful transition in leaving behind what they recalled as a "safer" or more "morally" enriched setting and struggling with unanticipated peer pressure in the public realm. Conversely, some mothers cited this shift from the private to public—or public to private—setting as a liberating time in their educational journey. In either case, mothers expressed a desire

to place their children in just one setting, rather than creating movement between the two.

Several mothers noted different academic standards between the public and private schools they attended; they reported content and expectations in private schools were above those of public. This placed some mothers at a perceived double disadvantage if they shifted into a more demanding school, by needing to adjust socially and struggling in the classroom. One 38-year-old, White mother of two children described her transition from a rural public school into a private Catholic school located closer to a city.

And then you get slapped into a private grade or a private high school, and you know practically nobody—so it was a big jump from 8<sup>th</sup> grade to freshman year; 8<sup>th</sup> grade you were at the top of your game. I struggled in math, but nobody really cared. And then you get to high school, and you realize how weak you are in math and science, because you're compared to these other kids you don't even know, who've already dissected frogs and pigs in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade!

Even after many years, this memory still evoked a certain level of anxiety for this mother in relationship to her math experience. As those memories were reactivated, she made it clear that she did not want to put her daughters through the same situation. In anticipating that some transitions might remain unavoidable, she stated that she wants to make sure that her girls are prepared academically for any type of transition they might endure. To this day, this mother still views herself as deficient in math, so she has her husband work on math skills with their daughters each night.

Mothers' stories often gravitated to points of transition during their schooling. These periods of change were perceived as both positive and negative phases for mothers depending on the circumstances. A few mothers celebrated transitioning into a more desirable setting, while others regretted the unfortunate loss of friends and stress associated with starting over. Overall, stories more heavily recognized the stress and insecurities attached to transitions, and many mothers voiced a conscious desire to either avoid unnecessary transitions or to better support their own children in these processes. Mothers wanted educational continuity for their children, to the extent that some mothers were attempting to locate schools that contained numerous levels in one building (e.g., K–8 schools).

### **Theme 3: School Setting**

In describing school experiences, many mothers informed us of the type of school settings they attended. The type of schools attended framed both social and academic memories in their responses. Outlining characteristics of

their schools often laid the foundation for their stories. For many mothers, the subthemes of *school traits* (e.g., size, location, religious affiliation) and *goodness of fit* held the most weight. It was not just about describing their schools and communities, but how well matched they personally were with these settings. These characteristics were continuously linked to how mothers experienced their education. For many participants, these memories were influencing the kind of setting they preferred for their children.

### *School Traits*

When mothers described specific traits of their schools, they often reflected on the size and location of the schools they attended and how it afforded or constrained opportunities. Some celebrated attending a small school, recalling the cohesion they felt with peers and faculty. However, others voiced disappointment with the lack of opportunities that existed in such environments.

A 32-year-old, White mother of two children recalled her school and rural community as limiting.

Well, it was a very small school, so socialization was limited. But it was the area that we grew up in. Every small community had their own little school, and that's exactly how it was, and it was, you know, something I would never put my kids through. I mean, I can still name all of the kids in my class in alphabetical order! (laughs)

The size of the school and system made a lasting impact on the mother's experiences and even influenced the type of district she desired for her children. For many mothers it is a driving factor in where they choose to live and send their children to school.

Other mothers discussed private or religious traits of their schools as influential. This type of designation provided a distinct foundation for how their schools functioned, who attended, what was taught, availability of resources, and general expectations for students. A 38-year-old, White mother of three remembered the values she received from her Catholic school upbringing.

I mean because I really believe that if I hadn't done the private [school] growing up, I don't think I would have had the morals and values that I needed to get through and that I never regret, you know. And that's what I wanted to give to my own children, where I judge they wouldn't get that in the public schools. You know and again, maybe making a judgment statement, but you know I really feel that they're learning, the things that they learn in the private school they're not even being taught in the public school, so it's a sacrifice we pay to send our children there. It's not like we're these wealthy people that can send them there, but it's a choice that we made.

*Goodness of Fit*

As mothers recalled the types of school settings they attended, they often reflected on how well the school environment matched their individual social and academic needs. This subtheme was labeled as goodness of fit. Some mothers noted that there was nothing inherently wrong with their school, but that it was not a good match for them. As mothers reflected on and assessed the qualities of their school, they addressed dissonance or consonance in regard to their needs as a student. For example, a 37-year-old, African American mother of one child expressed disappointment in her parents' choice to send her to a technical school rather than an art-oriented school, which was her passion at the time.

It would have been a much better experience overall if it wasn't a technical school, but of course I didn't know at the time. My parents were the ones that made the choice for me to go to that. It is something I have been thinking a lot about lately, as far as trying to figure out what his [son's] gifts are and then trying to figure out—ok, how do I find a school that you know works with him with that.

This mother devoted a great deal of her interview to describing the mismatch between her own characteristics and what was required by the school. She recognized that the school provided a quality setting for students and taught some practical skills, but it was not the right fit for her. It is an issue that is at the fore of her mind when thinking about her son's education.

The type of school mothers attended was a repeated theme across interviews. Mothers perceived that size and location, religious affiliation, and goodness of fit really mattered. Not only did school settings frame how they remembered school, but it now transcends into their current behaviors with their children in considering future placements.

**Theme 4: Diversity**

Issues related to racial and socioeconomic diversity emerged within many interviews and across all racial groups. Diversity-related stories generally fell into two subthemes: *lack of diversity* as a drawback, and *diversity enrichment* as a benefit. Mothers either recognized the enrichment they received from exposure to diverse individuals, or they regretted the homogeneity of their schooling. Both subthemes typically prompted mothers to consider diversity issues for their children in relationship to their future placements and in creating meaningful opportunities for learning about differences.

*Lack of Diversity*

Mothers often discussed the composition of their schools' student body in relationship to race, class, and religion. This finding was quite surprising, given

that the majority of our mothers identified as both White and middle-class and reported attending fairly homogenous school settings. However, for many of these mothers, the lack of diversity provided by their schools was viewed as a deficit. A common complaint centered on how “White” their school community was in relationship to the rest of the world. Growing up in such an unvarying environment did not prepare them for the “real world.” For many it was a negative aspect of their upbringing and an important factor in seeking out school settings for their children.

A 45-year-old, White mother of one child described the monocultural and monoracial community where she grew up. She perceived the lack of diversity as a negative aspect of her experience in school.

We didn't have a lot of people with color. I remember one Hispanic family, and I think they probably weren't treated very well. And there was some class bias definitely. For her [my daughter], meeting other people, and with different ages, you know, interacting with people of different ages is important also. I mean it's critical to meet people outside your religious and class and ethnic and racial background—[pause] diversity.

Currently, this mother is looking for a diverse setting for her daughter to begin her formal education and desires to enroll her in a bilingual program. She is very pleased with the amount of cultural inclusion her preschool provides and hopes her daughter will have a similar classroom in kindergarten.

Some families reported actively seeking out residence in neighborhoods that provided a demographically mixed environment. Raising their children in a diverse setting and providing opportunities to experience and discuss diversity stood out as a current practice and concern for mothers. A 35-year-old, White mother of two children commented that both she and her husband regularly discuss such issues related to socializing their children for school and interacting with others.

I think my own schooling experience has changed the type of schooling experience I want for her. My parents have offered to pay for private school for our kids, but we feel strongly that they be in a public school system.... We want them to have a more well-rounded experience than a private school can offer. The school experience I had was pretty sheltered in terms of what the community at large was experiencing. Because we want them to have that, we bought a home in a diverse neighborhood, because that's what we wanted them to have.

This mother also reported transferring her children into a different preschool so they were part of a more diverse community of students. Diversity, in regard to race and income levels, was a theme that dominated most of her interview.

A few mothers reported facing discrimination and racism in their White-dominated settings, which profoundly impacted their experiences and memories of school. In revisiting her school days, a 26-year-old, African American mother of five children recounted several disturbing memories of blatant racism and intolerance from classmates.

I was the only Black person at my school, and so I got racially threatened, all that stuff. And I still kept going. The older boys in high school, like I was a freshman, and they were like seniors, juniors, and stuff like that. When I became a sophomore they seen how cool I was and stuff like that—and I was like, “nah, remember you wrote all that stuff on my locker?” They used to write on my locker, like “n\*\*\*\*\*” on my locker. My sister had to come up to my school like every other day to say, “You do something about this,” and they never did.

This mother credited her involvement with athletics as the turning point in her experience; being part of a team helped her gain acceptance from others. Sports involvement moved her from feeling like an outsider to an insider in her school. She reported wanting to get her own children involved with sports as soon as possible, so that they can socialize with people who are on their team and connect with a community within their school. She also shared that she is currently talking about Black history with her children and supporting them in taking pride in their heritage.

