Integrated School–Family Partnerships in Preschool: Building Quality Involvement Through Multidimensional Relationships

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine a preschool program with a high level of quality family involvement. Since family involvement during the early years has been linked to achievement and success in school, it is important to examine how such partnerships can be fostered in a meaningful way. The study employs an inductive qualitative approach, including observation and interviews. The integrated school–family partnerships existing at this suburban preschool are attributed to three main factors: the multidimensional nature of the relationships, a welcoming environment, and an effort to enhance parents' cognitions about school. This case study, which addresses contextual gaps in the parent involvement literature, could serve as a generative paradigm for facilitating meaningful school–family partnerships in preschool, which is an important part of a child's educational foundation.

Key Words: preschool, school–family partnerships, relationships, early childhood, Montessori education, parents, involvement, welcoming environment

Introduction

The first day of preschool is emotional for the mother of 4-year-old Kayla. Clinging to her mother's leg, Kayla peers into the classroom where other children are playing, but her mother's mind is racing. How could she hand off her baby to complete strangers? Will they know how to handle all of her little

quirks? Is she ready for this? Then, Kayla and her mother are greeted with the teacher's warm smile. The connection between teachers and parents has much potential, including calming parental fears as a child begins preschool.

Preschool is an important time, bridging learning at home to a formalized learning environment and setting the tone for K–12 education. The current expansion of preschool programs through the universal pre-K movement only focuses more attention on the importance of early education. As preschool is becoming a standard part of the formal educational system in the United States, the role of families cannot be minimized. Meaningful school–family relationships begin in preschool and have the potential to shape the child's and family's perceptions of school over time.

Families represent the first essential system and source of support for children's learning and development, serving as a lifelong resource to children (Downer & Meyers, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2014). Decades of research demonstrate that family involvement is a critical contributor to student success (Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Epstein, 2010; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Fishel & Ramirez, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lareau, 1989; Larocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011; Marcon, 1999; Sheldon, 2005; Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, 2004; Wilder, 2014). Specific to the child's first experiences in school, parental involvement in early childhood education has been linked to greater success once children enter elementary school (Jeynes, 2014; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

Although the role of families is paramount as young children transition into school, the goal of achieving meaningful family involvement remains a challenge in many schools (Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Larocque et al., 2011; McNeal, 2014). This case study is a notable example of school–family partnerships in a small preschool program. This case exemplifies many qualities of successful and positive school–family relationships which may serve as a model for preschools trying to build a solid foundation of family partnership during the child's first exposure to formalized schooling. Three themes will be explored as components of building school–family partnerships: the multidimensional nature of the relationships (or social interactions that extend beyond the typical teacher–parent relationship), a welcoming environment, and an effort to enhance parents' cognitions about school.

Paradigm Shift: Parent Involvement to School–Family Partnerships

Parent involvement has long been considered a pathway through which schools could support their students, enhance the academic achievement of

underperforming children (Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Larocque et al., 2011; Pianta & Walsh 1996; Wilder, 2014), and address behavioral issues (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001). Educators recognize that parent involvement is a valuable component of the child's education. Literature on this topic over the last 25 years has examined effective practices of school, family, and community partnership (Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Downer & Myers, 2010; Epstein, 2001, 2010; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2014; Lareau, 1989; Larocque et al., 2011; Marcon, 1999; Moorman et al., 2012; Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Sheldon, 2002; Webster-Stratton et al., 2001; Wilder, 2014). Overall, this research points to positive outcomes when families are involved in their child's education. Recently, a paradigm shift has occurred. Increased awareness of environmental and ecological factors in a child's world and their impact on school performance has gained prominence, especially given the recent pressures of increased educator accountability (Downer & Meyers, 2010; Epstein, 2010; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Wilder, 2014). This newer conception of the family's role in a child's education has evolved from one of limited "parent *involvement*" to a more comprehensive model of "school–family–community *partnership*" (Epstein, 2010). This shift is significant for educators, who must now consider a broader scope of influence on their students and the potential that presents.

"Parent *involvement*" focuses on "the participation of significant caregivers, including parents, grandparents, stepparents, foster parents, etc., in activities promoting the educational process of their children in order to promote their academic and social well-being" (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005, p. 371). Involvement includes practices at home, such as providing a place and structure for homework, inquiring about school, helping the child with homework, communicating with the teacher, and responding to school requests. This model also includes more active types of parent involvement, such as parents having a presence at school, volunteering, or becoming involved in PTA or other parent–school groups. Both types of parent involvement are associated with positive development and mastery of early basic school skills in all subject areas (Lareau, 1989; Marcon, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005; Taylor et al., 2004). Parent involvement is a key component of early childhood education policy and programs, such as Head Start (Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act, 2007), and, most recently, the universal pre-K movement. These programs encourage parent involvement by inviting parents to participate in activities at school and facilitating parent–teacher communication.

The work of Epstein (2001, 2010) and Sheldon (2005) precipitated the paradigm shift from "parent *involvement*" to "school, family, and community *partnership*." Joyce Epstein's theory of "overlapping spheres of influence" (2001)

improves the portrayal of how home, school, and community affect children's education and development. This terminology of "*partnership*" extends beyond simple involvement to recognize that parents, educators, and others in the community share responsibility for students' learning and development in a more collaborative fashion (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). Partnerships are child-focused approaches wherein families and professionals cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate to enhance opportunities and success for children and adolescents across developmentally appropriate social, emotional, behavioral, and academic domains (Downer & Myers, 2010; Jeynes, 2014; Lines, Miller, & Arthur-Stanley, 2010; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). While parent *involvement* models view educators as leading the child's education and include parents as supporters of that process, parent *partnership* models position educators and families as partners in a long-term, collaborative effort to enhance the child's education and development.

