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The school can function as a thriving community. The *School Community Journal* includes articles related to the school as a community of teachers, students, parents, and staff. Family–school relations, site-based management, homework, sociology of education, systems theory, the classroom community, and other topics concerning early childhood and K–12 education are covered. SCJ publishes a mix of: (1) research (original, review, and interpretation), (2) essay and discussion, (3) reports from the field, including descriptions of programs, 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

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

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Executive Editor's Comments

Every six months I receive a notice from ERIC about the top views and downloads of articles from our journal. Every time, the top article by far is one from our Spring/Summer 2005 issue titled *Communicating With Parents: Strategies for Teachers*. Last year the author of that article, Susan Graham-Clay, undertook a massive update of that article for a new generation, which our blind peer reviewers eventually accepted as the first two articles appearing in this issue. While the 2.0 article is lengthy, it covers the subject quite well. The second is on (and titled) difficult conversations with parents, and I predict that both will be incredibly valuable to both practicing and preservice teachers (and their professors and administrators).

Next, several outstanding projects are chronicled. First, Kyle Miller and her team demonstrate through a community survey process how schools have room for growth to become more father-friendly—check out both the article and the video they link near the end for inspiration. Max Zhang and his colleagues in Ohio remind us of the power of student voices for our school–family partnerships. Roz Mickelson and company depict what can happen when a university creatively partners with a middle school around STEM. Smith Hill and her team invite us to explore parental engagement at a new level, that of the newly emerging inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs.

We then have two articles discussing built space and how it affects engagement (of parents and students, respectively). The first, from Megan Smith, is situated in Australia, while the other by Gaurav and his colleagues was conducted in a settlement in Mumbai—movie fans may recognize it as the same area depicted in *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Delouche and her team describe their qualitative study revealing community cultural wealth of immigrant families. Next, Mavrides Calderon highlights the difficulties of teachers lacking newly required credentials as universal prekindergarten was adopted in New York City—insights which could be very pertinent as such programs spread throughout the country. Smith and Grant describe a family literacy program targeting diverse learners in middle school—a population much less addressed than their younger counterparts. Shenoy and colleagues share about their partnership with a rural school to support teachers implementing tiered instruction. Rains and Gann discuss the flip side of parent engagement—what do secondary teachers face when overparenting occurs? Finally, we wrap up this issue with three book reviews.

Happy reading!

Lori G. Thomas
April 2024

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Communicating With Parents 2.0: Strategies for Teachers

Susan Graham-Clay

Abstract

Home–school communication is fundamental to parent involvement and student success. This essay and discussion article outlines the broad range of opportunities currently available for teachers to communicate with parents and associated strategies. The most frequent one-way modes of communication used with parents are discussed (websites, newsletters, email, texts, apps, report cards) as well as popular two-way interaction strategies (phone calls, home visits, parent–teacher conferences, virtual meetings). Key barriers to parent–teacher communication are also discussed, including racial stereotypes, language, teacher training, technology, and time, as well as the potential impact of a pandemic. Future directions for research in the area of school–home communication are also proposed. Ultimately, every communication exchange between teachers and parents occurs within the context of what has gone before and sets the stage for future interactions.

Key Words: communication, school, home, parents, teachers, strategies, partnerships, one-way, two-way, barriers, communicate, communicating, families, family engagement, parental involvement, technology, interactions

Introduction

We all want our children to learn and to thrive in school. However, these are challenging times for both schools and families. The ongoing impacts of an international pandemic cannot be underestimated on individuals and on society

as a whole. Teachers and parents have experienced disrupted work and family lives. Students have experienced disrupted learning and social experiences. More than ever before, the demands on teachers and parents have increased, economic pressures are significant, and time is at a premium for everyone. These increased stressors reinforce the need for better understanding and closer connections between teachers and parents built upon effective communication strategies to support all students.

Version one of this article was written a number of years ago (Graham-Clay, 2005). This second version describes the modes of communication between teachers and parents now in use some 20 years later. Several traditional modes of communication continue (e.g., parent–teacher conferences, report cards) while new technologies have dramatically changed the communication landscape. Technology has influenced the speed and cost of communication in addition to the quality and accessibility, the nature of the information that is shared (e.g., breaking news), as well as a change in style of communication over time (Alhadlaq, 2016). For example, in the current context, communication is often based on shorter, more concise bits of information versus a more detailed conversation. According to Kraft and Bolves (2022), new mobile technology is fundamentally changing the ways in which schools and teachers communicate with their parent community.

The purpose of this essay and discussion article is to outline key considerations, skills, and strategies that will support teachers to maximize the current communication opportunities with parents. The term "parent" used within is inclusive of designated adults who are responsible to care for a child and who would be the key person to communicate with the child's teacher (i.e., biological parent, guardian, foster parent, grandparent, etc.).

Partnering With Parents

Partnerships with parents have long been considered essential to the education of children. Epstein's work has been foundational to our understanding of the many types of parent involvement (Epstein, 1995, 2010; Epstein et al., 2019). Based on decades of research, Epstein et al. (2019) noted that "when students have support from school, home, and community, they are more likely to feel secure and cared for, build positive attitudes and school behaviors, work to achieve their full potential, and stay in school" (p. 14). Communicating is one of the six parent involvement strategies outlined in Epstein's framework. In fact, teacher communication skills have been described as the strongest predictor of parent involvement (Gisewhite et al., 2021; Park & Holloway, 2018).

Epstein and her associates described the communication function as the need to "design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school

communications about school programs and children's progress" (Epstein et al., 2019, p. 19). They highlighted the importance of viewing the school as a "homeland" that reflects an inclusive approach involving mutual respect, shared leadership, and ongoing communication. The expected results of an effective communication strategy include benefits for students, parents, and teachers. Epstein et al. (2019) suggested that "clear and useful" communication with parents will increase interactions between teachers and parents, promote better awareness and monitoring of student progress and behavior, foster a better understanding of school policies and programs (for parents and students), and enable teachers to elicit and better understand parental views regarding their child's learning progress (p. 201).

New frameworks for family engagement have also been proposed that have implications for school–home communication. Goodall (2022) described parent engagement as a "process to be lived" (p. 88) involving both relationship and action (versus an outcome). Within this framework, communication is considered key to the relationship that exists between teachers and parents who are both active partners in the child's learning. Goodall's framework defined home–school communication as a "process that supports the exchange of information, ideas, and understandings between school staff and families, in support of all aspects of learning" (p. 84).

A multitiered model of family engagement has also been proposed in which practices, services, and supports are categorized into different tiers available to staff and families in a flexible manner as needed (Bachman & Boone, 2022). The *universal* tier reflects engagement opportunities that exist for all families (such as parent–teacher conferences). The *tailored* tier focuses on groups who have common needs (such as parents whose work schedules prevent attendance at traditional conferences). The *intensive* tier provides unique opportunities to engage families with individualized needs (such as regular check-in meetings to review their child's progress). The authors suggested that the key is determining when to apply a particular tier to ensure the focus is on doing "better" rather than on doing more. This approach will require teachers to employ communication strategies that are flexible and adaptable based on the level of tiered approach needed for the parent community and for individual parents within that community.

Communicating With Parents

Communication has been defined as "the process of exchanging information between or among individuals, groups, institututions, and/or organizations in oral, written, or sign forms through any available media" (Nwogbaga et al., 2015, p. 33). Communication is complex and involves the sending and

receiving of information. Schools and teachers have many reasons to communicate with their parent community. General information may be shared regarding school policies and services as well as school-based activities and events. Classroom specific information may be shared with parents regarding activities and initiatives, assignments, projects, special events, as well as individual student progress and concerns. When schools communicate with parents, the information is typically shared in spoken or written form.

Communication can also be nonverbal in nature. The smiling face of the office staff greeting the parent registering their child for the first time, the artwork in the hallways, and the welcome sign at the door including in the languages spoken in the community are all subtle but important forms of communication (Chambers, 1998; Jones, 2010). The "Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through Tool Kit" is a user-friendly guide for schools to create an environment that will encourage family involvement (Moritz, 2018). The tool kit outlines four components of a welcoming atmosphere including the physical environment, practices and policies, personal interactions, as well as written materials and communications.