### *Diversity Enrichment*

On the other side, several mothers recognized the benefits they received from attending an ethnically or economically diverse school. They appreciated the opportunity of attending an environment that offered them a mixture of individuals. Such a collection of students enriched their experience and in some capacity enhanced their education. A 36-year-old, White mother of two children positively remembered her integrated experience as teaching her tolerance and life skills.

I had a lot of different friends across different groups. I was like the only White girl on my basketball team, so I was aware of different social situations and seeked (sic) them out. I went to a really good mixed school. A realistic-like school, mostly Black and White...I don't remember any racial tensions at the school, which there could be.

Later in the interview, the mother reflected on schools their children have and will be attending.

And then we moved to [city name] and I'm like, uhhhhh, painfully White! I wasn't comfortable with my kids being in that system.

Currently, her older son attends a crowded school where 75% of the students are on reduced lunch, and she appreciates that he is part of a diverse community. This mother enjoyed the richness of her own experience and wants the same for her children. Teaching her children tolerance and acceptance of a variety of differences is of top priority for this mother.

The theme of diversity surfaced in many recollections of schooling and in current practices with their children. A number of mothers viewed their experience as unrealistic and limited, which did not fully prepare them for the real world. For mothers that did attend a more mixed setting, they acknowledged its enriching contribution to their development. Diversity was viewed as something both positive and necessary for an appropriate education and preparing children for future endeavors. These findings support previous research suggesting that families of color are often interested in building pride in children's heritage, and White mothers address diversity in promoting tolerance of other groups (Katz & Kofkin, 1997). However, many of the White mothers reported not just providing subtle messages but creating a more inclusive lifestyle (e.g., living in a diverse neighborhood, seeking out diverse school settings).

## **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

Findings from this study offer insight into the complex process of school readiness in regard to how parents' personal school experiences may influence decision-making around children's learning and education. Previous research in this area has focused primarily on parents' own socialization and levels of involvement from their parents (Mapp, 2003; Taylor et al., 2004). This study broadens understandings of the relevance of parents' own school experience by identifying other influencing contextual factors such as school traits, sensitive transitional times, and diversity within the school setting. Almost all mothers reported that their school experiences influenced how they are preparing their children for school. This implies that school recollections claim a substantive role in the school transition and preparation process for families, as well as on more long-term thoughts on schooling. Mothers recalled a variety of stories that evoked a full gamut of emotions. The memories that mothers chose to share were shaped through their own interpretation; however, they represented academic and social experiences that were perceived as the most formative from their school days. Even when mothers categorized their overall school experience as positive, they still identified a variety of both favorable and unfavorable memories that fed into their cognitions and practices with their children. A 50-year-old, White mother of two children concluded her interview by saying:

Well, I think if you had a good experience, you, you want your child to have a good experience as well. If you had a bad experience, I think you learn from that and you look for things that would also—things that were maybe hard or bad for you—you look for something different for your child.

Work in this area often frames school experiences in terms of positive or negative experiences, and even in preparation for this study, we anticipated that mothers would fall into one of these categories. However, the way in which our mothers retold their stories suggests that this is not merely a binary phenomenon. Rarely were memories all positive or all negative, but instead they were a mixture of both that created the educational history of each individual. This expands practitioners' understanding of parents' experiences as merely "good" or "bad," but rather much more complex and nuanced. Whether mothers looked kindly on their school days or recounted a number of events that compromised their academic or social well-being, all mothers recognized that their own experiences contributed to the way they think about their children's education.

There was a great deal of emotion attached to the stories that mothers selected to tell, further supporting the idea that the significance of life events rests on affective reactions to those events and that emotions play an important role in influencing parenting (Dix, 1991). No matter where mothers' experiences fell on a positive to negative continuum, memories, and the emotions they assigned to those memories, were connected to their current thoughts and practices about schooling. As research suggests, as parents begin to prepare their children for school, there is often a reactivation of memories that surface (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Mapp, 2003; Raty, 2007) which can both support or challenge a healthy transition. Most recognizable in these interviews were issues related to their own parents' involvement, diversity, school setting, and transitions. They also pointed out paternal involvement and the influence of fathers' own educational histories.

These findings suggest that mothers are concerned about their children's readiness and academic success and are calling upon their own memories, consciously attempting to either replicate their own positive experiences or avoid unfavorable moments like those they endured. It also supports Taylor et al.'s (2004) conceptualization of academic socialization, in that "who parents are" helps explain "what parents do." Ultimately, this exploratory work can inform our understanding about the family transition to the school setting and enhance efforts in supporting both parents and children during this period and beyond. It acknowledges parental perspectives and concerns in relationship to preparing children for school and highlights potential points of intervention

for families. An understanding of parents' own developmental histories and how they could influence parents' relationships with their children's learning and education could be beneficial for school staff and counselors.

### **Listening to Stories**

Epstein (1995) writes, "The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families" (p. 701). Fostering a strong relationship and connection with families aids the development of important skills and contributes to a smooth transition for all children and their families. It calls for teachers and schools to solicit and listen to parent stories. As teachers bring their past to the work they do in schools (Gomez, Rodriquez, & Agosto, 2008; Graue, 2005), parents also bring their past to their learning-related involvement. These personal histories are excellent tools to create meaningful bonds with families. Schools have traditionally thought about family outreach as unilateral (school to home), instead of a mutual process (Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, Chud, & Lange, 1998; Christensen, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). However, creating meaningful bonds with families must be considered a joint process; both sides must take an equal investment in the child's development.

Some points of interest that were especially relevant to the mothers we studied included issues related to intergenerational influences, transitions, school setting, and diversity. Exploring these memories and areas of concern can provide a deeper understanding of families and children (Edwards, 1999). It can unveil why children behave as they do, children's way of learning and communicating, some of the problems parents have encountered, and how these experiences may impact children's views about schools and learning. We should encourage and teach the skills needed for practitioners to use these emotional stories and personal histories in order to better understand the home environment of children. A parent can share anecdotes and observations from his or her own individual consciousness to give teachers access to complicated social, emotional, and educational issues that can help teachers reduce the mystery around their students' early beginnings. In addition, as teachers help parents revisit their school memories, parents may become aware of the motivation behind their thoughts and actions.

### **Limitations**

Our findings should be interpreted with the acknowledgment of study limitations. While there was some racial and economic variation in our sample, the majority of our participants self-identified as White and reported comfortable income levels. This sample limitation suggests that identified themes might not fit everyone's story, or that additional themes may present themselves in

a higher risk sample. Our analysis relied on interviews as our primary source of data, and therefore is limited to maternal reports of current thoughts and behaviors as well as interpretations of their own experiences. It also relied on mothers' willingness to share these personal stories and current socialization practices. While investigators worked on building rapport with mothers from the initial phone screening and throughout home visit activities, some mothers provided less in-depth responses in regard to their schooling, even when a number of prompts were provided.

## Conclusion and Future Research

As demonstrated in this study, many studies focused on parents' experiences are limited to maternal reports. However, given the magnitude of maternal responses that incorporated the role of fathers and other family members in school preparation, future research should consider other family members' school experiences and their influence on the transition process. It would also be productive to explore school recollections in a higher risk sample, given the greater educational disadvantage that many children in this category face (Murnane, Willett, Bub, & McCartney, 2006).

Parental recollections on schooling guide cognitions, learning-related behaviors, and decisions parents make about their children's education. In sum, these thoughts and actions have immense influences on a child's readiness to learn and succeed in school, as well as on subsequent school years. Listening to parents needs to begin early and be sustained throughout a child's education in order to promote optimal levels of success. We as educators also need to suspend assumptions about parents' backgrounds and involvement in learning and open ourselves up to the variety of children's learning experiences, including learning that occurs within family and community contexts. Through this perspective, we can create more relevant and necessary supports and interventions for our families and children, in order to benefit all students.

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# Home–School Collaboration in the View of Fourth Grade Pupils, Parents, Teachers, and Principals in the Finnish Education System

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## Abstract

Although Finland currently holds the top ratings in international comparisons ranking education and children's health, there is evidence that the health of Finnish adolescents is being threatened by increasing obesity, serious risk behavior, and other health problems. In addition, subjective well-being at school is regarded as low by students. Besides the harm to individuals' health, these issues are influencing students' ability to learn and concentrate at school. Collaboration between home and school can be an effective tool for preventing these problems, given the knowledge that elementary school-age children's health learning is highly influenced by these two environments. While multiple international studies demonstrate the importance of effective home–school connections, the position of parents has only recently gained growing attention in the Finnish education system. This study examined home–school collaboration from the perspectives of children (aged 10–11 years), their parents, class teachers, and principals through questionnaires and interviews in four comprehensive schools (Grades 1–9). The results showed that the basic structures necessary to enable the children's academic success were established, but the potential to support their healthy growth and development collaboratively were only partly developed. The intent of the school personnel was to promote the children's learning and healthy development, but mutual collaboration between home and school was not goal-orientated, and therefore not fully nor systematically implemented in schools.