Consistent with this philosophical distinction, the subjects of research and literature utilizing the two paradigms differ. Literature rooted in the original general parent *involvement* model focuses on the structure of activities, such as various forms of communication, homework monitoring, tutoring, or establishing consistent household rules to address behavioral issues (El Nokali et al., 2010; Fishel & Ramirez, 2005; Lareau, 1989; Larocque et al., 2011; Marcon, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005; Webster-Stratton et al., 2001). More recent school–family *partnership* models have a broader scope, focusing on the relational factors (e.g., the nature and quality of the relationships and interactions) between families, school staff, teachers, and children to support the child's learning and development (Downer & Meyers, 2010; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Jeynes, 2014; Lines et al., 2010; Moorman et al., 2012). The paradigm shift from a structural parent *involvement* model to a relational, holistic school–family *partnership* model has pushed educators and researchers to consider the structure and depth of these relationships, not just the activities taking place. This case study is an attempt to examine school–family partnerships using the broad *partnership* approach, focusing on the school and family components and paying special attention to the relational factors.

Addressing the Gaps in the Literature

Although there has been much research on the relationships between schools, teachers, parents/families, and students, there are identified gaps in context and content. Moorman et al. (2012) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on this topic, including 27,000 studies since 1979. Moorman et al. identified four gaps which are addressed in this case study: the paradigm utilized, geographic context, age group of children, and focus of study.

As described in the literature review, the prevalent models used to examine the role of parents in school have been parent *involvement* models, while family *partnership* models have become more popular over the last 10 years. Moorman et al. (2012) found that 83.3% of the studies on parent intervention since 1979 have investigated the effects of a parent *involvement* approach while only 16.7% utilized a school–family *partnership* approach. Although this partnership approach is being employed more frequently, it is still fairly new, and previous research has failed to operationalize variables of interest (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Moorman et al., 2012). This case study is an attempt to describe some of the variables of interest which could be further defined in future qualitative or quantitative studies.

Another gap in the parent involvement/partnership research is examining different geographical contexts. According to Moorman et al. (2012), more than one-third of the studies did not report the type of community where the study was conducted, while many of the remaining studies were conducted in urban areas (31%) followed by rural (15.8%). This study examines the less-observed suburban communities which constituted only 5.3% of the studies that reported location.

The age group is another gap in the current literature. Only 22.6% of the studies on parental involvement or partnership models examined a preschool setting, despite the documented importance of establishing positive family relationships early in the child's academic experience (Jeynes, 2014; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). The increased public scrutiny due to the expansion toward universal pre-K calls for specific research in preschool settings. The current study was conducted in a suburban preschool serving children in the 2.5- to 6-year-old range.

In terms of focus, relationships are the hallmark of the partnership model, which attempts to define various aspects of these relationships or "relational components" (Epstein, 2010; Moorman et al., 2012). The least common relational components reported in the literature since 1979 are creating a welcoming school environment and enhancing parents' cognitions about the school, at less than 5% each (Moorman et al., 2012). The current study examines the research question: How does this suburban preschool program build integrated school–family partnerships? To answer this question, three themes will be examined: the multidimensional nature of relationships, creating a welcoming school environment, and enhancing parents' cognitions about school.

The Setting: Millcreek School

The Community

Millcreek School (Note: the school and all personal names used are pseudonyms) is a private preschool located in a region that is still feeling the effects of the financial recession. This community is a small suburb on the fringe of a large metropolitan statistical area, as defined by U.S. Census Bureau (2010). Located 70 miles from a large northeastern city, there are few job opportunities, unless one is willing to endure a lengthy commute to work closer to the city. The small town of less than 3,000 people is surrounded by rural areas. Since Millcreek enrolls students from all over the county, demographic data from the county is useful in understanding the community composition. The last census (2010) recorded about 57,000 residents in the county, with a slight decline since 2000. Diversity is somewhat lacking in this community, with the overwhelming majority of the residents being Caucasian (82.5%), followed by Hispanic or Latino (9.5%), and Black or African American (6.2%).

The major challenge in this community is economic. Although the median household income is $58,474, the unemployment rate is one of the highest in the state, hovering between 8.8–10.4% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Twenty-two percent of the population has a college degree, compared to the statewide figure of 27% (U.S. Census, 2010). Although the community as a whole is considered economically disadvantaged, the parents at the Millcreek School are disproportionately educated and middle to upper class, compared to the rest of the community.

Another challenge, perhaps stemming from economic challenges and a high unemployment rate, is a low level of preschool attendance. According to local school district data, only 40% of 4-year-old children attend preschool. This is a low level of preschool participation, compared to the 64% of the nation's 4-year-olds attending some form of preschool (NCES, 2010). It is understandable that families with financial challenges cannot afford preschool, but there has not been an overwhelming response to the school district's free preschool program either. The public school district preschool program started a few years ago for children with special needs and those who qualified financially. Recently, the district expanded their half-day program to all 4-year-old children in the district. Despite the district's expansion, preschool enrollment for 4-year-olds remains low. This finding is concerning since kindergarten retention rates have increased in this district, and the Common Core Learning Standards have raised the bar in terms of what is expected of young elementary school children. As one school district representative stated, "We are trying…preschool is here, and it is free. Why parents are not availing themselves is baffling." Despite

this trend, it is noteworthy to examine the 40% of families who do send their children to preschool. These children attend the public preschool, daycares with a preschool curriculum, and private preschools like Millcreek.