Communication is at the root of most misunderstandings (Fiore & Fiore, 2017). Hughes and Read (2012) encouraged teachers to "tune in" and to enter into a relationship with parents. The authors suggested that effective communication is based on learning the skills and taking the time needed to build relationships based on recognizing the feelings and perspectives of parents. Indeed, the development of a trusting relationship with parents has been highlighted "*before* there is anything substantial to talk about" (Leenders et al., 2019, p. 529). When teachers were asked how to build trust with parents, they identified the openness of the school, opportunities to communicate through informal contacts, as well as their own attempts to reach out to parents (Leenders et al., 2019). Rana (2015) also noted that effective communication is more than just exchanging information and involves "understanding the emotion behind the information" (p. 29).

A personal example illustrates the power of communication to build relationships. On the first day of school when my son was in Grade 3, he came home with a letter from his teacher. No doubt the same letter went home with every student in the class. The first two sentences were unforgettable: "I know that your child is important to you. Now that your child is in my class, your child is also important to me." This was a teacher who understood that establishing a positive and trusting relationship was key to ongoing communication throughout the school year, especially when future conversations might be difficult at times. The letter went on to explain the types of information to expect from the teacher and how to reach the teacher in the event of a concern.

The underlying message communicated to parents was one of genuine openess and shared vision.

An important question is the type of information that parents value most from teachers. Park and Holloway (2018) reported that parent involvement was enhanced by "informative" communication from the teacher regarding their child's performance at school and ways for parents to support their child, such as helping with homework. Epstein (2018) also reported that the most frequent parent request was for "information on how to help their child at home" (p. 402).

Teacher Training

Teachers play a key communication role with parents regarding their child's learning; however, many teachers do not feel adequately trained in effective communication practices. There is a need to specifically train teachers in their role as communicators and in the development of communication skills (Fuentes et al., 2017). In a survey of lecturers in a teacher training program, over 90% believed that communication skills were very important for teachers (Ortega & Fuentes, 2015). However, lack of formal training for teachers was highlighted in two cross-cultural reviews that reported the training of teachers on family–school partnerships seemed mostly dependent on the individual professors of education (Epstein, 2018; Thompson et al., 2018). Similarly, Luke and Vaughn (2022) noted that few teacher training programs require courses on collaboration or otherwise address the "interpersonal aspects" involved in teaching. Additional training needs of teachers have also been emphasized with respect to linguistic diversity (Piller et al., 2021), cross-cultural communication (Rubin et al., 2012; Weiss et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2018), as well as training in mobile communications (Burden & Naylor, 2020).

When family–school partnerships were reviewed as part of teacher training in England, communication skills were considered the most valued element to be taught, specifically preparing and running parent–teacher meetings and managing difficult conversations (Jones, 2020). Further delineation and review of the practical communication skills that will facilitate difficult conversations with parents are outlined in a companion article to this current article (Graham-Clay, 2024). In-service training for teacher trainees has focused on specific communication skills including active listening, nonverbal communication, and asking questions (Symeou et al., 2012). Tinajero et al. (2023) also described a set of practical experiences that improved the communication skills of preservice teachers with parents of English Learners. In outlining the positive effects of a communication skills training program for practicing

teachers, the skills taught were described as "learnable and developable" (Tuluhan & Yalcinkaya, 2018, p. 155).

The effect of teacher training programs on teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and family engagement practices was further explored through a meta-analysis of 39 studies (Smith & Sheridan, 2019). Results indicated that teacher training interventions had a significant and positive impact. The communication strategies described included one-way contacts between teachers and parents as well as two-way sharing of information.

Channels of Communication

"The method by which an individual communicates an idea is referred to as the communication channel" (Fiore & Fiore, 2017, p. 46). The channels of communication that occur between teachers and parents may be one-way or two-way in nature. One-way communication occurs when the information flows in one direction to provide specific details (e.g., teacher to parent or parent to teacher). A response may or may not be provided. Two-way communication involves a reciprocal dialogue that occurs between a teacher and parent in real time. Information flows both directions between the sender and the receiver. The intent is to engage in the mutual sharing of ideas and information involving interaction and feedback.

It can be a challenge for teachers to determine the strategies that will work best "for the array of messages that must be communicated while individualizing the communication form" (González & Frumkin, 2018, p. 6). When considering the most effective strategy to use, it is helpful to keep in mind the relationship that currently exists with the parent(s), how the parent(s) will best access the information to be shared, how the information may be received, and whether personal interaction is needed to support the process and the message. Teachers are also encouraged to utilize several different methods to maximize communication with all parents.

Accessibility and Readability

Accessibilty is a key consideration when written communication is sent to parents. Accessibility includes both the format of the information as well as the language of the content. Many teachers survey the parents of their students at the beginning of the school year to request their preferred mode of communication (i.e., paper or electronic) as well as their preferred language (Shamash et al., 2022). A colleague recently shared that her son in Grade 4 had a Spanish-speaking child join the class mid-year. The teacher immediately taught the students in the class how to use Google translate to interact with their

new classmate. The teacher also ensured that all texts to parents and the class website were in both English and Spanish. The teacher's inclusive approach to make information accessible to all parents was clearly evident.

A second factor related to written communication is the concept of "readability" or the ease with which a reader understands written text. Readability is based on grade level expectations. The American Medical Association (AMA) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have recommended that the readability level of patient education materials should not exceed the sixth grade level (Eltorai et al., 2014). A number of studies have shown that the estimated readability level of educational information intended for parents was far too high (i.e., Grade 8 to college level). Examples have included COVID-19 protocols on department of education websites, Individual Education Plans, written communication to parents of students with disabilities, and school choice guides across a sample of large urban districts (Gordon et al., 2022; Lo, 2014; Nagro & Stein, 2016; Stein & Nagro, 2015, respectively). Education is not alone. Studies have also shown that the readability of health information intended for parents is often too difficult, such as information related to parenting a child with a cleft palate, cochlear implant information brochures, and online materials on talking to children about sexuality (De Felippe & Kar, 2015; La Scala et al., 2022; Suleiman et al., 2016, respectively).

School district staff and teachers should not make assumptions regarding the readability level of their own written content intended for parents. There are guidelines available online to estimate the readability of text. Based on the work of DuBay (2004), readability is enhanced by the use of "culture-and-gender-neutral language" (p. 2), simple graphics (such as bulleted lists and numbered steps), as well as correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling. If the information is to be translated, it is even more important to use clear vocabulary and to reduce the complexity of text to make translated versions more accessible to parents.

Nagro (2015) created a helpful checklist designed to improve written communications for school personnel. The checklist is based on the acronym PROSE and provides strategies to improve Print, Readability, Organization, Structure, and Ease of reading. Teachers and school district staff are encouraged to use the checklist when developing any written content for parents that will be online or in print.

One-Way Communication

There are many types of one-way communication that occur between school staff and parents. One-way communication most often occurs in written form but may also include radio or TV announcements (e.g., bus cancellations)

as well as robocalls (e.g., phone message home regarding an unexcused absence). Based on the National Household Education Surveys Program data from 2016, 89% of U.S. Kindergarten through Grade 12 students had parents who reported receiving a newsletter, e-mail, memo, or notice from their child's school during the school year (McQuiggan et al., 2017). One-way communication in various forms is typically a permanent product that requires careful consideration regarding format, content, tone, and wording. It is important to recognize that once one-way communication has been released, it becomes "on the record" so to speak, and cannot easily be retracted.

Schools commonly use a number of one-way written strategies to communicate with parents. Increasingly, communication with parents is digital (electronic) in nature. Millenials have become parents themselves, and it is important to align school–home communication practices with the needs and practices of the current age group of parents with respect to technology and social media use (Ray, 2013). The U.S. Census Bureau report (Martin, 2021) "Computer and Internet use in the United States: 2018" indicated that 92% of American households had a computer in 2018, and 85% had an internet subscription. Smartphones were present in 84% of households. Given the prevalence of technology use, the term "parental e-nvolvement" was coined to describe parental online endeavors to support their child's learning and to communicate with school staff and other parents (Sad et al., 2016). That said, it still holds true that sensitive topics such as problem behaviors, health issues, and concerning incidents should be discussed directly with parents in person whenever possible (Hernandez & Leung, 2004; Kuusimäki et al., 2019).

Technology has significantly impacted the way that society communicates and education continues to respond. It is interesting to note that Zoom was founded in 2011, and Zoom 1.0 only became available to the public in 2013. The use of video technology has now become commonplace a decade later. Similarly, the Remind app was also founded in 2011, and in May 2023, the Remind website reported nearly 30 million users in 80% of U.S. schools. "In this era of electronic communication, educators are faced with a choice: Continue to use traditional methods of communication with parents and students, or co-opt contemporary electronic communication and use it to their advantage" (Marshall, 2016, p. 66).