Key Words: home–school collaboration, parent–teacher, conferences, collaboration, parents, involvement, participation, comprehensive school, elementary school, Finland, PISA study, healthy, learning, teachers, students, principals

## Introduction

Finland is a Northern European country of 5.3 million inhabitants (Statistics Finland, 2010). It has been ranked fourth in comparisons of child well-being among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (UNICEF, 2007) and among the best performers in educational attainment, based on Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores in reading, mathematics, and science in 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2009 (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010). Due to the high standard of education in Finland, the learning opportunities of children from different backgrounds are similar, which is illustrated by very small differences in learning results between schools (Kupiainen, Hautamäki, & Karjalainen, 2009). In addition, the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE, 2010) explains Finland's success in education, for example, by the completely free-of-charge basic education (including teaching, learning materials, school meals, health care, dental care, and school transport) and the teachers' universally high level of academic education (FNBE, 2010).

However, the findings on Finnish school children's relatively poor well-being at school (e.g., Currie et al., 2004, 2008) have intensified the discussion about students' well-being substantially in Finland and have led to many new developmental procedures (Kämppi et al., 2008). Additionally, low rankings in international comparisons as well in national studies in areas such as adolescent risk behavior (Currie et al., 2008; Lavikainen, Lintonen, & Kosunen, 2009), overweight and obesity (Isomaa, Isomaa, Marttunen, & Kaltiala-Heino, 2010; OECD, 2009), and mental health problems (Luopa, Lommi, Kinnunen, & Jokela, 2010), are placing Finnish children and adolescents at risk in both physical and psychological dimensions of health.

A recently published Finnish document, "Quality to home–school collaboration" (FNBE & FPA, 2007), places functional home–school collaboration as a central element of children's and adolescents' well-being at school. According to the document, the common goal of the collaboration is to support children's learning and healthy growth and development, which involves the responsibility and commitment of all stakeholders.

This study examines the prevailing practice in home–school collaboration at the beginning of the school health project targeted at developing collaboration between home and school in children's health learning. It is a part of a two-year

(2008-2010) research and development project undertaken within the Schools for Health in Europe (SHE) in Eastern Finland.

## **Children's Healthy Development as an Important Goal of Home-School Collaboration**

Today's communities where children grow differ substantially from the environments of previous generations. The choices that children make between healthy and non-healthy behavior have become more difficult, and even adults seem to struggle more and more with their own decisions regarding health. Still, the parents' role in educating and rearing their children in the area of health is significant, as the habits and behaviors of everyday living have a major influence on children's lives (Bois, Sarrazin, Brustad, Trouilloud, & Cury, 2005; Carlyon, Carlyon, & McCarthy, 1998; Sutherland et al., 2008).

Schools are also in a central position in creating health and well-being in childhood and adolescence (Blom-Hoffman, Wilcox, Dunn, Leff, & Power, 2008; Tossavainen, Turunen, Jakonen, & Vertio, 2004). Throughout their existence, schools in Finland have shared the common goal of increasing not only the academic knowledge, but also the health of children. Healthy students learn better, and better education leads to healthier people (St. Leger, Young, Blanchard, & Perry, 2009). However, schools alone cannot meet the new challenges that children and adolescents are experiencing; accordingly, the collaboration of the home and school has become even more significant.

The relationship between home and school has been an important issue internationally for decades, and it has been the object of considerable research, for example in the fields of education, sociology, and psychology (e.g., Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Cox, 2005; Harris & Goodall, 2008). The intensive research has indicated that the advantages of home-school collaboration are undeniable. For example, active home-school collaboration with high parental involvement has been found to strengthen children's learning (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Kyriakides, 2005; Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, Whetsel, & Green, 2004) and bring about positive effects as far as the age of 20, also correlating positively with the children's length of schooling (Barnard, 2004). Even though there are many reasons for and desired outcomes in developing partnerships between the school and the home, the ultimate goal of that relationship is to help children succeed in school and in later life (Epstein et al., 2002). For example, in the U.S., several very successful programs have been launched in order to activate parental involvement, and structures and frameworks have been developed to help schools build connections with parents (Casper, Lopez, & Wolos, 2006/2007; Epstein et al., 2002).

However, research on Finnish home–school collaboration is quite rare and is mainly based on doctoral dissertations. Studies in Finland from the last 10 years concern teachers’ representations of their students’ upbringing in the context of home and school collaboration (Hirsto, 2001), cooperation between home and school in the first two years (Siniharju, 2003) and in the last two years of comprehensive school (Metso, 2004), and generally in the pre-primary and primary school levels (Hirsto, 2010; Lehtolainen, 2008). The role of fathers in school has been examined by Torkkeli (2001), and the use of digital communication systems to facilitate interaction between home and school, by Latvala (2006). In addition, cooperation between parents and school nurses has been studied (Mäenpää & Åstedt-Kurki, 2008).

## Finnish School Culture

Compulsory education starts in Finland in the year when the child reaches 7 years of age. The duration of basic education is 9 years, and only 0.5% of pupils fail to be awarded the basic education certificate. More than 96% of those completing basic education continue their studies at the upper secondary level (FNBE, 2010). If typical parental involvement in Finnish comprehensive schools is viewed according to Epstein’s categories (Epstein et al., 2002), *communicating (type 2)* is clearly the most common form. It includes parents’ evenings, usually held once a semester; optional parent–teacher conferences, occurring once at each grade level (or more rarely, at selected grade levels); phone calls, usually if some problems have occurred; and information sent home by the teacher, via paper or email. *Volunteering (type 3)* exists when parents attend the school as an audience, usually at school feasts once or twice a year or sometimes at other events. Parents can also collect money for a class trip or camp school, which is usually executed in the sixth grade. A few parents also participate in school councils and/or PTAs (*decision-making, type 5*). *Type 4, learning at home*, or *type 6, collaborating with the community*, have not traditionally been within the scope of collaboration in Finnish schools; parents obviously participate in their child’s homework at some level, but this is more an underlying assumption than a mutually discussed or highly encouraged element of schoolwork. On the other hand, information related to educational health or well-being intended for parents, usually provided at school by an outside lecturer, has been quite a popular phenomenon among Finnish schools at all grade levels, being one form of *parenting (type 1)*.

The shared responsibility between home and school in childrearing is a current issue in deliberations concerning Finnish education. Growing attention to and awareness of the issues of home–school collaboration have quite

recently spawned broader discussions among policymakers, educators, the media, and parents. There are, however, many significant discrepancies between the rhetoric of policy documents and the practice of effective home-school collaboration in education. Even though the Basic Education Act (1998, Amendment 477/2003) highlights collaboration between parents/caregivers and schools, and the National Core Curriculum of Basic Education (FNBE, 2004), through which the Basic Education Act is executed, further describes home-school collaboration and recommends including parents in the planning and evaluation of teaching and childrearing tasks (FNBE & FPA, 2007), the recommendations are quite rarely executed at the school or classroom levels, as earlier Finnish research indicates (Metso, 2004; Siniharju, 2003). Collaboration between home and school continues to be mostly one-sided, and parents are traditionally not viewed as significant partners in children's education.

## Aim and Objectives

The aim of the present study was to examine the prevailing practice in the home-school relationship from the viewpoint of pupils, their parents, class teachers, and principals, to attain a broad view and to form a starting point for improving developmental procedures in the schools. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How do pupils, their parents, and school personnel describe parents' and other adults' roles in the school community?
2. What are the characteristics of collaboration between the school administration and parents and between class teachers and parents?

## Method

### Sample

All the fourth-graders ( $N = 173$ ) and their parents or caregivers ( $N = 348$ ), five class teachers, and two principals from four comprehensive schools (Grades 1–9) in eastern Finland participated in the study. The teachers and principals were interviewed, and the students and parents were surveyed. The response rate of the pupils was 89% ( $n = 154$ ; girls  $n = 80$ , boys  $n = 74$ ), and of the parents, 53% ( $n = 184$ ; mothers  $n = 106$ , fathers  $n = 78$ ). The teachers were all females; their experience as a teacher varied between 1.5 and 28 years; the length of teaching in their current position varied from 1 to 4 years. The principals had 9–29 years in a position of leadership at different schools, and 9–11 years in the study schools; one was male, one female. The ethnicity of all the participants was White. The schools' characteristics are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Study Schools ( $n = 4$ )

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4
Size of the school				
Pupils	630	491	477	311
Teachers*	59	37	35	31
Other personnel**	15	7	10	10
<i>Total</i>	<i>704</i>	<i>534</i>	<i>521</i>	<i>344</i>
Fourth-grade pupils	51	49	46	27
Size of the city/town, rounded	7,500	23,000	92,000	4,000
Characteristics of the city/town	rural	urban	urban	rural

\*including special needs teachers

\*\*including principals, secretaries, special needs assistants, school nurses and doctors, and school welfare officers or psychologists, if any; excludes canteen/cafeteria personnel, maintenance, and janitors

### Design and Data Collection

At the beginning of the study, the local municipal federation of education and the principals of four schools authorized the research. The fourth-graders and their parents or caregivers as well as the school personnel were informed about the study, and the appropriate permission was obtained from them prior to the data collection.