The School

Millcreek has a history of being family-oriented. The school was founded eight years ago by a small group of friends who were trained abroad in Montessori methods. Although there have been setbacks—namely, the untimely death of one of the founders, some contention between the remaining owners, and declining enrollment—the school has survived. Millcreek is private and financially supported through tuition. Although the tuition at Millcreek is among the lowest for Montessori schools in the region and comparable to other private preschools in the area, it is out of reach for many of the families in the county. Similar Montessori schools in the city have tuition three times the rate at Millcreek. Millcreek has not raised the tuition in four years and has a program in place to assist presently enrolled families under financial strain. Even so, enrollment dropped from an all-time high in 2008–2009 of 38 children to a low of 13 students in 2013–2014. As a result, two teachers and an assistant have been laid off, and the school is operating with a restricted budget.

At the time of this study, the student body was composed of four females and nine males, ranging in age from 2.5 to 6 years old. Consistent with the Montessori model of multiage grouping, the children were grouped together with the same teachers in this two-room school. The director manages the administrative aspects of the school on a part-time basis but is rarely on site. There are three female teachers: one head teacher who is Montessori-certified, Ms. Beth, and two part-time, volunteer assistants, Ms. Sue (a parent) and Ms. Ann (a parent of a Millcreek graduate), both of whom have backgrounds in the field of education and share the position of assistant teacher.

Since Millcreek adheres to a specific curricular model, it is important to understand the classroom setting which is quite distinct from other preschool curricula. The Montessori model is known for its emphasis on independent learning and its supportive community, preparing children to grow into lifelong learners and responsible citizens of the world (American Montessori Society, 2013). The Montessori model is highly individualized and encourages independence, so children work at their own pace; this is a major benefit of multiage grouping. Children choose their own "work," so they feel a sense of ownership and control over their learning. The materials are designed for a developmental progression in five areas of Montessori education: language, practical life, mathematics, sensorial, and geography/cultural studies (American Montessori Society, 2013). During the long "work" period (2–3 hours),

the teacher works individually with children on their progress in various areas. The day also consists of group "circle time" and social time at recess and lunch. The Montessori program at Millcreek has impressive results. Last year, 90% of the graduating preschoolers (4- and 5-year-olds) at Millcreek were already at a kindergarten reading level or higher. Traditional academic skills are not the only focus of learning. Teachers emphasize the development of social and emotional skills and integrate themes of sustainability, active lifestyles, and healthy eating throughout the year. The well-rounded approach to learning considers the development of the whole child.

Most relevant to this study, the Montessori philosophy encourages family partnerships and the use of Montessori principles in the home as a valuable bridge to what the child learns in the classroom (American Montessori Society, 2013). Indeed, there is a focused effort to build this "valuable bridge" between home and school. Every single family at Millcreek has contributed time or resources (other than tuition) in some way to Millcreek. This level of involvement exists in sharp contrast to the surrounding community, in which preschool education is not necessarily a priority or a possibility for many families.

Methodology

This case study employed an inductive participatory action research approach to examine how a preschool program fostered positive and integrated school–family partnerships. The case study as a qualitative method is appropriate for inductive, exploratory research that can then be used to formulate more specific questions or identify trends (Creswell, 2013). The case study was inductive since it began with the general research question: "How does this suburban preschool program build integrated school–family partnerships?" During eight months of data collection, institutional background information and data were collected first. Then, interviews of the 3 teachers and 18 parents (at least one parent of each child) were conducted. The focus of the interview was the parents' perceptions of their experiences at Millcreek, specifically their role as partners in their child's education. Classroom observation occurred 48 times, including drop-off and pick-up interactions. In addition, observation included 12 family events, meetings outside of school hours, and two meetings at the public school district. A memorandum of understanding between the school and researcher was approved, and IRB approval was obtained.

Three forms of data were triangulated to establish themes: observations at the school, interviews with teachers and parents, and documents from the school and surrounding community, including demographic data and institutional records. The discussions from the interviews were audiorecorded and

transcribed verbatim. Observations were documented with the observer's notes. All data collection and analysis was personally conducted by the principal investigator. To assure consistency and trustworthiness, observation criteria was stipulated and a thoughtful set of questions was used with at least one parent of every child at Millcreek, ensuring diversity of perspectives and information-rich sampling. The qualitative data was then systematically coded and analyzed to find similar themes from all three sources: the institutional documentation, the interviews, and the observations. During the course of exploring this data, open coding was used to identify three main themes: nurturing multidimensional relationships, creating a welcoming school environment, and enhancing parents' cognitions about school. Once these themes were established, axial coding was used to investigate the connections between the evidence and these three themes. At the conclusion of data analysis, member checks were conducted with the teacher, the director, and most of the parents to ensure that the findings were sound and credible.

Findings

This case study revealed three major themes in answer to the question of how Millcreek built integrated school–family partnerships:

1. Multidimensional relationships occurred across all six components of Epstein's (2001) framework for school–family-community partnerships.
2. Creating a welcoming environment was essential to the development of the relationship.
3. Enhancing parents' cognitions about preschool education and their role in the child's learning resulted in the buy-in necessary for a true partnership.

Multidimensional Relationships

The multidimensional nature of the relationships between the families and the school was critical in terms of understanding how the school–family partnership functions. These relationships extended beyond the typical teacher–parent interactions focused on the child's performance in the classroom to include other interactions, both professional and social in nature. Joyce Epstein's six structural components of school–family–community partnerships (2001, 2010) were used as a foundation to explore these relationships: communication, parenting, learning at home, volunteering, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Millcreek was successful in creating parental involvement in all six components of school–family–community partnerships by establishing rich relationships with families.