Prior to the pandemic, teachers had already moved towards a more technology-based form of communication with parents (e.g., email, GoogleClassroom, various apps; Natale & Lubniewski, 2018). "In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, communication among families and professionals has been transformed out of necessity" (Shamash et al., 2022, p. 83). It is now recognized that rapport can be built with technoloy (Natale & Lubniewski, 2018) and

that most issues can be reasonably addressed through digital communication (Kuusimäki et al., 2019).

A number of considerations have been highlighted in the literature when communicating with parents digitally. For example, parents of children with disabilities may need more frequent contacts that are best supported by an "individualized" approach respectful of their preferred mode of communication (Shamash et al., 2022). Parents and teachers have emphasized the importance of maintaining a good balance of information when providing digital feedback (Kuusimäki et al., 2019). Administrative support for the use of digital communication has been deemed important by both parents and teachers (Bordalba & Bochaca, 2019). Technology can also support teachers who are parents themselves to connect with their own child's teacher given that scheduling conflicts may prevent them from attending events at their child's school (Sanders, 2016).

The following section provides an overview of one-way communication strategies commonly used by teachers to communicate with parents including websites, newsletters, email, texting, apps, and report cards. Teachers should ensure that their practices align with school district and union/association policies, procedures, and guidelines. As teachers consider various one-way communication strategies, it is important to develop a communication plan that provides flexibility to ensure information access for all parents.

Websites

Parents typically access school websites in advance of enrolling their child in school, for information about current school activities, or to find out what is happening in their child's class (Gilleece & Elvers, 2018). School websites have been promoted as an accessible and flexible way to foster parent involvement (Gu, 2017). School leaders are encouraged to know their audience, to incorporate unique and interesting content, to make the school website clean and simple in design as well as easy to navigate, and to expand the content through links (Williamson & Johnston, 2013). Sanders (2016) also suggested incorporating graphics to make websites more inviting.

Many teachers have also created class websites for parents to access classroom-specific information regarding their child's learning experience. In a survery of several hundred parents and teachers, participants indicated that class websites were the easiest way to provide parents with accurate information regarding daily school life, current news, the class calendar, and homework (Unal, 2008). The author noted that designing a class website was complex with limited information available regarding the type of content most desired by parents and teachers. The survey results were then used to create a suggested layout that included all the items that teachers and parents agreed upon (Unal, 2008).

A follow-up study by Roman and Ottenbreit-Leftwich (2016) noted that teachers typically did not receive coaching support on important features to include on their K–12 classroom websites. In a review of 20 teacher websites, the authors reported the typical information included:

*Name of the course/class *Contact information for the teacher (email, phone)
*Picture of the teacher *Homework assignments and homework help
*Calendar information *Tips for parents, links to resources, educational games

Based on Unal's initial recommendations, Roman and Ottenbreit-Leftwich (2016) noted that a number of desired items were missing on the websites such as field trip information, class notes, spelling lists, parent–teacher conference information, and various forms needed for school.

Specific cautions have been identified with respect to websites. Dunn (2011) reinforced the time needed for teachers to create and maintain a website and encouraged teachers to check with school district technology personnel regarding set-up. Piller et al. (2021) stressed the need to incorporate strategies to engage linguistically diverse parents including access to translation options (such as Google translate). Even when translation was provided on school websites, Piller et al. (2021) noted that accessibility was still an issue due to the "monolingual logic" that may not make sense to a non-English speaker. They suggested that school websites should include a dedicated page in each of the school's most frequently used languages as a central hub for information in that language. They also recommended placing a link to the language-specific pages on the home page in the language itself (versus listing language names in English). The importance of web accessibility for those with disabilities has also been emphasized including missing alternative text (i.e., generic desciptors of pictures may not translate accurately), empty or confusing links, as well as issues with color contrast (Huss, 2022).

Newsletters

Newsletters provide an efficient and effective way to keep parents informed about what is going on in their child's school or classroom. Traditionally, school newsletters were in paper form. Back in 2010, Masseni cautioned that the "mediums of choice" were changing, and newsletters are now typically sent to parents in digital formats.

Newsletters provide a consistent and streamlined way to share a wide array of information with parents, including school and class policies, calendars, classroom practices, announcements, learning strategies, homework help, resources, and parenting tips. Jensen (2006) suggested that newsletters facilitate a "feeling of connection to the classroom" (p. 188), and Sims (2016)

described monthly newsletters as easy, inexpensive, and the "perfect opportunity to share the highlights of your program and the learning and teaching that take place" (p. 28).

Newsletters serve three main purposes: to inform, to educate, and to encourage parents (Allen & McAtee, 2009). These authors outlined four helpful criteria for teachers to consider when constructing a newsletter for parents:

1. Be brief–focus on key points and keep it to one page;
2. Be diverse–include words and visuals and keep language simple and conversational;
3. Be interesting–include catchy titles and graphics to spark interest;
4. Be professional–pay attention to clarity, formating, spelling, and grammar.

Jensen (2006) reinforced the need to write in a warm, respectful, and caring tone; to consider the format (i.e., use a consistent font and design, a simple layout, and colored headlines); and to encourage parental feedback. Including examples of student work in newsletters has been suggested (Jensen, 2006; Nail, 2007). Sims (2016) also recommended including resources for parents such as links to videos, websites, and tutorials, as well as activities for families and books to read. Indeed, newsletters for parents have been used in a variety of creative ways to promote parent engagement with respect to mathematics learning at home (Hollingsworth, 2020), health messaging (Merga & Hu, 2016), and garden education (Vi et al., 2022). Many examples of school and classroom newsletters are available online for educators to review.

Email

Email has become a common method of communication between teachers and parents over time (Bouffard, 2013; Laho, 2019; Natale & Lubniewski, 2018; Thompson & Mazer, 2012; Thompson et al., 2015). Emails provide a quick, efficient, and personalized way to connect with parents on a variety of topics including student grades, student behavior, social concerns, health issues, and scheduling, with grades and academic performance listed as the primary concerns (Thompson, 2009; Thompson & Mazer, 2012). Email has been described as asynchronous in that communication does not happen in real time, but teachers and parents can send and receive messages when it is convenient for them. Some parents reported emails provided them time to think and to create a more effective message in response to their child's teacher (Öztürk, 2013; Thompson et al., 2015). The use of email also provides for the capacity to translate the content for parents who speak another language. In addition, mass emails based on a listserv can provide quick updates and information on special events to a large parent group (Hernandez & Leung, 2004).

Thompson (2009) reported that elementary and secondary teachers typically spent 30 minutes to one hour each week communicating with parents by email. Frequent email interactions with parents typically involved a limited number of two to five parents. Despite the common use of emails, a survey of over 100 teachers revealed over 75% reported having received little to no training on the use of email as a parent communication tool (Ferry, 2022). Thus, in addition to the advantages of using email, it is important for teachers to be aware of the cautions.

First and foremost is the need to maximize the security and privacy of email accounts through the use of effective passwords and procedures as per school district guidelines. A second important concern is the potential for miscommunication in emails. Most of us have received an email that made us feel uncomfortable due to content or tone. Miscommunication may occur for several reasons, such as the lack of nonverbal signals (e.g., facial cues) and the fact that the content of emails to parents often reflect a concern with associated emotions involved (Bouffard, 2013; Hernandez & Leung, 2004; Thompson, 2009). Teachers addressed potential miscommunication by regulating the tone of their email and by stating their feeling about the issue clearly in the email, rather than leaving interpretation to the parent (Thompson, 2009).

Several recent examples of the effective use of emails to parents have been highlighted. A study designed to examine strategies for disseminating online parent resources in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic found that positively framed emails had the highest numbers of "clicks" (Lasecke et al., 2022). Rates of on-task behavior and math problem completion and accuracy increased through the use of an Electronic Home Note Program that generated emails home to parents (Lopach et al., 2018). Another study found use of weekly emails to parents improved the off-task behavior of students with behavioral challenges (Fefer et al., 2020).

Teacher's experiences emailing parents are not always positive, however. An email sent to a parent may not be responded to, leaving a teacher unsure of the next step. Sometimes a parent's response to an email may be unexpected. A teacher who emailed a parent expressing concern that her son was not completing a project was met with an angry parental email response criticizing the teacher for not motivating her child (Fagell, 2023). Another teacher expressed frustration that an upset parent copied the principal on a series of emails with the teacher (Fagell, 2021). It is important to note that emails are a permanent product and can be retained as a record of information sent and received. Emails can also be shared and altered. As such, teachers may wish to create an email file, particularly when corresponding with parents by email on issues of concern.