The data were collected in the spring/early summer of 2008. The views of the pupils, parents, and the school personnel were considered important, being the parties of collaboration. In addition, a mixed methods approach was also used as a “tool” in this study; different forms of data were put together to make a more coherent, rational, and rigorous whole, which in this study made it possible to reveal the main ideas of all the groups of respondents (Creswell, Plano Clark, & Garrett, 2008; Pommier, Guével, & Jourdan, 2010).

The quantitative data were collected from the pupils and parents through structured questionnaires developed by the research group on the basis of the findings of previous studies (e.g., Cox, 2005; Epstein et al., 2002; Epstein, Salinas, & Connors, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Poutanen, Lahti, Tolvanen, & Hausen, 2006; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004), as well as national documents (e.g., FNBE, 2004; FNBE & FPA, 2007). The questions concerned parents’ participation and home–school collaboration. In addition, the pupils’ and parents’ background information was gathered. To check that the questionnaires were comprehensive, understandable, and contained valid and sufficient content, both questionnaires were piloted on fourth-graders in a separate school ( $n = 76$ ) and their parents ( $n = 56$ ). Minor revisions were made to the questionnaires after the pilot study.

The questionnaires, with a cover letter that assured confidentiality and included instructions, were delivered by the pupils to their parents in sealed envelopes with postage-paid, self-addressed return envelopes—one questionnaire for each parent available. The parents were asked to complete the survey and mail it back directly to the researcher within two weeks. The fourth-graders completed the questionnaire individually at each school during a 60-minute classroom period. The researcher distributed all the questionnaires to the pupils after informing them about confidentiality and that their responses would not be seen by anyone other than the project researchers. Instructions were given for filling in the questionnaire, and the pupils' questions were answered. Although written consent was not obtained from the pupils, they were informed that they could stop filling in the questionnaire or refuse to participate in the study (e.g., Mauthner, 1997).

Two very similar semi-structured interviews were developed for class teachers and principals with the purpose of gaining information about home-school collaboration and existing and desirable school procedures. The interview forms were based on the same documents and research as the questionnaires. The class teachers, who shared a similar education and work environment, were interviewed in focus groups of two and three. By using focus groups it was possible to get natural conversation around the study themes without going into more depth and detailed information, which was not the purpose of the study (Morgan, 2008). Because of their unique role in the school community, the principals were interviewed individually. The interviews were held at the participants' own schools, both during the school day and after school; they lasted approximately 1–1½ hours and were recorded digitally on audiotape.

### Analysis

Analysis of the data from the surveys focused on using descriptive statistics. The data were analyzed using SPSS for Windows 14.0. A significance level of .05 was adopted for all statistical analyses. In the parents' survey, the background variables (gender: father or mother; year of birth: 1950-1959, 1960-1969, or 1970-1979; and education: comprehensive school or vocational school, upper secondary school or post-secondary level, or polytechnic or university) and home-school collaboration were described by percentages and tested using Pearson's chi-square test. The background variable gender ("mother", "father", "caregiver") was summed up in two classes ("mother" and "father"), because there were only three caregivers in the study, and the aim was not to determine the difference between biological and non-biological parents. Two female caregivers were classified as "mother" and one male caregiver as "father." Five-point Likert scale variables were classified into two classes ("agree"

and “disagree or cannot say”), as were five-point frequency measuring variables (“sometimes” and “never”). The question concerning the extent of using methods of collaboration between class teachers and parents was described using means, standard deviations, and numbers of observations, which were divided into five classes from “once a week or more often” to “never,” and tested with the Mann-Whitney U-test. The pupils’ survey was analyzed under two categories of variables (“agree” and “disagree or cannot say”), described by frequencies and percentages, and tested using Pearson’s chi-square test. The only background variable used with the pupils’ survey was gender.

The digitally audiotaped interviews of the personnel were transcribed and checked against the original recordings. The interviews were analyzed separately using inductive content analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

## Findings

### Parents’ and Other Adults’ Role in the School Community

In the pupils’ opinion, their parents usually participated in *school activities* quite often, while only one-tenth of the pupils stated that their parents sometimes visited *the class or school during the school day*. Parental participation would be appreciated by the pupils; they would like to have their parents sometimes attend school trips or school clubs and/or breaks or help in classrooms. The number of pupils who did not have a clear opinion of their parents’ participation was high, varying from 16.4%–26.0% (see Table 2).

Nearly all the parents considered collaboration between home and school important. The traditional method of home–school collaboration, parents’ evening, was perceived as necessary by the parents, and many parents also thought the school organized enough parents’ evenings. In the parents’ opinion, it is good that pupils also meet adults other than the school personnel in the school environment. The role of the principal in building the atmosphere at school was considered important by mothers and fathers (see Appendix A).

Besides parents’ evenings, parent–teacher conferences were considered important by parents; nearly 90% of them would like conferences to continue throughout comprehensive school (Grades 1–9). Regarding school-organized activities, over half of the parents thought the schools organized enough *whole-school activities for parents*, contrary to their satisfaction with *whole-family-targeted activities*, which were considered sufficient by only one quarter of the parents. Moreover, most of the parents felt the school is responsible for building collaboration between home and school, mothers clearly more than fathers ( $p = .006$ ). Parents would also like to diversify the forms of home–school collaboration. Less than half of the parents agreed when asked about

Table 2. Pupils' Opinions on Parental Participation in the School Community

Pupils' Opinions	Boys ( <i>n</i> = 74)	Girls ( <i>n</i> = 80)	Total ( <i>n</i> = 154)
	%	%	%
My parents usually attend school activities			
Agree	79.7	67.4	73.4
Cannot say	12.2	21.3	16.9
Disagree	8.1	11.3	9.7
I like/would like to have my parents attend school trips sometimes			
Agree	58.9	57.0	57.9
Cannot say	17.8	15.2	16.4
Disagree	23.3	27.8	25.7
I would like to have my parents help at school clubs and/or breaks sometimes			
Agree	45.2	47.5	46.4
Cannot say	21.9	18.7	20.3
Disagree	32.9	33.8	33.3
I like/would like to have my parents help in the classroom sometimes			
Agree	40.6	40.0	40.3
Cannot say	29.7	22.5	26.0
Disagree	29.7	37.5	33.7
My parents visit my class or my school during the school day sometimes			
Agree	12.2	8.8	10.4
Cannot say	21.6	13.8	17.5
Disagree	66.2	77.4	72.1

whether parents were encouraged to take an active role in the school community, and a majority of the parents were not sure or disagreed on whether home-school collaboration is evaluated regularly in the school.

Looking at individual family actions in Appendix B, a majority of parents had participated in parents' evenings whenever possible, mothers more frequently than fathers ( $p = .024$ ). Most parents also seemed happy to participate in school activities, although fathers were less enthusiastic than mothers ( $p = .003$ ). Also, parents with the lowest level of education participated less in school activities ( $p = .004$ ). If the school were to offer parents more possibilities to participate in their child's school day, over half of the parents expressed their willingness to do so. The higher the level of education of the parents, the more they were willing to participate in their child's school day ( $p = .003$ ). Parents were unsure whether their children were invited to parents' evenings, as over half of them were not sure or answered the question negatively. Nearly half of

the parents stated that their family had too limited time to participate in school events. However, nearly 40% of the parents were willing to participate more if the school would offer more opportunities for doing so. Finally, when asked if their own child would not want parents to come to school during the school day, less than one-third answered affirmatively to that question, and one-fifth of the parents were unsure about their child's opinion.

The parents were asked with an open-ended question which function(s) of the school they liked. A total of 63 parents (34%) answered the question, and many parents wrote several issues (92 mentions total). The most common answers were parents' evenings (22 mentions), parent-teacher conferences (17 mentions), and school procedures, including, for example, prevention of bullying or the students' opportunity to eat healthy snacks (14 mentions). Parents were also asked why they do not attend school activities, and 11 of them (6%) answered. The reasons for not participating in school activities were due to work, child care problems, nothing "new" to offer, no time, and another family member's active participation. When class teachers were asked about the role of parents in the school community, one of them answered:

It has changed over the years—even more to the point that a teacher outlines it—we have been anxious to show [to parents] that we can take care of teaching here...parents have their own jobs; we have our own... they have no time, and we have no time.

The common activity shared by all the class teachers was informing parents about different kinds of happenings. Teachers did not especially encourage parents to participate in the activities of the school community. Class teachers in one school admitted that the principal was not visible at the class level and the principal's work was somewhat unknown to pupils: "Once I gave the pupils an opportunity to interview our school personnel. Many pupils wanted to interview the principal, who does not have much contact with pupils." The teachers continued: "It feels that these days the principal's role is too often collaboration with the home in negative matters." The class teachers' interviews also revealed the teachers' strong caregiving tasks now:

I remember someone saying that teaching should be divided into 70% at school and 30% at home, and caregiving vice versa. But the childrearing task—30% at school—is way too small a number today. Sometimes it feels most of the time is spent in caring for the children.