Communication

The cornerstone of a strong relationship is open communication; this was evident at Millcreek. There was a well-attended Back to School Night, newsletters were sent home every two weeks, and parent–teacher conferences were conducted twice a year. Aside from these typical activities, the most meaningful form of communication in terms of building relationships was informal daily chats at drop-off and pick-up. The assistant took children to find work while the head teacher, Ms. Beth, talked with each and every parent, which was not difficult in a small school like Millcreek. Ms. Beth described this as "a necessary part of what we do in Montessori education. It also makes it much easier to bring up issues when you feel comfortable with the parents." Indeed, problems could be handled immediately, instead of waiting for a phone call or conference. The observations revealed many topics covered during these daily chats. Parents asked questions, updated the teacher on situations at home, and just chatted socially. Many conversations extended to topics beyond the classroom. Ms. Beth has lived in this community for many years, has three grown children who went through the school district, and knows many of the families in contexts outside of school. This kind of community presence fostered the growth of relationships that extended beyond typical parent–teacher conversation. For example, this multidimensional nature was captured in an interaction observed at the end of a school day. Ms. Beth and the parent of 4-year-old Cathy covered the following topics: Cathy's work that day, her unwillingness to share with others, the upcoming Easter parade, places to get a good pedicure, their common friend's difficult divorce, and family plans for the Easter break. The conversation bounced back and forth between a parent–teacher and friend–friend conversation. This complexity allowed each to know the other more deeply and built a foundation of mutual respect, which is essential for communication and partnership.

The partnership approach focuses not only on the methods of communication, but *how* this communication occurs and develops over time. Over eight months of observation, specifically of the new parents at Millcreek, revealed that brief daily updates often evolved into multidimensional relationships. In fact, several parents characterized Ms. Beth as not only a teacher, but a friend by the end of the year. Much of the multidimensional relationship-building with parents at Millcreek had to do with the attitude of the teacher, Ms. Beth. Ms. Beth is funny and light-hearted. The parents overwhelmingly "love" Ms. Beth. As one parent described, "Beth is so special. She has the perfect preschool personality…bubbly and fun, but stern if need be." Ms. Beth made en effort with *every* parent, even those who were not as involved as others, which is not always the case in classrooms with more students. This warm, open approach

supports the notion that the teacher's attitude is a key ingredient for open communication and meaningful relationships.

Parenting

While some schools shy away from offering parenting advice, several parents actually sought it out from Ms. Beth. Parenting happens outside of the classroom, so it follows that this is part of a multidimensional relationship. Often, when there was an issue at school, such as a behavioral problem or potty training mishap, Ms. Beth immediately discussed it with the parent at pick-up. She explained what happened, how she or the assistant handled it, and then asked the parent how it is handled at home. This last piece recognized the parents' efforts and, according to Ms. Beth, was meant to "find out what parents do and how I may help." This collaboration to address the challenges of parenting a preschool-age child invited the teacher into the realm of the home, another example of the potential of the multidimensionality of the family–teacher relationship.

An interesting example of the parenting component occurred during a conversation between Ms. Beth and Leon's mother. Leon was a 4-year-old boy who just enrolled at the school during the study year and had a severe speech delay. He was impulsive, and many children did not understand him, which often led to frustration. One day during his third month of school he was particularly disruptive, and when redirected, he threw his work across the room and stomped away, refusing to rejoin the class activities. Ms. Beth told Leon's mother about the behavior and explained that she asked Leon to rejoin the class when he was ready; she also had a discussion with him about appropriate ways to "use his words" and handle his frustration. When Ms. Beth asked the mother if she ever saw this behavior at home, Leon's mother began sobbing, explaining that her husband was deployed to Iraq again and that she was "on her own" with Leon and her 7-year-old daughter, all while trying to work nights as a nurse. She was mentally and physically exhausted and had no energy to deal with Leon's behavior. This conversation, while emotional and painful, built much rapport and allowed Ms. Beth some valuable insight as to the cause of Leon's behavior. Leon's father, the disciplinarian of the family, was now absent; this negatively affected Leon. Ms. Beth offered empathy and support to the family. She gave Leon's mother an idea of how she and the assistants handled Leon's behavior and encouraged her to try the same at home, evidence of parenting support. Ms. Beth also connected Leon's mother with a babysitter who could help out so she could get some rest. Parenting support is important but best given and received in the context of a close and trusting relationship, which is why it seemed successful at Millcreek.

This openness to parental advice was not universally accepted. There was one notable exception, the mother of 3-year-old Rose. This mother was extremely involved with the school; she started a parent gardening group and always volunteered. However, about six months into the school year, Rose was having difficulty staying focused and was easily frustrated. Ms. Beth noticed the behavior and asked her mother about routines at home, such as bedtime, eating patterns, and recent changes. Rose's mother asked for Ms. Beth's advice and admitted that she and her husband did not really have a set bedtime for Rose. Often, she would stay up until 10:00 or 11:00 p.m. with them. The more Ms. Beth heard about Rose's home life, the more she realized that it was a very disorganized and chaotic environment for a 3-year-old child. Ms. Beth gently suggested ways to institute a routine and explained why it would benefit Rose. The mother became very defensive, ended her involvement with the school, and pulled Rose out of school, opting to keep her home until the new school year began. A few weeks before ending her involvement with the school, Rose's mother said in an interview, "I know [Ms. Beth] means well, and she is an awesome teacher, but she has no right butting into the way I raise my child." Ms. Beth was saddened by the family's decision and said, "It is not fair to Rose, and I am sorry they made that choice out of anger." Even though Rose's mother sought out Ms. Beth's suggestions on how to handle Rose's behavior, some parents are not open to such advice. In this case, Rose's mother perceived the parenting suggestions negatively, which had an unfortunate effect on Rose and the family's involvement with Millcreek. Although parenting is a delicate topic, Ms. Beth's strong rapport with the parents usually led to positive outcomes.