A number of authors have provided advice for teachers on the use of emails. In summary, when using emails as a communication tool with parents, teachers are encouraged to:

- Create an email policy. Advise parents of the expected time frame for a response.
- Use a professional school district email address.
- Build a relationship with parents first. Avoid sending a concern in an initial email.
- Consider if email is appropriate for the topic or whether personal contact is needed.
- Keep emails friendly, short, and factual. Avoid using educational jargon.
- Check spelling and grammar to ensure a professional message.
- Use Cc and Bcc (Blind Carbon Copy) options thoughtfully. When emailing multiple parents, send the email to yourself and list parent emails in the Bcc field for privacy.
- Customize and create a clear subject line for the email.
- Create a balance between positive and negative information. Start with the positive.
- Consider the tone implied in an email. Offer support rather than criticism.
- Reread emails for accuracy and content. If unsure, wait to send, and reread again.
- Create a plan for personal time with respect to managing emails.
- Remember emails are a permanent product that can be saved, altered, and shared.

Texts

Educators need to constantly expand their communication techniques with parents to align with societal practices (Lazaros, 2016). Given the vast majority of parents have access to cell phones, texting has become a common tool for teachers to communicate with parents. The advantages of texting include its reach to multiple parents, immediate real-time sharing of information, low cost, and flexibility (Kurki et al., 2021). Texting also allows language barriers to be “bridged” as recipients can translate messages on their own phone or the message can be translated before sending (Snell et al., 2020). Texting has also been shown to build trust between teachers and parents and to improve teacher confidence in promoting parent engagement (Bachman et al., 2022).

Many teachers use their personal cell phone to text parents which can be a concern for some. Emails can be sent as a text message on various platforms as outlined by Lazaros (2016), thereby keeping teacher cell phone numbers private. Text messages can also be sent to parents via several apps. From a research perspective, texting parents requires a small time investment and has

been shown to improve the attendance of chronically absent students (Kurki et al., 2021), the literacy skills of Kindergarten children (Doss et al., 2019), parents' confidence to talk with their adolescent children about school (Bachman et al., 2022), and young children's vocabulary skills (Snell et al., 2020). Texts to parents have also been used to reduce summer literacy skill loss in primary students (Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2017).

Lazaros (2016) suggeted a number of class topics appropriate for texting a group of parents including: clarifying an assignment, requesting parental support to monitor an assignment or project, inviting parent participation in an event or activity, as well as various reminders (such as a special event, due date, permission sheets required, activity supplies needed, and so on). Before using texting as a communication tool, Lazaros (2016) encouraged teachers to ensure principal permission, to obtain parent consent and contact information in advance, and to send a test text at the outset requesting a simple parent response to ensure the text was received. Texts to individual parents to share student-specific information may also be appropriate at times. Doss et al. (2019) found that personalizing texts was more effective to engage parents in their child's learning.

Several considerations related to texting parents are noteworthy. Ralli and Payne (2015) reported that the "cadence and timing" of text messages was important. For example, sending a text message close to when the parent would see their child (e.g., picking up a child from school) was suggested. The use of emojis in texts to parents should be considered thoughtfully. Yang (2020) created an undergraduate class activity to demonstrate that emojis are a form of nonverbal communication with varying interpretations that tend to be rule-guided and influenced by culture. Lastly, Pakter and Chen (2013) noted teacher concerns that they could not confirm that text messages were actually received by parents.

Apps (Applications)

The past decade has seen an explosion of mobile applications (apps) designed to enhance teacher communication with parents. Several authors have reinforced the importance of "timely" communication between teachers and parents through the use of an app (Fisher, 2017; Jarvis & Martin, 2018). Apps provide instant messages to parents (typically through a text to their phone) on a range of topics such as reminders, student work, pictures, class activities, and more. Apps facilitate one-way communication to parents, and some apps also allow teachers to receive responses from parents. Apps may allow a teacher to communicate directly with one parent as well as save considerable time when communicating with all parents in the class at once.

Shamash et al. (2022) provided examples and descriptors of a number of commonly used communication apps by teachers for both one-way and two-way communication, including: Remind, Seesaw, Bloomz, Otus, Schoology, Buzzmob, AppleTree, Class Dojo, TalkingPoints, ClassTag, Parent Square, and School CNXT. Many additional apps are also available to support teacher–parent communication. The authors noted that compliance of apps with various privacy legislations is inconsistent and should be considered and explored. They also noted that technology is constantly evolving, and apps may change over time and should be reviewed periodically.

A number of criteria have been described online when teachers are reviewing a potential app to communicate with their parent community. Teachers are encouraged to first identify their current challenges and goals for using an app (Marshall, 2016). Based on identified needs, an app should be easy to use for both teachers and parents and should clearly outline the cost (if applicable). Apps should also contain features to meet the goal (e.g., translation options and mass messaging) and provide details regarding security of student data (e.g., pictures).

Research is still limited (albeit increasing) on the effectiveness of apps to support communication with parents. Ryan (2018) reported the Seesaw app provided parents an accurate idea of what their child was doing at school and helped teachers to communicate with parents who spoke another language (given the translation option). Can (2016) reported that the majority of surveyed parents in Nepal favored the use of the Meridian Connect mobile app to communite with teachers, and 95% viewed the app as easy and user-friendly. Dogan (2019) reported that school WhatsApp groups enabled teachers to provide instant communication to parents which improved relations and allowed for quick decision making. Deleon (2018) described the Seesaw app as an "accessible" way for parents to become involved with their child's learning when their child's work and photos were uploaded for them to view. Lambert (2019) noted that parents surveyed favored ClassDojo as a communication tool, although parents reported they only checked the app when they received a notification. Nisbet and Opp (2017) investigated the effect of the Remind app after four weeks and found that use of the app increased parent–teacher communication, was convenient, and saved time. Teachers typically spent about five minutes each week drafting a message to send to all parents as part of the study. Similarly, Castaneda (2019) reported increased communication with middle school parents using the Bloomz app.

Some school districts have strict media policies with respect to app use, and others provide considerable latitude (Jarvis & Martin, 2018). A number of concerns and cautions have been outlined in the literature regarding the use

of apps that teachers should be aware of. Privacy of information and student data are key concerns. Nisbet and Opp (2017) noted that parents needed clarification as to who would see their app message to the teacher. Teacher decision making in the selection of a specific parent communication app was described as “far from uniform,” making individual parent consent inadequate to protect children (Rennie et al., 2019). In their survey of the top 50 educational apps in Australia, Rennie et al. (2019) described the complexity of the associated privacy statements and reinforced the need for school systems to take responsibility to select apps to protect student data. Even though apps are widely used, student privacy and data concerns related to app use is understudied and not yet well understood (DiGiacomo et al., 2022).

A number of additional concerns have been noted with respect to use of apps to communicate with parents. Dogan (2019) highlighted the misunderstandings that can occur in app messages with parents and noted that app use may minimize face-to-face communication. Time constraints for teachers have been a noted concern, including spending time engaging outside of school hours (Castaneda, 2019; Dogan, 2019; Ryan, 2018). Lack of technology is an ongoing barrier that impacts the participation of some parents (Ryan, 2018). Language barriers have also been identified with some apps (Castenada, 2019). Access to limited characters for a message can impact the content, and longer messages may needed to be divided into two (Nisbet & Opp, 2017). Lastly, teachers expressed concern that use of an app removed the “burden of learning” from students as information was sent directly to parents via the app (Wasserman & Zwebner, 2017).

Based on semi-structured interviews with teachers, Wasserman and Zwebner (2017) commented that media becomes an “equalizer,” and teachers reported feeling use of an app tended to “demote teacher authority” in that parents might make comments within the app that they would not make face-to-face with the teacher. Further, some teachers described app communication with parents as somewhat “cold and alienating” in terms of the lack of expression and emotions involved. Some teachers also reported feeling app use created a sense of “surveillance” of their work by parents with the potential for their “pedalogical decisions” to be criticized (Davidson & Turin, 2021, p. 992).

Report Cards

Report cards are a traditional way for teachers to communicate to parents regarding their child’s performance in school (Deslandes & Rivard, 2013; Tuten, 2007). Report cards provide a formal written record of a student’s performance over time relative to identified curriculum expectations. Information within the report card should not come as a surprise to parents and should not

be the first indication to the parent of a concern (Hall et al., 2008). Teachers are encouraged to communicate and discuss concerns with parents early in a reporting period so that corrective action can be taken. Peltzman and Curl (2019) described report cards as a "conversation starter" that should generate dialogue and partnership in the child's learning. In fact, dissemination of report cards often occurs just before or just after parent–teacher conferences.