One principal described the "Welcome to the school" phrase as polite rhetoric. Parents' visits were not necessarily expected for more than regular events, such as bringing the child to school, parents' evenings, or celebrations. Individual pupils' problematic cases were, however, taken care of very effectively.

When parents were invited to school for special occasions, it was done with very sincere thought. The other principal admitted that direct communication between the principal and a pupil happens mostly when something negative has happened. The principals themselves would like to be with the pupils more and saw meeting with the pupils as important, but they saw no possibility to do that because of the lack of time. The task of administration has multiplied in recent years, as has dealing with pupils' problematic cases. One principal said, "Sometimes I had a dream that I could visit all the classes and, for example, teach one hour in each—at this moment there is no possibility of doing that."

To sum up the role of parents and teachers, the teacher is assumed to take care of education and childrearing at school with the consciousness that the caregiver or parent has the main responsibility for the child. The task is done together, even though mutual collaboration is not goal-oriented.

### **Interaction and Collaboration Between Class Teachers and Parents**

Most of the parents, mothers more than fathers ( $p = .002$ ), felt it was easy to converse with the class teacher. Parents also agreed that the teacher is the key person in building collaboration between home and school. Many parents thought the teacher showed interest towards the parents, although fathers were more unsure of that than mothers (21.8% vs. 5.7%). Mothers agreed more than fathers ( $p = .002$ ) that the teacher's language was understandable (i.e., teachers did not use much professional jargon). Over half of the parents said they were invited to school also at times other than parents' evenings. When asked whether the teacher had presented different ways to participate in school activities during the school day, about a quarter of the fathers and less than half of the mothers agreed, with a significant difference ( $p = .004$ ). Moreover, the higher the level of education among the parents, the more they agreed with the question ( $p = .007$ ). In the parents' opinion, both genders equally, the teacher had not proposed to parents different ways to participate in the classroom during the school day. Most of the parents would like to continue collaboration with the class teacher at the same level while the child is growing. The "oldest" group of parents was most willing to let collaboration decrease as the child grew older ( $p = .043$ ). Overall, the majority of parents thought interaction between teachers and parents could be increased (see Appendix C).

Most of the parents thought teachers contacted the home in multiple ways, but fewer parents stated that the contacts were on a regular basis. Class teachers had given advice to parents on how to support their child in doing homework (59%) or in preparing for tests (50.3%), more frequently to mothers than to fathers ( $p = .002$  in both). Over half of the parents felt they could contact the teacher in the evening or on weekends, less among the highest education group ( $p = .024$ ).

Table 3 shows the means, standard deviations, and numbers of observations of parents in estimating the teacher’s activities (rows 1–5 and 7–8) and their own participation in their child’s school day (row 6). Overall, according to this table, the most used method of collaboration between the class teacher and parents was getting a report from the teacher about their child’s success in schoolwork ( $M = 2.61$ ;  $SD = 0.83$ ), and the lowest rates were obtained for asking the parents to participate in planning schoolwork ( $M = 1.07$ ;  $SD = 0.37$ ) or school events ( $M = 1.22$ ;  $SD = 0.58$ ). The parents also reported that their participation in their children’s school day had been very rare ( $M = 1.22$ ;  $SD = 0.60$ ), which is indicated by the lowest category “never.” It is also notable that none of these methods described below received a mean score over 3, which was indicated as “once a semester.” Compared to mothers, fathers were asked less to participate in planning schoolwork ( $p = .033$ ).

Table 3. Frequency of Home–School Relationship by Parents

How often	M	SD	<i>n</i>	<i>p-value</i> ( <i>gender</i> )
...has the teacher told you how your child is doing at school?	2.61	0.83	183	ns
...has the teacher organized a parents’ conference or other discussion with your family?	2.38	0.78	182	ns
...has the teacher given your child homework that involves you?	2.18	1.08	180	ns
...has the teacher asked how your family is doing?	2.03	1.02	181	ns
...has the teacher been present at events organized for your child’s class?	2.00	1.05	172	ns
... have you participated in schoolwork at your child’s school during the school day?	1.22	0.60	180	ns
...has the teacher asked you to participate in planning school events?	1.22	0.58	183	.033*
...has the teacher asked you to participate in planning schoolwork?	1.07	0.37	183	ns

ns = nonsignificant; \* $p < .05$

Note: The options range from 5 = once a week or more often, 4 = a couple of times a month, 3 = once a semester, 2 = once a year, 1 = never

According to the teachers, collaboration between teachers and parents happened mainly through individual contacts based on distribution of information or on the occasion of problems arising. Parent–teacher conferences were held differently at the schools; at one school conferences were offered only in the

lower grades (1–2) and in Grade 7, but at the other one parent–teacher conferences were offered once a year in Grades 1–7. Teachers also noted, in their own classes, the role of the parent was “mainly bringing some things to school that a child has forgotten, maybe seeing them popping in and going out.”

From the principal’s point of view, the parents’ visibility was low: “They bring and get the smallest pupils, but they stop at the door. Parents do not come into the classroom.” The principal continued by stating that home–school collaboration between the class teacher and parents depends on both the teacher and the parents. There are classes where everything is in order, and classes where the best way would be to start over. The question is about collaboration, “growing together.” Both principals thought the teachers’ time spent in collaboration is continuously growing. If collaboration is not pursued, it will be reflected later somehow. Home–school collaboration is a very essential part of the teacher’s job. “We have tried to keep the ‘threshold low’ for parents. Still, we have parents who have a high threshold to contacting the school. They remember their own times at school; the teacher was an authority who was not supposed to be bothered for minor matters.”

For teachers, preservice education had not prepared them enough to handle difficult situations with parents or, generally, home–school collaboration:

Obviously, it is assumed that we get along without that part of education [home–school collaboration/interaction]; it is a surprise for new teachers when they enter “this world.” Especially as a new teacher, you have to follow what the others are doing, and it really demands much work.

To sum up the interaction and collaboration between class teachers and parents, in addition to “traditional” contacts, teachers meet the parents only occasionally. According to the parents, teachers are the key persons in creating collaboration, and parents are also willing to increase collaboration. The fathers’ role in the school community is quite minimal.

## Discussion

Most of the parents were happy to participate in school activities, but they were not used to coming to school other than on occasions when they were invited, nor were they encouraged to take a more active role in the school community, at least at the classroom level. The parents described the reasons for low participation in school events as having to work in the evenings, lack of child care, or that the school had nothing “new” to offer. The absence of parents was revealed also in the pupils’ answers; they hoped to see their parents or other adults more often in the school community. This finding confirms previous Finnish studies on home–school collaboration which revealed parents

genuinely participated in school activities, but did not take or were not allowed to take an active role (Metso, 2004; Siniharju, 2003). Furthermore, the activity level depended on the occasion. A few teachers in the study by Siniharju (2003) were also worried about some parents' disinterest towards their child's schooling, which Johnson, Pugach, and Hawkins (2004) also bring out as a wider problem of parental disinterest towards the whole school system. However, in Finnish society, attitudes towards education in general have traditionally and continuously been positive (Kyrö & Nyysolä, 2006).

Contrary to Docket and Perry (2004) and one of the principals interviewed in this study, parents did not bring out that they do not want to come to the school because of their own memories from school. Many of them seemed to know very well what is happening at their child's school, which may imply a good flow of information from the teachers. On the other hand, it may also imply a carrying on of customary ways of doing things, which may also be one reason for feelings of insecurity among parents (Ben-Arieh, McDonell, & Attar-Schwartz, 2008). Furthermore, many traditional methods of collaboration, such as the parents' evenings, may have presented new challenges in knowing how to act currently. For example, the parents in this study were unsure whether they have permission to bring the children of the family to the parents' evenings, or they reported that child care problems decreased their participation at school events. This implies a lack of extended family structures now (grandparents in the same household or at least living near the family). Moreover, single-parent families probably face the problem of child care even more if the school has not offered the option of bringing the children to parents' evenings, as Carlyon et al. (1998) and Johnson et al. (2004) suggest. Also, the "oldest" group of parents in this study was most willing to lessen collaboration with the school as the child grows up (see also Yun & Kusum, 2008). Possibly these parents had participated in similar events before, and they felt the information was repeated. The schools have to critically view and refresh their methods of collaboration to better meet the needs of today's families.

The students in this study had positive attitudes towards parental participation, but many of them did not have a clear opinion on it. This is not surprising, taking into account that parents are a rarity in the school environment, at least during the ordinary school day. In contrast with the U.S., for example, where parents are often more involved in their child's learning (e.g., Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2007), the Finnish educational system is largely built on teachers' professionalism and independence in the classroom. Compared internationally, Finnish teachers have many opportunities to influence their own work (Kumpulainen, 2009). Obviously, the children generally like parental participation, but also play an important role in stimulating or

curbing it (Vyverman & Vettenburg, 2009). Similarly, Deslandes and Bertrand (2006) found that if parents perceived that teachers and students (Grades 7–9) expected or desired their involvement, it motivated parents to actually be more involved in their children's schooling.