Learning at Home

Closely related to parenting is learning at home. Again, the parents at Millcreek had that level of comfort with the teacher to step outside of the child's classroom and extend the learning to home. Ms. Beth made extraordinary efforts to educate parents about the benefits of preschool, Montessori methods, and how parents could support learning at home. This effort demonstrated to parents that Ms. Beth "really cares about [the] child, not just in school but outside of school, too." Ms. Beth admitted that there was an added benefit for her too: "If parents reinforce what we do in school at home, then life is easier on both fronts." At the Back to School Night, Ms. Beth gave an overview of the Montessori methods and even demonstrated some of the practical life work. She invited parents to try it out with their children and explained the benefits of individualized, independent learning. Ms. Beth provided simple suggestions to reinforce learning at home in her newsletters and as reminders at drop-off and pick-up. These suggestions included letting the child dress him or herself,

allowing the child to pour his or her own drink from a small pitcher, talking often to the children, reading at home, and many others.

For the older children, Ms. Beth was receptive to the concerns about children being ready for kindergarten, particularly the homework part. The parents' concerns were valid, given the high standards in the district's kindergarten program. Ms. Beth started sending home low-pressure "homework folders" for the 4- and 5-year-old children to bridge learning at school with learning to be reinforced at home. One parent of three children, all of whom attended Millcreek, stated, "I am always in awe of what I learn every year with my children. I knew Montessori was great for kids, but I am still learning about more I can do at home." Supporting parents, both in terms of parenting and education, is an important piece of building the relational components of the school–family partnership and empowers parents to be active partners in their child's learning.

Volunteering

Epstein's volunteering component was evident at Millcreek and allowed parents to do more than just support their child's learning. Volunteering provided the opportunity for parents to become involved in another dimension of the school–family relationship—to become part of the school. Every single parent volunteered in some way. Examples included buying cleaning supplies and snacks when the budget was tight, organizing fundraisers, and sending in recyclable materials that the children used for art projects. Six of the 13 families volunteered more extensively. In the school's lowest enrollment year, parents feared the school would close and "really stepped up." In Ms. Beth's words, "We wouldn't have survived this year if it weren't for the parents." One parent designed the school's new website. Another parent designed an advertisement which was placed in church bulletins and local papers. A father of one of the children built a new sandbox for the playground. Another father repainted all of the walls over the summer and did several necessary repairs. Other parents were "guests," such as a firemen, musician, and dentist visiting the class. It should be noted that one of the classroom assistants is actually a parent volunteer who used to be a preschool teacher. The other assistant had a child who finished at Millcreek last year. The assistants worked out a schedule so that they split up the days each week. Having the volunteer assistants certainly saved money. In addition, if both assistants were out, there were three parents on "back-up" call as assistants, as well as Ms. Beth's own daughters who were available if necessary.

When asked why they volunteer their time, money, talents, and efforts, parents generally had the same responses: "to support this wonderful school and Ms. Beth;" "because this school is great;" "because Ms. Beth has done so much

for the kids." Some parents cited their fear that the school would close, and others wanted to be involved in their child's education. Several expressed remorse that they did not have more time to help out. The high level of volunteering built parental commitment to the school and strengthened relationships between the teacher, assistants, and parents who volunteered. Volunteering also provided opportunities for fostering depth in the multidimensional relationships, as parents and teachers were often observed joking and interacting socially while building, painting, and helping out. At a summer "painting party," five families (including students and siblings), the director, and the teachers congregated to repaint the bookshelves, furniture, and walls. There was laughing, poking fun, and a real sense that "we were all here to fix up *our* school." This level of commitment is above average, even for preschool, where there is generally a much higher level of volunteering.

Decision Making

Building partnerships with families must be a two-way street. Ms. Beth and the director realized that parental decision making is an important part of investing in the school. Ms. Beth welcomed input from every parent. Ms. Beth explained her approach: "I don't want the parents who always help out to be the only ones having a say. Every parent deserves a say in how this school is helping their child. Even those parents who can't help, or those who don't feel comfortable in schools, I try to get their two cents at drop-off or pick-up." This effort to solicit parents' input was empowering for parents and often began open and honest communication between Ms. Beth and the parents.

The parents made decisions on two levels: large-scale, and individually regarding their own children. Parents who volunteered were most involved in large-scale decision-making. For example, Ms. Sue and Ms. Ann, the two mothers who were assistants, learned Ms. Beth's methods and approach, especially to behavior, and reinforced it. At first, the volunteer assistants asked many questions and had limited responsibilities in the classroom, but this changed over time. The assistants then gained more autonomy as they could make decisions about handling behavior. After six months working together, Ms. Beth took suggestions from Ms. Sue, the parent assistant who was a former preschool teacher. For example, they noticed that some of the older 4- and 5-year-old children would choose work that was well below their ability level. Ms. Beth and Ms. Sue worked out a system to encourage these children to work with Ms. Beth first and then do the art projects with the assistant. The parents involved in designing the website and ads made decisions about how the school was portrayed but made these decisions with input from Ms. Beth. Not all parents were able to dedicate so much time to the school, but Ms. Beth wanted every voice heard. She had a "Parent Brainstorming Night" once a year,

at which parents came to share ideas about the school and brainstorm ways to improve it.

Not all parents made these schoolwide decisions, mostly due to time constraints. However, each parent had decision making capacities in terms of their individual child's own progress. Ms. Beth often asked at the conferences, "What do you think your child needs work on?" One parent whose child had a speech delay asked Ms. Beth to include some of the child's speech exercises in school. Ms. Beth not only reinforced the sounds with the child individually, but made up a song about "Cupcake Counting" for the entire class to reinforce the /k/ sound on which the child was working. Including parents in small or large decisions only reinforced the idea that they have a partnership and a two-way relationship based on open communication, respect, and shared power.