Teachers spend considerable time writing report cards with parents perceived as the primary audience (Hall et al., 2008). Although approaches to grading varies across jurisdictions, report cards provide teachers an important opportunity to communicate a range of information and observations to parents regarding their child, including academic performance, attitude, effort, class participation, work habits (e.g., following directions, organizational skills), behavior (e.g., self-regulation skills), as well as social development. The report card is considered a permanent product once released and becomes an important part of a child's learning portfolio over time.

Report cards are provided to parents in different ways, ranging from a hard copy sent home (both sealed and unsealed) to an electronic version to be downloaded (Barkman, 2017; Peltzman & Curl, 2019). The mode of release has potential impact on who views the report card first (Barkman, 2017). A consistent finding was that parents spent approximately 10 to 15 minutes reviewing the report card, and most parents discussed the results with their child (Barkman, 2017).

Teachers know a great deal about the students in their class; however, the format of report cards often limits the information teachers can communicate to parents (Tuten, 2007). Teachers are encouraged to use clear, uncomplicated language and to avoid the use of technical terms (Tuten, 2007). The readability level of the content is important to consider. It is helpful to begin with a positive comment that highlights the student's strengths. The information provided should be straightforward with respect to the student's knowledge and skills including an explanation of the grading criteria used (Munoz & Guskey, 2015). Specific ways for parents to support their child at home are also frequently included and valued by many parents. Comments about the child should be descriptive and personalized to inspire confidence (Barkman, 2017). Ultimately the goal of reporting is to improve student learning (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015).

Communicating student learning through report cards presents several challenges. A noteworthy finding is the association with report cards released on a Friday and an increase in verified reports of child physical abuse the following Saturday (Bright et al., 2019). When such concerns exist, efforts should be made to discuss the report card with the parent in advance. Cultural barriers

have also been identified regarding report card comments. Urabe (2006) noted significant differences in the dimensions that were prioritized for report card comments by Japanese and German teachers. It is important for teachers to appreciate that a cultural lens may be inherent in the comments they write and how comments are received. An additional challenge is the need for translation for parents who do not speak the language of the report.

It is also important for teachers to consider how to frame report card descriptors for students with a confirmed diagnosis. The following is a real-life case in point: An elementary-aged student was formally diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). On the report card the teacher described the child as distractible and forgetful, often out of his seat, with difficulty initiating and completing tasks. All of these observations were true. The challenge was these behaviors are also diagnositic for ADHD. Based on the report card comments, the parent contended that the teacher did not understand the child's diagnosis and thus the school was not programming effectively for the child. This reaction could have been avoided with carefully worded comments. For example: "Liam is learning to respond to verbal cues to get started on his work" indicates the challenge is recognized and support strategies are in place with some progress made. Teachers are encouraged to approach every report card thoughtfully and intentionally in order to communicate student learning. Tuten (2007) eloquently described report cards as an "an intersection of parents' hopes and concerns about their children's education" (p. 319).

Two-Way Communication

Two-way communication between teachers and parents involes interactive opportunities that occur during phone calls, open houses (e.g., meet the teacher night), school-based activities (e.g., a sports game, play, movie, or literacy night), home visits, and parent–teacher meetings and conferences. With the onset of the pandemic, virtual meetings have also became a common platform for two-way communication between teachers and parents. Texting may also become two-way if the interaction becomes conversational in real time. Two-way communication may be informal and unplanned (such as conversing with a parent who is picking up a child or attending a school activity) or more formal and scheduled (such as a parent–teacher conference).

The relationship with the child varies significantly for teachers and parents, and this is an important factor influencing teacher–parent communication. Parents have a "close and highly emotional relationship with their child" along with potentially low school-related expertise (Gartmeier et al., 2017, p. 7); conversely, teachers have a "more detached and less emotional relationship"

with the child along with high school-related expertise (p. 8). Given these relationship dynamics, establishing "professionalism" in two-way teacher–parent conversations places high demands on teachers and can mean navigating difficult conversations at times (Gartmeier et al., 2017).

In-depth interviews with over 50 teachers identified the topics most discussed with parents during two-way interactions (Leenders et al., 2019). These included: gathering input on the child (e.g., asking how the child is doing), performance results, background and home life (particularly with families who spoke another language), social–emotional development of the child, and a range of educational concerns (e.g., difficult behaviors, bullying, poor listening skills, etc.). As previously noted, Leenders et al. (2019) reinforced the importance of building trust with parents before entering into more substantial conversations regarding concerns.

The following section outlines the common two-way strategies used by teachers to communicate with parents including phone calls, home visits, parent–teacher conferences, and virtual meetings. Virtual meetings between teachers and parents became commonplace during the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to provide a convenient option to promote the active participation of many parents.

Phone Calls

Phone calls home have been a traditional form of communication with parents for many years. These typically involve a call from the classroom teacher, the principal, or a recorded "school messenger" call with information regarding a student absence or a district announcement (Lavergne, 2017). Research suggests that phone calls have become less common as digital communication has increased (Thompson & Mazer, 2012; Thompson et al., 2015). Based on household survey data, McGuiggan et al. (2017) reported that 42% of students had parents who were contacted by phone during the 2015–16 school year (versus 62% who received emails/notes). Despite the decline in phone calls as a typical mode of school–home communication, parents reported that interactive contacts such as phone calls were more appropriate for some topics, such as classroom behavior concerns or peer challenges (Thompson et al., 2015).

Phone calls can be challenging to organize given that the synchronous nature of the interaction requires both parties to be available at the same time (Thompson et al., 2015). The ongoing challenge of parent and teacher schedules is a significant barrier to an interactive phone call. Many parents are not available during school hours, and teachers are not available outside of school hours. Another challenge is keeping parent cell phone numbers up to date (Lavergne, 2017). Many teachers use the school phone line to call parents (with

limited access at times), while some may elect to use a personal cell phone. To protect privacy, many phone providers have an option to block one's personal number (e.g., *67 in some locales).

Unlike writing an email that can be edited before sending, "you can't revise what's been said in a phone conversation" (Romano, 2012, p. 14). Thus, it is important to be prepared with a clear plan prior to calling a parent including the key points to raise as well as a plan for what to say if the student answers or the call goes to voice mail (Romano, 2012). It is also important to keep track of phone calls with parents (Greene & Voiles, 2016; Romano, 2012; Tutt, 2022). A phone call record may include the date, time of the call, who was spoken to, the key points of the conversation, suggestions made by the teacher, and the parent response (Romano, 2012).

Creating a script for phone calls to parents has been suggested to ensure consistent communication. Bergmann et al. (2013) proposed a "faculty phone blitz" where part of a staff meeting early in the school year could be spent with all staff phoning parents with a scripted message (such as checking on parent contact information or providing an invitation to an open house). Platt (2020) created several versions of a script for good news calls home to parents. Finally, Romano (2012) suggested creating a script to have on hand to respectfully end a phone conversation in the event that a parent becomes hostile.

Tutt (2022) noted that taking the time to make a phone call gives parents a powerful message that the school wants to connect. That said, traditionally, phone calls home have been viewed as negative in nature, such as expressing a concern about a child's problem behavior or incomplete work (Platt, 2020; Tutt, 2022). Some parents may even become disinclined to answer recurring phone calls from the school (Breaux & Whitaker, 2018). Platt (2020) noted the need to "flip that dynamic" and make more good news phone calls to parents. Seventh grade teachers in Tennessee made a phone call home each week for deserving students (Greene & Voiles, 2016). A number of positive reasons to call parents about their child include helping another student, turning in homework, or bringing needed supplies to class (Breaux & Whitaker, 2018), as well as asking a good question, telling a funny anecdote in class, or finishing an assignment (Platt, 2020).

Several suggestions have been offered in the literature for teachers regarding use of phone calls as a communication tool with parents. Tutt (2022) recommended teachers call parents early in the school year and pace the calls to keep it manageable. Asking students directly who they would like the teacher to call with good news has been suggested (Tutt, 2022), as well as calling home with a positive message in front of the student during class time (Platt, 2022). Phone calls have also been used to check on an absent student (Greene & Voiles,

2016) and to provide home support for the parents of students receiving special education services (Hurley et al., 2022). A daily phone call home during a summer school program positively impacted student engagement (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

Home Visits

Home visits have been described as an "evidence-based family engagement approach" that improves student outcomes (Sheldon & Jung, 2018, p. vii). Home visits to support parents and children have actually been used dating back to the late 1800s with a subsequent decline in the 1930s, then reestablished in the 1960s (Park & Paulick, 2021). More recently, home visits by educators have increasingly been used as a tool to build relationships with parents. The Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV) approach grew from a group of teachers and families in a low-income neighborhood in Sacremento, California in 1998 to over 700 communities in 25 states some 20 years later (Sheldon & Jung, 2018).