To enhance connectedness between home and school, interaction between them should be regular. The parents in this study considered parent–teacher conferences important and would like to see the discussions between them, the teacher, and the student continue through grades 1–9, which is normally not the case in Finnish schools. In fact, Peltonen and Kalkkinen (2008) bring out that less than half of the Finnish comprehensive schools regularly organize parent–teacher conferences in Grades 7–9. The parents in this study were also willing to embrace a variety of methods of home–school collaboration which forms an excellent base for continuing the development of the health context in the school community. For example, Michael, Dittus, and Epstein (2007) have been applying Epstein's categories of involvement (e.g., Epstein et al., 2002) in the health context, which presents many options for enriching parental involvement at schools. The suggestions are well adaptable to this study: in order to achieve and maintain a good relationship between parents and the school, the inclusive components related to health could include, for example, opportunities to participate in school health programs, involving families in health education learning activities at home, or involving parents in the development of school health policies (Michael et al., 2007).

The principals cautiously brought out that home–school collaboration should be developed, but eventually backed off the idea by listing inhibitory arguments in another sentence. Parental involvement should, however, be seen as subservient to both parties. For example, according to Kyriakides (2005), parents who actively take part in their child's schoolwork get more involved in their child's learning process and follow the school's procedures at home, also. This, in turn, helps the teacher with the childrearing task, which in this study—as in earlier Finnish studies (Kumpulainen, 2009)—was seen by the teachers as having increased. One class teacher in this study brought out the clear distinction between the tasks of home and school. Similar results were obtained in a study where parent involvement was investigated from elementary through high school (Ferrara, 2009) in which the teachers' view of “adding” responsibilities like parent involvement was seen as taking their time from teaching the students. It seems, as Ferrara (2009) indicates, that teachers and principals value parental involvement and basically acknowledge its benefits, but it still is not a high priority in the school community, even at a national level. The role of parents or collaboration has not even been mentioned in explaining the PISA success among Finnish adolescents (e.g., Kupiainen et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the position of the father, in particular, seems to be unclear in the school community. According to this study, fathers felt it was more difficult to discuss issues with their child's teacher, and they also had more difficulties in understanding the teacher's professional language than mothers did. Moreover, compared with mothers, fathers also often felt they had gotten less advice about their child's homework or preparing for tests or invitations to plan school events. Fathers' involvement in schoolwork has been noted to be mainly marginal and supplementary to mothers' involvement, even though fathers' participation has been found to promote the child's learning, as McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, and Ho (2005) and Tam (2009) point out. The school culture seems to be more favorable toward mothers than fathers, even though the school should be the arena of both parents. The reasons for fathers' lesser activity should be investigated, and their participation in their child's schoolwork should be enhanced, even though the child's schooling has traditionally been more the task of mothers than fathers (e.g., Tam, 2009). According to a study by Torkkeli (2001), fathers who had talked personally with the child's teacher also had a significantly more positive view towards home-school collaboration than did fathers with no experience of discussion. In addition, personal discussion with the teacher was the thing that fathers desired most from schools.

In the opinion of the parents in this study, the teacher is the key person in building collaboration between home and school. However, as the findings show, class teachers seem to receive very little education in the areas of home-school collaboration or talking with parents. Teachers reported that the first year of teaching had been especially difficult, as the skills had to be built in real situations with families, following the example of others. This finding is similar to research by Uludag (2008), in which preservice teachers had learned the importance of communication only after they had started their actual work as teachers, or the findings of Fantilli and McDougall (2009), who found insecurity, inexperience, and lack of preparation had been the sentiments regarding communication with parents for new teachers in their first years of teaching. According to the current study, teachers, regardless of their teaching experience, equally valued collaboration between home and school.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations that need to be acknowledged and addressed regarding the present study. Due to the purposeful sampling of the study schools, the criteria for the selected schools highlighted their willingness to participate in the development project, and therefore this may have influenced some of the answers of the personnel, although the interviews were held before the

development project had formally started. Secondly, the number of schools in this study is too limited for broad generalizations. However, nearly all Finnish children and adolescents (Grades 1–9) go to public schools (private schools under 3%, homeschooling under 1%) whose teacher qualifications are equal and where learning is based on the National Core Curriculum of Basic Education. Therefore, other Finnish schools are able to benefit from our findings when developing home–school collaboration.

The background of the families in this study was quite similar due to the study environment in a relatively small area of eastern Finland. Further empirical evaluations are needed to replicate the study in larger cities or in other parts of Finland where the background of families varies more. In addition, although the parents' socioeconomic status was not asked directly in the questionnaire, their level of education and current working status were asked in order to get a rough estimation of the participating families' socioeconomic background. According to the findings, parents with the lowest level of education participated less in school activities and vice versa: the more education the parents had, the more willing they were to participate in their own child's school day.

Finally, although the response rate of the parents' survey was average (53%), it is possible that the non-respondents of the survey may have had different outcomes than the parents who did participate in the study. In addition, the total number of possible respondents turned out to be extremely difficult to calculate, as the families differed (e.g., stepparents, etc.) and two copies of the questionnaires were sent to all the pupils' homes in case one of the parents did not get the questionnaire initially. Despite these limitations, the study makes a valuable contribution by examining home–school collaboration in the Finnish education context.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of this study clearly showed that Finnish pupils are taken care of in the school community, but the possibilities to support the children's healthy growth collectively with families are only partly developed. Therefore, based on the findings above, the following recommendations are provided for parents, teachers, and other school personnel:

- Schools (and wider: school districts and national policy) should emphasize parents' responsibility for their children's education.
- Schools should develop their environments as places where family involvement is welcome, well structured, and well supported.
- Preservice teacher education (as well as in-service training of teachers) in home–school issues should be examined and further developed.

- Appropriate teaching methods, such as simulation-assisted learning, should be used more in teacher education to improve the communication skills of future teachers.
- A novice teachers' mentoring system should be established in schools.
- Tested models and the latest research on home-school collaboration and partnerships should be utilized in all teacher education regardless of teachers' working site or grade level.
- Education on family structures should be offered to school personnel.
- Collaboration with the home should start at the beginning of school and continue throughout the child's school path.
- To achieve high quality in home-school collaboration, the whole school approach (e.g., health promoting school approach) should be implemented and personnel commitment obtained.
- The goals and strategies of home-school collaboration should be formulated together with families, described in the school's policy, and made visible in everyday life.
- The principal's important role in promoting home-school collaboration should be noted and appropriate education provided.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

To determine the most effective strategies on how children's health learning can be supported by home-school collaboration, future studies (a) should take into account all the environments (e.g., home, school, peers, media) where the children learn about health now, and try to find the most effective methods for support in those environments; (b) need to look at how parent involvement (in education and also in health issues) changes as the child ages and why; (c) should focus on finding out the characteristics of today's demanding society, including high demands of achievement for children and their parents at school and at work (that is reflected in collaboration); (d) should attempt to identify the limited teacher, principal, or other personnel knowledge of alternative strategies for increasing effective home-school collaboration; and (e) should explore the pupils' own experiences and opinions about learning and health in the most effective ways. Additionally, the research methods should include a variety of different approaches to cover the phenomenon broadly enough. For example, mixed methods involving qualitative and quantitative approaches allows the achievement of a wide and deep interpretation of the current situation, and an approach of action research enables the involvement of all stakeholders in the development process.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Parents' Opinions on General Collaboration of Home and School

Parents' Opinions	Fathers ( <i>n</i> = 78)	Mothers ( <i>n</i> = 106)	Total ( <i>n</i> = 184)	<i>p</i>
	%	%	%	
Collaboration between home and school is important				.097
Agree	97.4	100.0	98.8	
Cannot say	1.3	0.0	0.6	
Disagree	1.3	0.0	0.6	
Parents' evenings are necessary				.789
Agree	96.1	95.3	95.6	
Cannot say	1.3	0.9	1.1	
Disagree	2.6	3.8	3.3	
The principal's role is important when building the school atmosphere				.144
Agree	96.2	90.6	92.9	
Cannot say	2.5	8.5	6.0	
Disagree	1.3	0.9	1.1	
It is good that pupils meet adults other than school personnel at school				.466
Agree	87.2	90.6	89.1	
Cannot say	12.8	6.6	9.3	
Disagree	0.0	2.8	1.6	
<i>Appendix A continues next page</i>				

<i>Appendix A, continued from previous page</i>				
Parents' conferences should continue through comprehensive school				.146
Agree	84.6	91.5	88.6	
Cannot say	7.7	4.7	6.0	
Disagree	7.7	3.8	5.4	
The school organizes enough parents' evenings				.480
Agree	75.6	80.0	78.1	
Cannot say	12.9	4.8	8.2	
Disagree	11.5	15.2	13.7	
The school is responsible for taking the initiative in home-school collaboration				.006*
Agree	67.1	84.6	77.2	
Cannot say	19.7	5.8	11.7	
Disagree	13.2	9.6	11.1	
Methods of home-school collaboration could be more versatile				.489
Agree	59.7	64.8	62.6	
Cannot say	28.6	17.1	22.0	
Disagree	11.7	18.1	15.4	
The school organizes enough whole-school activities for parents				.407
Agree	59.0	52.8	55.4	
Cannot say	21.8	8.5	14.2	
Disagree	19.2	38.7	30.4	
Parents are encouraged to take an active role in the school community				.481
Agree	37.6	42.9	40.6	
Cannot say	33.8	15.2	23.1	
Disagree	28.6	41.9	36.3	
The school organizes enough regular whole-family activities				.950
Agree	24.3	24.8	24.6	
Cannot say	37.2	22.8	29.0	
Disagree	38.5	52.4	46.4	
Home-school collaboration is evaluated regularly in my child's school				.168
Agree	23.1	15.1	18.5	
Cannot say	28.2	21.7	24.5	
Disagree	48.7	63.2	57.0	

Note: p-value, in backgrounds of year of birth (B) or education (E) were all nonsignificant for these items.