Collaborating With the Community

Epstein's school–family–community model (2001) extends beyond individuals to include the larger community as an integral part of the child's education. Although this study focused on the school and family components, Millcreek utilized community assets, specifically by taking field trips, walking around the neighborhood, and enjoying guests such as firemen, park rangers, dentists, and even an opera singer. Ms. Beth also sought out community connections in response to parents' concerns regarding kindergarten readiness. She made an effort to connect with the school district and attended district meetings so that children were more prepared to enter elementary school. As Ms. Beth explained, "Even though we are true to the Montessori model, we have to face the reality that the children will enter public school. The children are always ready academically, but there is a social adjustment." Indeed, one parent whose older child recently entered elementary school described an adjustment from the independent choices of Montessori and the structured atmosphere of the traditional public school: "It was a totally different world. He was bored with the work, but confined to his seat!" One public school principal responded by placing the children from Millcreek with "more relaxed" teachers who were familiar with the Montessori method. Even though the focus of this study was the family and school aspects of the partnership model, it should be noted that Millcreek collaborated with community resources in the local area, especially to act on parents' concerns.

In all six of Epstein's structural components of school–family–community partnerships, there was a common thread of parents and teachers coming together to build strong relationships. These relationships were multidimensional, meaning that parents and teachers saw each other in multiple contexts, had several levels of involvement, and experienced different types of relationships.

For example, Ms. Beth's daughters babysat for several parents, some parents attended Ms. Beth's church, and children and parents often saw the teachers around town. One parent described the overlapping relationships: "It's a small town, and everybody knows your name, so the relationships are multidimensional…Ms. Beth is a friend, a teacher, a fellow parent. Ms. Sue [the assistant] is a fellow parent, Sunday school teacher, and helper at the school. Ms. Ann is one of my neighbors. I think it's amazing." As the partnership model advocates, we must look beyond the structure of the family's involvement to examine *how* this involvement occurs and the relationships that result. At Millcreek, it is evident that school–family relationships are built on many dimensions.

Creating a Welcoming Environment

A welcoming environment is the foundation and starting point for building the multidimensional relationships described above. Millcreek was more than welcoming; it was "home-like," as one parent described it. The most striking evidence of the welcoming environment was that Millcreek has never done advertising until the study year when enrollment dipped to a critical low point. Every child came to Millcreek by word of mouth, and only a handful over the years decided not to attend after the initial visit. From the family's perspective, the first encounter with the school would be a phone call inquiring about the school, usually after hearing about it from a neighbor or friend. During the initial phone call, the teacher arranged an individualized tour of the school. Observations of two such tours demonstrated that the welcoming environment was a major priority. The teacher spent 30 minutes to an hour with the prospective family. The child was free to explore the materials; this served as an initial assessment of the child's abilities. The parents and teacher engaged in conversation about the child, the parents' assessment of their child's strengths and weaknesses, what the parents wanted out of preschool, the Montessori approach, particulars about the program, and background information. This "chit-chat" helped the teacher get to know the family and demonstrated that she valued the parents' and the child's perspectives. When asked about their initial visit to the school, a new parent said, "It just seemed so right. They made me and [my child] feel so welcome and comfortable. Ms. Beth spent so much time with *us* and made *us* feel important." This investment of spending so much time getting to know prospective families created a welcoming environment.

The physical environment was also welcoming. There were small chairs and couches and a kitchen, in which children wash their own dishes after snack. The décor was all the children's artwork. Every material had its place on a designated shelf. This orderly environment and emphasis on purposeful materials is a landmark of Montessori education, but also sent the message that "we must

care for our home," which the assistants and teacher often said. Ms. Beth often referred to the class as her "school family." Children were encouraged to "clean [their] workspace" and were involved in cleaning up the playground, planting flowers, and polishing silver. As children talked to their families about their efforts to care for their school and their friends, families often realized the importance of the school environment to the child.

Families were an important part of this school environment and were always welcome. Several parents also described Millcreek as a "family." Indeed, over half of the children had older siblings at the school, and several more had younger siblings coming in the next year. Siblings were invited to all school events, such as the Halloween parade and other holiday celebrations. It was common to see toddlers participating in these events alongside their older siblings. The Back to School night had 90–100% participation. Parental observations were welcome as long as they were not disruptive. Parents lingered at drop off and pick up, often for 5–20 minutes. During this time, children showed parents their work and school materials. Parents had lengthy chats with one another at drop-off and pick-up which became the foundation of many friendships between the parents. One parent talked extensively about this aspect of the welcoming environment: "We parents have become such friends. Face it, I'm a mother of three with no life outside of my children. It is nice to see other mothers and socialize after school for a while. My oldest is in third grade now, and I am still friends with parents from his preschool class. It's just not like this in elementary school." Certainly, the closer parents became, the more "family-like" the school felt. The welcoming environment brought families to the school, oriented children and families to the school, and resulted in dynamic relationships between teachers and parents and among parents.

Enhancing Parents' Cognitions About School

Another theme related to how Millcreek fosters successful school–family partnerships is enhancing parents' cognitions about preschool education and their role in the child's learning. This effort results in the buy-in necessary for a true partnership. The more parents saw value in preschool, particularly the Montessori model at Millcreek, the more willing they were to invest time and effort into the school and their child's education.