Home visits have been described as a way for teachers to significantly impact the two or three students in their class each year from the most challenging life circumstances (Stetson et al., 2012). Scher and Lauver (2021) reported that 70% of the home visits in their study occurred in the child's home with the remainder at a "neutral, non-school location" (such as a park, library, or community center). Visits lasted an average of 40 minutes, and students were present 90% of the time. A broad range of topics discussed during home visits have included: student interests; academic, social, and attendance information; expectations from the teacher and family; family experiences with school; resources; and the parent's hopes and dreams for their child (Cornett et al., 2020; Scher & Lauver, 2021; Wright et al., 2018). Teachers recommended bringing a small gift and photos to the family and visiting before or early in the school year (Johnson, 2014). Ultimately the goal of home visits is for teachers to learn from families (Paulick et al., 2023).

Johnson (2014) proposed a 3-phase procedural framework for home visits that outlined a series of "malleable strategies" that adapt to various contexts (p. 378). Examples included:

Phase 1: Before the visit—check school district policies, contact parents and set up visits, and research "culturally appropriate etiquette" for visits;

Phase 2: During the visit—greet everyone present, clarify what to call the teacher, use props to prompt conversation (e.g., pictures), and inquire about the child, home, and customs;

Phase 3: After the visit—record details of the visit, send a thank you note home with the student, and maintain informal communication with the parent going forward.

Cornett et al. (2020) subsequently developed a user-friendly protocol for teachers to organize and record observations during a home visit. Observations to note were based on five constructs, including relationships (e.g., body language, tone, cultural responsiveness), environment (e.g., home details, participants, meeting space), content (e.g., language used, details of the conversation, length of visit), physical artifacts (what did the teacher bring and leave with), as well as any additional comments and concerns (pp. 135–136).

Home visits by teachers have been found to decrease rates of chronic student absenteeism (Sheldon & Jung, 2018; Soule & Curtis, 2021), to improve student achievement (Franks, 2016; Ilhan et al., 2019; Sheldon & Jung, 2018; Wright et al., 2018), and to increase graduation rates when used by high schools (Soule & Curtis, 2021). Teachers have described more positive relationships with parents (Franks, 2016; Ilhan et al., 2019; Soule & Curtis, 2021), a better understanding of the child and the child's home environment (Meyer & Mann, 2006), and a "deep sense of empathy" and increased compassion towards the family (Lin & Bates, 2010; Stetson et al., 2012). Home visits also provide an opportunity to "level the barriers" and "give voice" to parents from culturally and economically diverse backgrounds (Johnson, 2014).

Despite the demonstrated value of home visits, concerns have also been noted. Finding time to make home visits has been a concern for many teachers (Franks, 2016; Soule & Curtis, 2021; Stetson et al., 2012). Teachers who were new to the experience expressed anxiety and uncertainty prior to initial visits (Johnson, 2014). Some teachers have expressed concerns about safety (Kronholz, 2016; Lucas, 2017; Soule & Curtis, 2021) as well as fears of making a "cultural mistake" (Paulick et al., 2023). Plans for a translation program (e.g., Google translate), or a translator attending in person were needed for many visits. In some cases, teachers visited in pairs, for safety and for an opportunity to reflect together on the visit later (Kronholz, 2016; Wright et al., 2018). Scheduling with families has also been identified as a challenge (Stetson et al., 2012).

"Simply visiting homes does not ensure listening" (Paulick et al., 2022, p. 72). Teacher training to conduct home visits varies across jurisdictions, and it is important to equip teachers with the skills they need to conduct home visits effectively (Jiles, 2015). Paulick et al. (2022) noted that home visits tended to reinforce the "hierarchical power dynamics" between home and schools in that teachers generally took charge, outlined expectations, asked the most questions, and determined the language of the visit. However these authors also noted that "well mediated" visits can be a way to promote "powersharing" with parents. Based on the literature reviewed, teacher training should include clarifying the purpose of home visits, recognizing and valuing the knowledge and assets that families bring, as well as supporting culturally responsive practices.

Parent–Teacher Conferences

Parent–teacher meetings are the most common form of two-way parent–teacher communication (Lemmer, 2012; McQuiggan et al., 2017). Such meetings may occur at any time during the school year (Ediger, 2016) and may be arranged to discuss student concerns, to review programming such as an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and to review student performance as part of a formal and structured annual parent–teacher conference (Fiore & Fiore, 2017). For the typical parent, the parent–teacher conference is the most common meeting attended at the school for their child. Based on the 2016 National Household Education Survey of over 14,000 U.S. students, 78% of students had parents who reported attending a parent–teacher conference during the school year (McQuiggan et al., 2017).

Parent–teacher conferences have been described in a variety of ways in the literature, ranging from an "institutional encounter" (Pillet-Shore, 2015) and "ritualized school events" (Lemmer, 2012) to an "important bridge" between home and school (Oh & Pomerantz, 2022) and a "moment of interaction" that provides unique possibilities (Gastaldi et al., 2015). Many of us remember those stressful moments when our parent(s) went off to visit the teacher, and we worried about what would be said. These conferences have become traditional points of contact over many years and typically involve an annual one-to-one meeting with the parent and teacher initiated by the school in the student's classroom for about 15 minutes. Attendees at the meeting may include the teacher and parent only, or the parent, teacher, and student for student-led conferences.

Parent–teacher conferences generally focus on the student's academic achievement, behavior in class, attitude, work habits, and social development. Oh and Pomerantz (2022) reported that the parent–teacher conferences of young elementary students focused on literacy skills and ways to promote parent involvement related to literacy. For high school students when parental attendance at school meetings typically drops, student-led conferences demonstrated immediate success with 85% of parents participating in the first semester, reflecting a significant improvement from the previous semester (Clemensen, 2021).

Teachers have typically not been trained to conduct parent–teacher conferences (Lemmer, 2012; Walker & Legg, 2018). Conferences are sometimes problem-oriented with respect to student learning and/or behavior and can be challenging for teachers to navigate. The first set of parent–teacher conferences for new teachers can be particularly stressful. A number of tools have been developed to train preservice teachers to host parent–teacher conferences

including fictional video cases (Deng et al., 2020), digital simulations (Luke & Vaughnn, 2022; Thompson et al., 2019), and simulated conversations (Walker & Legg, 2018). Principals have been encouraged to train practicing teachers to hold effective parent–teacher conferences, particularly with the use of focused role plays (Potter, 2008).

Suggestions for effective conferences have been provided based on parent expectations for parent–teacher meetings (Gilani et al., 2020). Interviewed parents identified the need for advance notice of the meetings in order to plan. Parents valued a welcoming atmosphere, a clear agenda, an organized approach to the meeting, and a "fair and true statement" of their child's performance (including academic, behavior, and social development; p. 1065). Parents recommended that teachers take notes during the meeting and plan appropriate follow-up. Use of adult-sized chairs was also recommended for parent–teacher meetings to promote both comfort and equity in the interaction (Gilani et al., 2020).

Several challenges have also been reported in the literature with respect to parent–teacher conferences. The meetings are often scheduled during the school day or for a few hours on a single evening, with many parents unable to attend due to conflicts with work, child care, and/or other commitments (Clemensen, 2021). Difficult conversations may occur with parents during conferences that require important communication skills on the part of the teacher. Potter (2008) recommended ensuring a tactful, empathetic, and honest approach, monitoring tone, outlining positives about the child, and use of active listening strategies.

Concern has been noted regarding how to interpret the silence of some refugee parents during parent–teacher meetings. In this circumstance, silence may be easily misinterpreted. Matthiesen (2016) argued that refugee parents may become silent through "interactional processes" whereby the teacher is positioned as the expert with the right to speak, and the parent is positioned as the listener. For these parents, it is especially important to provide time and space for the parent to speak within the context of a welcoming and respectful interaction.