\* $p < .05$

Appendix B. Parents' Opinions of Their Own Participation/Role in the School Community

Parents' Opinions	Fathers ( <i>n</i> = 78)	Mothers ( <i>n</i> = 106)	Total ( <i>n</i> = 184)	<i>p</i>	<i>p</i> -value, if significant, in backgrounds of year of birth (B) or education (E)	
	%	%	%		B	E
I participate in my child's parents' night whenever possible				.024*	ns	ns
Agree	85.7	95.3	91.3			
Cannot say	2.6	0.9	1.6			
Disagree	11.7	3.8	7.1			
I gladly participate in school activities				.003*	ns	.004*
Agree	77.0	92.5	85.9			
Cannot say	17.9	0.0	7.6			
Disagree	5.1	7.5	6.5			
I could participate in my child's school day if it would be offered by the school				.075	ns	.003*
Agree	51.3	64.4	58.8			
Cannot say	30.8	16.3	22.5			
Disagree	17.9	19.3	18.7			
Our children are welcome to parents' evenings or other events targeted to parents				.116	ns	ns
Agree	55.1	43.4	48.3			
Cannot say	32.1	18.9	24.5			
Disagree	12.8	37.7	27.2			
Our family has too little time to participate in school events or activities				.586	ns	ns
Agree	47.4	43.4	45.1			
Cannot say	16.7	7.5	11.4			
Disagree	35.9	49.1	43.5			
I would participate in more school/class events if there were more opportunities offered by the school				.664	ns	ns
Agree	35.9	39.1	37.7			
Cannot say	37.2	27.6	31.7			
Disagree	26.9	33.3	30.6			
My child does not want me to come to school during the school day				.871	ns	ns
Agree	28.2	29.5	29.0			
Cannot say	32.1	20.0	25.1			
Disagree	39.7	50.5	45.9			

ns = nonsignificant; \**p* < .05

Appendix C. Parents' Opinions on Collaboration With Their Child's Teacher

Parents' Opinions	Fathers (n = 78)	Mothers (n = 106)	Total (n = 184)	p	p-value, if it exists in backgrounds of year of birth (B) or education (E)	
	%	%	%		B	E
<b>Interaction and Collaboration with Parents</b>						
I feel it is easy to discuss issues with my child's teacher				.002*	ns	ns
Agree	75.6	92.4	85.2			
Cannot say	19.2	1.0	8.7			
Disagree	5.2	6.6	6.1			
Collaboration with the school depends on the child's teacher				.694	ns	ns
Agree	80.8	83.1	82.1			
Cannot say	11.5	9.4	10.3			
Disagree	7.7	7.5	7.6			
My child's teacher shows us that she/he is interested in the parents				.084	ns	ns
Agree	66.7	78.1	73.2			
Cannot say	21.8	5.7	12.6			
Disagree	11.5	16.2	14.2			
The teacher explains school-related things understandably				.002*	ns	ns
Agree	60.3	81.0	72.2			
Cannot say	25.6	10.5	16.9			
Disagree	14.1	8.5	10.9			
Interaction between teachers and parents could be increased				.824	ns	ns
Agree	66.6	65.0	65.7			
Cannot say	24.4	14.2	18.5			
Disagree	9.0	20.8	15.8			
The teacher has welcomed parents to school at times other than parents' evenings				.091	ns	ns
Agree	47.4	60.0	54.6			
Cannot say	30.8	14.3	21.3			
Disagree	21.8	25.7	24.1			
The teacher has proposed different ways to participate in school activities				.004*	ns	.007*
Agree	25.6	46.6	37.7			
Cannot say	42.3	12.4	25.1			
Disagree	32.1	41.0	37.2			

*Appendix C is continued on the next page*

FINNISH HOME-SCHOOL COLLABORATION

<i>Appendix C, continued from previous page</i>						
The teacher has proposed different ways to do things in the classroom during the school day				.362	ns	ns
Agree	14.1	19.2	17.0			
Cannot say	43.6	19.3	29.7			
Disagree	42.3	61.5	53.3			
Collaboration with the child's teacher can decrease when the child moves to Grades 5 and 6				.466	.043*	ns
Agree	12.8	9.4	10.9			
Cannot say	19.3	5.7	11.4			
Disagree	67.9	84.9	77.7			
<b>Contacting and Advising the Parents</b>						
The teacher contacts the home in diverse ways				.476	ns	ns
Agree	80.8	84.8	83.1			
Cannot say	5.1	2.9	3.8			
Disagree	14.1	12.3	13.1			
The teacher contacts the home regularly				.561	ns	ns
Agree	61.5	65.7	63.9			
Cannot say	16.7	4.8	9.8			
Disagree	21.8	29.5	26.3			
I have received advice on how to support my child in his/her homework				.002*	ns	.053*
Agree	46.2	68.6	59.0			
Cannot say	20.5	7.6	13.1			
Disagree	33.3	23.8	27.9			
I feel I can contact the teacher also in evenings or on week-ends				.681	ns	.024*
Agree	56.4	59.4	58.2			
Cannot say	23.1	8.5	14.6			
Disagree	20.5	32.1	27.2			
I have received advice on how to support my child in his/her test preparation				.002*	ns	ns
Agree	37.2	60.0	50.3			
Cannot say	20.5	6.7	12.5			
Disagree	42.3	33.3	37.2			
The teacher contacts the home mainly to deal with problems				.914	ns	ns
Agree	48.7	49.5	49.2			
Cannot say	10.3	11.4	10.9			
Disagree	41.0	39.1	39.9			

ns = nonsignificant; \* $p < .05$



**Book Review of *Bicultural Parent Engagement: Advocacy and Empowerment***

*Pablo C. Ramirez and Margarita Jimenez-Silva*

Key Words: bicultural engagement, democratic schooling, action research, community, parents, immigrant, advocacy, empowerment, Latino, schools, book review, perspectives, critical, language, culture, involvement, family

*Bicultural Parent Engagement: Advocacy and Empowerment* makes a significant contribution to understanding how culturally and linguistically diverse parents engage in their schools and communities. The three editors of *Bicultural Parent Engagement*, Edward M. Olivos, Alberto M. Ochoa, and Oscar Jimenez-Castellanos, have a substantial trajectory in the area of bicultural parent engagement and have compiled a volume of chapters that examine the role and contribution of bicultural parents in school communities. The book addresses important issues about bicultural parents through a myriad of perspectives. Darder (1991) defines the term bicultural as a process wherein individuals learn to function in two distinct sociocultural environments which include their primary culture and that of the dominant mainstream culture of the society in which they live. The editors make it clear in the opening chapter that in this book, bicultural refers to Latino parents in the United States. In most of the chapters, the terms bicultural and Latino are used interchangeably. The Latino parents represented in this book possess distinct backgrounds, ranging from Mexican American to Central American and from immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds. Consequently, multiple chapters illustrate a unique process Latino parents use to engage in their school community. The

book unveils practices in schools and communities that have historically marginalized bicultural parents and presents critical perspectives and research studies that describe bicultural parents as active members of school communities. Specifically, the book provides practices and ideas that can be utilized by teachers, administrators, and community members to overcome sociocultural and systemic barriers in schools, thus supporting parents in becoming leaders and advocates for student progress.

Many school districts are witnessing a major demographic shift in population. According to the PEW Hispanic Center (2008), more culturally and linguistically diverse families are residing in urban school districts, and in 2008, Latino students in U.S. public schools constituted 19.8% of the student population (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). The need to examine the current realities of bicultural parents is of great importance, since much of the literature on bicultural parents has traditionally undermined their role in schools (Olivos, 2006). As Olivos and his colleagues point out, "Existing parent and family involvement paradigms tend to exclude the valuable and legitimate interaction patterns of many bicultural families" (2011, p. 7). *Bicultural Parent Engagement* describes the multiple dimensionalities of bicultural parents and their active participation in schools and communities in the United States. *Bicultural Parent Engagement* is a timely book.