The families at Millcreek generally valued early childhood education, evident by their willingness to pay tuition and pursue preschool in a community in which preschool participation was relatively low. However, not all parents had a high level of formal education, and none had expertise in the unique Montessori methodology. Millcreek made an effort to educate *all* parents, regardless of their educational background. On Back to School Night and also

during the individualized initial visits, the teacher explained the physical, social, and cognitive benefits of Montessori education and provided real-life examples. One of Ms. Beth's favorite examples was the Practical Life "pouring" activity. She demonstrated to parents how the "pouring work" is done by methodically picking up the small pitcher with the right hand, holding the cup with her left hand, and pouring liquid into a glass, while taking her time. This pouring work not only fostered fine motor skills necessary for writing, coordination, and concentration, but made the child more independent at home. For older children, Ms. Beth discussed the class' recent interest in the "bank," where children exchanged ones, tens, or hundreds for larger units, learning the foundations of place value. In both verbal and written communication, Ms. Beth conveyed an appreciation for the fundamentals of early childhood education, which resulted in an increased awareness about the importance and impact that early childhood education has on the child's future. One parent who did not have much formal education remarked after the Back to School Night, "I learned so much. I just want my little girl to do better than I did. Now I know some things I can do at home with her."

Parental buy-in does not only occur on the academic front, but for social and emotional skills as well, which are a major focus of the curriculum. Many parents were open about raising behavioral concerns with Ms. Beth, and she was just as open, often telling parents about how children were encouraged to express their emotions, regulate their reactions, and "use their words" in school. Children were asked daily how they felt and encouraged to express themselves, which was feasible with such a small class. The structure of children being able to select their own work fostered enthusiasm, comfort with the setting, and ownership of their work. As a result, behavioral issues were minimal and handled quickly and respectfully. One child, Adam, who had major behavioral challenges, made dramatic changes in only two months at Millcreek. Adam was expelled from his former preschool program, and the parents were told to take him to a psychiatrist. Although his behavior was quite disruptive at first, he learned to express and regulate his emotions in a positive way through the teachers' consistency, preventative efforts, and individualized intervention. His mother described the change: "I can't believe the change with Adam. Three months ago, we were considering medication and a psychiatrist. Now, he likes coming to school, and he is learning. I think it is the smaller class size and the individual consideration Ms. Beth gives him…she accepts who he is and works from there." Many parents echoed similar sentiments that behavioral issues were handled well, and they learned something in the process. Social–emotional development is critical at this age, and Ms. Beth wanted parents to understand best practices to foster it.

The time the teacher took to educate parents about the value of what the children were doing was well-invested but had to be approached very delicately. One parent described Ms. Beth's approach: "She is great with the kids and all, but my kid has a bad day, and I get a bad report from Ms. Beth. Don't get me wrong, I want to know if my kid is screwing up, but she can be so blunt sometimes." This same parent, although not happy about the "bluntness" of Ms. Beth's approach, benefitted by learning about setting limits at home and different ways to handle his daughter's physical reactions to the word "no." Ms. Beth realized that "some parents think their children are perfect, but it is not good or bad—it is a matter of normal development for children to test limits. We just have to react in an appropriate way and prevent what we can." Ms. Beth tried to stress with parents on numerous occasions that behavioral problems are developmental and manageable, not a good or bad quality of the child. Parenting is a journey of continuous learning, and Ms. Beth tried to share some of her insights with parents, which most parents valued immensely.

Teaching parents about what children are doing in school not only built relationships between teachers and parents, but also encouraged parent–child conversations. No longer did parents ask, "What did you do in school all day?" and get the standard "Nothing" response. The parents knew what was done in school and could then have meaningful conversations with their children, whether about academic learning or behavior. Pick-up observations often included children pulling their parents into the classroom to show them what they did in school or a check-in with Ms. Beth about a previously discussed behavior. Parents felt they were a part of what was happening in school and could talk meaningfully with their children about their day, thereby building positive schemas about school performance. The result was a feeling of commitment and being an active part of the child's first educational experience. This buy-in resulted in a stronger parental commitment to the child's education, which is invaluable in the long run.

Discussion: A Model for Integrated School–Family Partnerships

This case study illustrated three best practices for building integrated school–family partnerships at the preschool level. As the Findings section describes, all three elements were evident at Millcreek: fostering multidimensional relationships, creating a welcoming school environment, and enhancing parents' cognitions about school. In addition, these factors were examined in the context of a suburban preschool, which is underrepresented in the research on school–family partnerships (Moorman et al. 2012). Although the Montessori model invites family partnership and Millcreek was a small school in a close-

knit community, there are some outcomes that contribute to the exploration of the nature of integrated school–family partnerships.

Multidimensional relationships between the families and teacher extended beyond the typical teacher–parent interactions focused on the child's performance in the classroom to include other interactions, both professional and social in nature. Joyce Epstein's six components of school–family–community partnerships (2001) were evident at Millcreek. Of course, Millcreek parents were involved, but the success extends beyond parental *involvement*. It was not just conferences, newsletters, and volunteering. It was *how* these structural components were executed. Millcreek was an example of how the relational components of the school–family *partnership* work and contribute to student success. The relationships made all the difference—they were deep, many-layered relationships, and there was an effort to include *all* parents, thereby promoting equity and trying to avoid some of the issues that can arise with parent involvement. Larocque et al. (2011) identified teachers' attitudes as a major factor in addressing barriers to successful parent communication. Certainly, Ms. Beth's bubbly personality, openness to family involvement, and responsiveness to the parents' concerns were critical pieces of building these relationships. It was also helpful that Ms. Beth had a presence and was rooted in the community, so parents knew her outside of school. The director was also supportive of family involvement, reinforcing the notion that administration also plays a critical role in building family partnerships (Lines et al., 2010). The emphasis on communication and involvement was constant and evident through the power of the daily chats which built rapport and relationships over time. Parents then felt comfortable raising concerns, seeking parenting advice, and volunteering or contributing to decision-making which in turn resulted in greater commitment to the school.