Pisani (2020) outlined a series of recommendations for teachers to maximize the effectiveness of parent–teacher conferences when communicating student learning. Teachers are encouraged to:

- Know each student's background including individual learning plans and medical concerns.
- Focus on the key areas taught and the student's strengths and weaknesses.
- Be organized. Have a file of work for each student prepared in advance to present.

- Know the meeting structure and who is attending. Stay on time.
- Schedule personal breaks.
- Clearly outline expectations for the meeting. Link expectations to the curriculum.
- Prepare in advance for difficult interviews. Request administrative support if needed.
- Consider booking more time or an alternate time for more challenging student concerns. Plan an "exit strategy" for longer meetings.
- Inquire and ask parents questions about their child to encourage a two-way conversation.
- Take notes and keep a record of parent–teacher conferences.
- Maximize time to discuss key topics. Know what the parent already knows (e.g., report card).

Virtual Meetings

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 required education to incorporate a new online reality. During school closures, teachers shifted to provide online instruction to their students once the infrastructure was in place. This initial adoption of technology was seamless for some and overwhelming for others, with limited time for training. As part of this new reality, there was also an immediate shift needed from in-person to virtual meetings, for staff as well as with parents. Now in the postpandemic years there is a return to in-person meetings; however, virtual meetings have broadened communication options and are welcomed by some parents.

The use of video technology in education has actually been described in the literature for more than a decade, well before the pandemic. Catagnus and Hantula (2011) utilized online collaboration with a multidisciplinary team to develop a behavior intervention plan resulting in a much faster product as well as time saved travelling. When inclement weather resulted in cancelled parent–teacher conferences at an Iowa school, teachers created 90 second video clips to share with parents about their child, including comments regarding the student's strengths, areas of concern, and suggestions (Grundmeyer & Yankey, 2016). Teachers appreciated they could create the videos in a flexible manner and re-record if needed. Parents were able to view the videos at their own convenience including more than once, and some parents watched with their child. McLennan (2018) outlined a pilot initiative involving video conference consultations used to deliver mental health services to students in six elementary schools across three school districts.

Also prior to the pandemic, several investigators explored the feasibility of virtual parent–teacher conferences. Parents and teachers were surveyed regarding

their experiences participating in face-to-face or virtual conferences (Winkler, 2016). The vast majority of the parents who participated in the virtual conferences (91%) reported a time saving. Interestingly, they also demonstrated better recall of the information shared than did parents who attended face-to-face meetings. Conversely, teachers reported some logistical and technical problems with the virtual meetings and overall were more satisfied with the face-to-face interactions. Hutton (2018) reported that use of video parent–teacher conferences was convenient for working parents and also helpful when it was difficult to schedule face-to-face meetings to discuss sensitive topics.

More recently, a research team explored the "barriers and facilitators" of virtual IEP meetings (Scheef et al., 2022). Over 90% of surveyed school staff reported they were comfortable leading IEP meetings virtually. Barriers included technology difficulties reported by half of the teachers (internet or computer-based), parents who did not have internet access, as well as the loss of "personal connections" (Sheef et al., 2022). Teachers reported that finding a location for a confidential meeting was challenging at times (for parents as well), it was difficult to see all participants when multiple people used the same computer, and there was a tendency during virtual meetings to talk over one another. On the positive side, teachers described the virtual IEP team meetings as "convenient and efficient" for both teachers and many parents, and noted there was less tendency to go off topic in virtual meetings. The authors recommended that virtual IEP conferences may increase attendance for working parents who are not able to leave work and should be offered as an option (Scheef et al., 2022).

Once again, teachers have received little training to conduct virtual meetings. Tiersky (2020) noted that virtual meetings are an entirely different medium and require specific strategies to ensure an effective interaction. One of the notable challenges with virtual meetings is to maintain the attention and engagement of the participants as they may become distracted in their own personal environment (Tiersky, 2020). A series of engagement strategies to enhance virtual meeting were outlined (Tiersky, 2020, pp. 70–71):

- request that cameras be on (to provide nonverbal input);
- dress professionally for the audience;
- reduce clutter in one's on-screen background;
- request participants mute microphones unless speaking (to eliminate background noise);
- utilize turn taking strategies (e.g., raising one's hand or typing into the chat);
- incorporate activities to promote interactivity (e.g., use of chat, small group breakouts).

The format of the meeting is also important. Meagher (2021) suggested identifying the chair of the virtual meeting, having a clear agenda, soliciting initial nonverbal feedback by starting with a request for a thumbs up for a low risk question (e.g., "thumbs up if you can hear me"), and ensuring chair approval of all who enter the virtual meeting platform. Baker and Murphy (2021) also suggested ensuring virtual meetings start on time, using visuals to maintain attention, and having a minute-taker so the chair can manage the flow of the meeting.

An interesting finding related to virtual meetings was outlined by Brucks and Levav (2022) who compared the generation of creative ideas for both in-person and virtual teams. Results of a field experiment across five countries showed that videoconferencing tended to inhibit the production of creative ideas, although the ultimate selection of quality ideas by the virtual teams was not impacted. The authors suggested that videoconferencing focused participants on a screen which prompted a "narrower cognitive focus" (Brucks & Levav, 2022, p. 108). Given this finding, when hosting virtual meetings with parents, it is particularly important for educators to use strategies to invite and encourage the ideas of all participants. Ultimately the goal is for each virtual team member to feel valued and invested with their voices heard and their ideas considered (Swift, 2020).

Barriers and Opportunities

Effective communication is key to developing relationships with parents based on trust and respect, and is fundamental to establishing strong home–school partnerships. A number of barriers to parent–teacher communication have been highlighted throughout this article with a range of strategies noted. This section summarizes the key barriers to parent–teacher communication that have been discussed in the literature. These include: racial stereotypes, language, teacher training, technology, and time. Opportunities to respond are also highlighted.

Racial Stereotypes

Piper et al. (2022) reported that racial and cultural biases can have direct influence on the engagement of families of color with school staff. It is also important for educators to be aware that racial disparities have been shown to exist in the actual contacts that teachers make with parents. Racial stereotypes play a role in shaping teacher communication (Cherng, 2016) and may create barriers and inequalities for many families.

A pivotal study by Cherng (2016) reported that differences existed in teacher contacts with parents from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. The patterns of teacher communications with parents was examined based on a nationally representative sample of high school sophomores in the U.S. Teachers were more likely to reach out to Black and Latino parents about disruptive behavior at school than they did for White students. Teachers were less likely to contact immigrant Asian parents about academic or behavioral concerns, even when the student was struggling. Teachers were also less likely to contact minority parents with good news related to student accomplishments. It was noted that the "patterns of communication" were "consistent with racial stereotypes that teachers may subscribe to different racial and ethnic groups" (Cherng, 2016, p. 29). Cherng suggested such stereotypes included disruptive youth in Latino and Black families who struggled to learn math, and stereotypes of Asian students as overachievers who were less in need of intervention.

A recent study by Zimmerman and Keynton (2021) also explored the impacts of race/ethnicity on the ways that teachers communicate with parents about student behavior concerns, academic problems, and accomplishments. Results were based on U.S. national early childhood education data (Early Childhood Longitudinal Study) from 2011 and 2012 for kindergarten and first grade students who were Black, Latino, Asian, and White. In comparison to White students, teachers were more likely to contact the parents of Black boys and Black girls about behavior problems. Teachers were less likely to contact the parents of Latino boys, Asian boys, and Asian girls about academic problems (versus White students). Lastly, compared to White students, teachers were more likely to contact the parents of Black boys and Asian students (both boys and girls) about accomplishments. Zimmerman and Keynton noted that "the patterned ways in which teachers contact parents about their children tells us something about the complex ways in which racial and gendered meanings work in society" (p. 16); thus, it is important that teachers become aware that their communications with parents may be influenced by "dominant racial and gendered ideologies in society" (p. 17) and not simply by children's actual behavior and skills.

A number of authors have addressed antibias efforts in education in a variety of ways. Bouley (2021) stressed that studies of teacher bias towards students and families of varying identities suggested a lack of teacher awareness and confidence to support students with diverse backgrounds. The importance of both school- and district-wide approaches to antibias education was emphasized. The need for educators (who are predominantly White and female) to understand the lived experience of families of color has also been highlighted (Marchand et al., 2019). Brown (2022) encouraged teachers to understand

that parents of color may be on “high alert” for stereotyping and may therefore “push back” when contacted by a White educator with concerns about their child. The importance of teachers building the trust of Black parents was noted by showing an interest in students’ families (e.g., home visits) and by extending invitations to parents that are specific about how parent engagement can promote their child’s success at school (Brown, 2022). Brooks and Watson (2019) highlighted the importance of working with school leaders and understanding the “contextual dynamics” with respect to race in leadership preparation programs. Antony and Vaughn-Shavuo (2022) developed a Tri-Fold Multicultural model that incorporated a class-based field experience and reflective journal approach to promote culturally responsive teacher education. Lastly, Kayser et al. (2021) suggested the need to “reimagine communication” that goes beyond making contact and sharing information to include listening to the experiences of marginalized parents and welcoming them as partners and stakeholders to develop true partnerships.