The editors have selected highly qualified scholars and researchers who have dedicated their careers to understanding bicultural parents, specifically, Latino parents. The authors, all leading experts in their particular fields, present a critique of traditional parent involvement models to formulate a democratic parent engagement process for historically disenfranchised parents, thus illustrating bicultural parents' contribution to the success of their children, schools, and communities.

This well-organized 232-page book is divided into three sections. Part One includes three chapters that focus on the role of parents' culture and knowledge in the success of students. Part Two has three chapters that present a critical analysis of how power and democracy influence bicultural parents in schools. Part Three includes four chapters that illustrate the manner in which parents and researchers can operationalize transformative parent engagement in schools and communities.

The writing, readability, and an organization of this book merit exceptionally high marks. The authors provide well-articulated introductions to each chapter's readings, in addition to discussion questions and suggested readings at the end of the book.

## Part One: Introduction and Multicultural Perspectives

Chapter 1, written by the editors of the book, Olivos, Ochoa, and Jiménez-Castellanos, sets the context for the book and provides the framework that serves as the lens for examining issues within the field of parental engagement in the remaining chapters. The authors provide a thorough review of the parental engagement literature and reasons why it is important to focus on parental engagement if we truly want to address the current gap in student academic achievement. The authors also discuss how terms often used interchangeably to describe the concept of involving students' families in school—such as parent involvement, home–school collaborations, parent engagement, parent participation, and parent–school partnerships—each carry implications and assumptions about how the roles of parents and schools are defined. In this opening chapter, the authors also state that as editors of the book, they recognize the prominence of the Latino experience described in the following chapters and assert that this prominence is not meant to minimize the experiences of other groups. They point out that the salient concepts presented in the remaining chapters have implications for other ethnic communities in our society. The editors take into consideration that Latino parents are influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status, childcare availability, and limited English proficiency. Further, they contend that parent involvement practices in schools do not acknowledge sociocultural factors and, consequently, perpetuate asymmetrical power relationships with Latino parents.

Part One, “Multicultural Perspectives,” contains three other chapters. Chapter 2 by Moreno, Lewis-Menchaca, and Rodriguez, focuses on schools' conceptions of parental involvement and presents strategies for building better relations between bicultural families and schools. The authors do an excellent job of addressing the complexities of parent involvement at home through their own studies of Latina mothers teaching their children the alphabet. In Chapter 3, Lindsey and Lindsey examine “cultural competency and culturally proficient schools and practices” (p. 6). Included are a useful series of steps for planning and implementing a culturally proficient parent involvement component and a rubric that the authors present as a “template for action.” In Chapter 4, Wlazinski and Cummins describe the Family Narrative Project within a preservice teacher education course and explore how collaborative scripting can shed light on the issue of coercive power relations in marginalized communities. Especially powerful are the preservice students' voices describing the mutual benefits for themselves and the parents with whom they coauthored family stories.

## **Part Two: Critical Perspectives**

In Chapter 5, author Shannon describes the unequal political and social relations that exist within a single school and the complexities of parent engagement. This is one of the strongest chapters in the book and may become a seminal piece in the field of parent engagement. The parallels drawn between a Dual Language Program in the United States and a Dual Language Program (DLP) in Israel were thought provoking, and the concrete examples of converging and diverging interests in a specific DLP were enlightening. Chapter 6 presents a case for democratic schooling for bicultural parents. The author, Pearl, draws from seven democratic schooling principles to articulate the need for democratic practices for bicultural students, parents, and communities. Each democratic principle challenges existing problems in schools and communities that have historically impacted bicultural parents. The author makes an excellent argument for democracy in schools by citing flaws in the educational system and linking them with contemporary issues hurting culturally diverse students and parents in schools. This chapter echoes the overall thesis of the book. Chapter 7 proposes an alternative parent engagement model. Specifically, Grant and Potter discuss constructive pluralism as a starting point for developing parents' engagement practices. Constructive pluralism is discussed as a way to unite diverse groups in schools and communities for the well being of all. The authors argue that constructive pluralism advocates for the civic engagement of ethnically diverse parents and the school in order to bring about a more democratic and socially just education. The authors posit that a parent involvement model's main emphasis should be to reflect a global society, and they remind the reader that parent engagement in schools has global implications.

## **Part Three: Operationalizing Transformative Parent Engagement**

The application of transformative parent engagement practices in schools is introduced in Chapter 8. Johnson provides a rationale for modifying Epstein's (2001) model of parent involvement by describing issues of inequality that have impacted parents of color in urban communities. The author recounts the success of two action research projects and describes seven types of action-based approaches needed for urban school parents, including: access to information and data collection, parents in decision-making roles, parents as student advocates, parents as leaders at home and in the school community,

effective two-way communication, acquiring district level support, and creating a friendly school atmosphere. The strength of this chapter lies in the fact that parents in urban communities led the action research projects, thus reaffirming the focus of the book. Latino immigrant parents' engagement through action research is also the focus of Chapter 9. The author, Montero-Sieburth, like previous authors in this book, adds to Epstein's six-type model of parental engagement by advocating for Latino immigrant parents in leadership positions in schools and communities. The author chronicles four action research projects from 1999–2006 that highlight Latino immigrant parents as researchers. The action research projects describe the role of diverse groups of Latino immigrants offering insightful perspectives often ignored in the research literature on parent involvement. The data resulting from the action research projects evoke more discussion on the potential of action research in bicultural communities.

Chapter 10 examines the role of public schools in the civic engagement of immigrant parents. Terriquez and Rogers draw from empirical data to illustrate that, despite barriers to parental school participation, Latino immigrant parents actively participate in school-based civic activities. The authors argue that the desire Latino immigrant parents feel to create a better life for their children prompts them to become civic agents. This chapter, like the previous chapters, affirms the book's focus, which is the need for bicultural parents to become leaders. The final chapter reviews and re-emphasizes the significance of transformative parent engagement. Specifically, Ochoa, Olivos, and Castellanos- Jiménez draw from previous chapters to reiterate the need to understand the process by which transformative parent engagement practices are enacted in schools and communities. The editors present a Transformational Parent Engagement Model to describe the process of how parents can be sociopolitically active in their children's school. The authors propose five levels of engagement in actualizing the Transformational Parent Engagement Model: Level I, Connectedness; Level II, Inclusion; Level III, Decision-Making; Level IV, Participatory Action Research; and, finally, Level V, Macro Civic Engagement. The final chapter calls for schools and communities to seek equal opportunity and social justice, thus magnifying the need for bicultural parent engagement in education.

## Conclusion

The editors state in Chapter 1 that one of the goals of the book is “to raise critical questions that will problematize how the current conceptualizations about parent involvement in public schools serve to replicate the status quo”

(p. 4). They have succeeded in meeting that goal. One of the strengths of the book is that each chapter raises common critical questions as well as unique questions posed by the various authors. Indeed, a powerful aspect of the book is that each chapter can stand on its own, although greater impact will be made when readers are presented with the myriad of issues within bicultural parent engagement presented in this compilation. The major weakness of the book, as the editors advised in Chapter 1, is the prominence of the Latino experience and very limited explicit discussion of other ethnic groups. A comparative study between Latino parents and other ethnic minority parents would have been useful in examining other factors that might influence parent involvement in bicultural contexts. This is not to say, however, that the ideas presented are not applicable to other ethnic groups; rather, these ideas could easily lead to powerful discussions with implications for all schools regardless of the populations they serve.

As stakeholders in the education experiences of an increasing population of culturally and linguistically diverse students realize that broader social changes through civic engagement are needed to improve outcomes for these students and their families, books such as this one can provide the impetus for dialogue followed by action. Parents engaged in learning communities within schools or through their parent–teacher organizations can use several of the chapters as part of their discussions. It would be ideal to have the chapters translated in order to make the content accessible in parents’ native languages. Professional learning communities composed of teachers and/or administrators could also use this book as a whole or choose individual chapters to stimulate rich dialogue that would hopefully lead to action tailored to their individual schools. Several of the chapters provide steps and rubrics as well as specific ideas and strategies for improving parental engagement within schools and communities that parents, teachers, and administrators will find practical and helpful, though not simple to implement due to the complexity of underlying issues within any school willing to authentically engage bicultural families.

This book is especially valuable as either a stand alone text for a course on family engagement or for selecting specific chapters to enhance any course that addresses issues of family engagement. The rich use of cited research studies also makes it an ideal resource for undergraduate and graduate courses exploring issues of cultural diversity and family engagement. Editors Olivos, Ochoa, and Jiménez-Castellanos have made a valuable contribution to the education field and specifically to the conversation about bicultural parent engagement. *Bicultural Parent Engagement* should be read by all who are interested in meeting the needs of each and every student who sits in our classrooms, as each deserves to be valued, respected, and provided a quality education.

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