The welcoming, home-like environment at Millcreek was the positive start for these relationships. School context matters when it comes to involving parents (McNeal, 2014). At Millcreek, the message was loud and clear: Families are welcome, and we are in this together. Each family was welcomed individually with the preadmission visit—time well-invested into beginning a relationship. The schedule permitted informal conversations at the beginning and end of the day as the assistant started children with work. These informal conversations not only helped the teachers build rapport, but also encouraged socialization among the parents and built bonds between the families. This practice is important, since social network size among parents predicts levels of parental involvement (Sheldon, 2002). The comfortable, welcoming environment provided an ideal climate for building positive relationships.

The third finding revealed that enhancing parental cognitions about school encourages parental buy-in to the idea that they are an important piece of the child's education and the school. Ms. Beth continually educated parents about aspects of the children's development, how they learned at school, and what could be done at home. Since social–emotional and academic development are critical at the preschool age, parent involvement should be age appropriate (Denham, 2006; Jeynes, 2014). As parents learned about the Montessori model (including its directed focus at various critical periods of the child's academic and social development) and saw results and benefits to their children, there was increased "buy-in." Parents became excited and empowered to do at home things similar to what the children were doing in school. Parents valued the teacher and school as the provider of this knowledge and critical support for their child. This kind of belief resulted not only in parents supporting their child's learning at home, but also wanting to help the school they valued, especially during the study year as Millcreek struggled financially. Parental attitudes and practices provide the foundation for children's development of schemas about school performance and thus are critical determinants of children's early school experiences (Taylor et al., 2004). As parents became more a part of the school, they conveyed their positive attitude toward the school to their children. Of course, there are socioeconomic and cultural considerations related to parental attitudes and practices, but the school, and especially teachers, have the ability to enhance parents' cognitions about school which can thereby impact the child's early school experiences.

Limitations

This qualitative research focused on the particulars of school–family partnerships with an in-depth examination of Millcreek over a period of eight months. Although credible as a qualitative study, it is bound by its context, and the findings are internally generalizable to a specific population (i.e., the population at Millcreek), not necessarily applying to other schools or communities. More mothers than fathers were included in the sample. The parents all had children in the same school, so the transferability of the findings to other schools should be made cautiously. Nonetheless, the study highlights the potential importance of engaging parents and building meaningful relationships with them to support young children.

Implications

The case study at Millcreek contributes to the field by providing a successful example of school–family partnerships in a small, suburban preschool, which

has not been studied extensively in past parent involvement/family partnership literature. As universal pre-K efforts expand access, many districts, community-based organizations, and private schools are increasingly involved in educating preschool children. Preschool children and their families are unique in that their first experiences with school are formed in these critical years. It is imperative that preschool programs build meaningful and respectful relationships with all families. Millcreek was a small, close-knit school. Can such partnerships exist in larger schools? Perhaps creating networks within the school in the form of small cohorts or building a "community within a community" are options to facilitate this individualized attention and meaningful, two-way relationship-building. Larger schools could coordinate staffing so that teachers can have daily chats with family members while others get the children settled. Smaller cooperative groups of teachers and parents could be maintained over time; for example, teachers could be assigned to siblings of former students. Most importantly, teachers should be open to parent involvement, and schools should make every effort to involve all parents, especially during the first years of schooling.

Families experience a great decrease in communication between preschool and kindergarten and an even greater decrease as children progress through elementary school (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). This decline in parent involvement between preschool and kindergarten is attributed to not having an adequate foundation of interaction in preschool to support more frequent communication in kindergarten (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). A question that emerges out of this case study is: How can the partnerships built in preschool be extended to elementary school, particularly if the elementary school is separate from the preschool? Communication between the preschool and public school is a start. Ms. Beth attended school district meetings of preschool directors and made the needs of her students known. The principal responded to the different learning style of the Millcreek graduates by placing them with certain teachers who would facilitate the best transition to public school. This type of communication across schools is the start of bridging the gap between preschool and elementary school.

Another implication is the diversity that exists in schools today. The Millcreek population was relatively homogeneous—mostly Caucasian, educated, and middle to upper class. Can a positive atmosphere of family partnership exist in larger and more diverse schools? What about the questions raised regarding class differences and their role in parental involvement (Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999, Pianta & Walsh, 1996)? Lareau (1989) examines how class differences play out in terms of parental advocacy, finding that parents with less social capital are often left out of school partnerships, or even worse,

the involvement of less educated parents may even be seen as counterproductive. While the literature overwhelmingly supports parental involvement, there are issues of perspective and equity that cannot be ignored (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). When examining the partnership approach and how it can be applied in more diverse schools, the perspective of parents and students must be included, regardless of parents' perceived ability to be involved, social capacity, or level of education. Larocque et al. (2011) stated that

> parents cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group because they do not participate in the same ways; some have more of a presence in the school than do others. There is a need to move from this idea that parents are the same, with the same needs. (p. 115)

Certainly, some parents have more presence in schools than others; this was true at Millcreek, too. However, parents from all backgrounds respond positively to a welcoming environment and respectful, two-way communication (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Given that increased levels of parent involvement in schools and in the education of their children is positively correlated with increasing educational achievement, it is important to devise many different ways to foster school–family partnerships and build on the unique strengths of every family.

As preschool becomes integrated with the standard school system in the United States through the universal pre-K movement, teachers and administrators should consider the potency of school–family partnerships, specifically in building relationships with parents. Millcreek provides a powerful example of how real school–family partnerships not only benefit children, but ensure the school's success and survival. As districts scramble to find space and teachers for universal pre-K, as community-based organizations contemplate their role in building on their existing programs to include universal pre-K, as parents seek an appropriate preschool for their children, and as teachers (many new to preschool) find ways to strike a balance between the child's developmental needs and academic preparedness, let us not forget that this is "pre" school, the precursor to formalized education, the bridge between the loving comfort of home and institutionalized education. This crucial transition must be handled with care through a meaningful partnership between schools and parents.

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