Language

Language differences have been identified as a key barrier to effective communication between teachers and parents (MacPhee, 2021). Fiore and Fiore (2017) reported that English was not the primary language spoken in 20–25% of American homes (p. 49). They reinforced that non-English speaking parents have the same legal and moral rights for communication from school that English-speaking parents have. Language diversity is complex and often associated with additional barriers, such as low socioeconomic status, multiple jobs, issues with transportation and scheduling, family obligations, a range of experiences with formal education, lack of free time, and different belief systems (Barone, 2011; Foulidi & Papakitsos, 2022; Grace & Gerdes, 2019).

“No one sets out to misunderstand or to be misunderstood” (Kreuz & Roberts, 2017, p. 1), yet this happens frequently in cross-cultural communication. “The real culprit of cross-cultural communication failures is when differences in language use go unrecognized, unheeded, or unacknowledged” (Kreuz & Roberts, 2017, p. 2). It is the responsibility of educators to acknowledge the language needs of their school community (Bibby et al., 2016) and to make communication with parents meaningful and responsive by finding creative ways to bridge the language divide. Even when language is a barrier, parents appreciated when teachers attempted to communicate in an open, effortful, and consistent manner (Li et al., 2021).

A number of strategies have been utilized to address language barriers with parents. Personal invitations to parents to meet at the school at convenient times will welcome many parents (Grace & Gerdes, 2019). Students can often

provide information as to what language is spoken at home (Olmos, 2020). Several studies have described innovative approaches to involve linguistically diverse parents, including parents participating in reading activities with young children (Barone, 2011) and parents who were trained in specific English content who then tutored their child (Hartman, 2017). "How can we help?" cards in five languages were created by one school district to provide parents with staff contact information to address common questions as well as information about translation services (Howell, 2017). Parent education classes have been proposed as a way to invite parents into the school to build language capacity (Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2018). Specific hiring practices with diverse staff that reflect the background and cultures of the broader school community can also improve communication and interactions with families (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). Some districts have created a dedicated "cultural liaison" staff position focused on diversity initiatives (Tipton & Furmanek, 2016).

For parents who speak a different language from the school, access to translation services has been highlighted (Rossetti et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2022). Translation into the parent's home language is important for digital and written communication (including legal documents such as an IEP; Vassallo, 2018). Use of Google translate can be helpful (e.g., for emails), and some apps provide translation options for messages. However, translation of educational jargon is challenging and requires special attention (Soutullo et al., 2016). It is also important to distinguish between the translator and interpreter roles as expertise in one skill does not imply expertise in the other (Tipton & Furmanek, 2016). For example, an interpreter may be fluent in speaking a specific language but may not have the expertise needed for translation to read and write the language well.

A further concern has been the use of children as "language brokers" when children are asked to interpret when teachers meet with their parents. This can be a "paradoxical position" for the child (Garcia-Sánchez et al., 2011) and is generally not recommended. The experience can be stressful for some children (Tuttle & Johnson, 2018), may create a power dynamic in the family, and may violate civil rights (Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2018; Jacques & Villegas, 2018). That said, peer translation can be appropriate in some contexts and may serve to recognize and reinforce a student's multilingual skills (e.g., supporting a new student).

Access to interpretive services is key to communicate orally with parents who do not speak the language of the school. Interpreters have supported a range of school activities, such as family meetings, parent–teacher conferences, graduation exercises, Kindergarten welcome meetings, and so on (Tipton & Furmanek, 2016). These authors noted that sometimes bilingual staff in a

school building have been asked to interpret when the individual staff may not have the language skills required. Privacy and confidentiality are additional concerns in this scenario.

Access to a trained interpreter requires advance consideration and organization. Lack of experience working with interpreters during face-to-face meetings is also a barrier for many educators. Tipton and Furmanek (2016) provided a series of helpful recommendations for teachers when working with interpreters including advance planning, introductions, seating, a clear meeting agenda, and opportunity to debrief with the interpreter. It is also recommended that teachers avoid jargon when interpretation is required, incorporate visuals and student work samples (Rossetti et al., 2017), and plan additional time to meet (Zaidi et al., 2021). Interpreters should be well versed in educational terminology and acronyms and knowledgeable about various educational proceedings, such as IEP meetings (Tipton & Furmanek, 2016). In reducing the barriers inherent in language differences, the use of trained and qualified interpreters "create and strengthen cultural bridges between families and schools" (Tipton & Furmanek, 2016, p. 191).

Teacher Training

The importance of teacher training with respect to home–school partnerships has been highlighted by many authors. A significant barrier is the number of skill sets required for both preservice and practicing teachers to communicate effectively with parents. These include an understanding of the importance of home–school partnerships; awareness of linguistic diversity, ethnic/racial stereotypes, and culturally responsive practices; practical communication skills; as well as technology skills needed to facilitate digital communication.

Although the training of preservice teachers with respect to family–school partnerships has long been recognized as important, relevant coursework remains inconsistent, although improving (Epstein, 2018). In a review of the literature on teacher education in North America, Australia, and Europe, Willemse et al. (2018) described the lack of preparation of preservice teachers to engage with parents as an ongoing concern. Lack of a consistent standard and multiple course priorities often leaves training to the discretion of the instructor. In the case of praticing teachers, the number of professional development days in a school year are limited with multiple and competing system training priorities impacting opportunities for needed training.

A number of innovative approaches have been utilized to address the communication training needs of teachers. Examples include simulations (Walker & Legg, 2018), videos (De Coninck et al., 2018), and an afterschool professional development course (Szech, 2021). Miller et al. (2018) developed an

innovative cross-discipline certification training course for graduate students in education, school psychology, and social work designed to develop knowledge and skills to foster home–school partnerships. Preservice teachers developed and implemented a series of parent workshops that provided the opportunity to talk with and learn from parents regarding the challenges they face supporting their children (Tinajero et al., 2023).

Additional training initiatives have included workshops on communication skills and emotional intelligence (Tuluhan & Yalcinkaya, 2018), a "how-to manual" for teachers to engage with English Language Learner (ELL) parents (Davies-Payne, 2022), and a series of professional development workshops for teachers to engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families (Olmos, 2020). Mentoring by experienced teachers has been described as an effective way for novice teachers to establish good communication with parents (Mosley et al., 2023; Ozmen et al., 2016) as well as Professional Learning Communities whereby interested teachers can collaborate together regarding new and innovative practices (Wages, 2021).

The practical skills that teachers need to facilitate difficult conversations with parents are discussed at length in a companion article (Graham-Clay, 2024). These include the use of clear vocabulary, active lisening, I-messages, questioning techniques, paraphrasing and summarizing information, as well as awareness of the use of leveled information and the impact of nonverbal messages.

Technology

Goodall (2016) suggested that schools should incorporate technology as they do other changes in education, by establishing clear aims and objectives. However, the use of technology to communicate with parents has been described as somewhat of a "wild card" (Patrikakou, 2015) as both teachers and parents have attempted to develop and manage online interactions. One barrier to technology use has been the "fragmented approaches" used by schools to communicate with parents, resulting in many parents having to navigate an array of communication channels (Kraft & Bolves, 2022). This sometimes happens with different children in the same family. According to these authors, 75% of school administrators surveyed reported use of multiple and different apps within their school to communicate with parents. To address this concern, Kraft and Bolves (2022) recommended the need for school-wide expectations for a common communication platform as well as common practices across teaching staff. Another approach was developed by Laho (2019) who explored the potential for a Learning Management System (LMS) to serve as a "one-stop location" for information sharing for both teachers and parents.

A number of barriers to the use of technology have been reported by teachers including the lack of time to prepare to integrate technology, need for training and technology support, lack of resources, lack of ability and/or confidence, and limited access (Dinc, 2019; Francom, 2020; Nikolopoulou et al., 2023). Interestingly, Francom (2016) reported more access to technology tools and resources in smaller school districts and communities versus larger districts and cities in a North Midwestern state in the U.S., thus location may be a barrier in some cases. In terms of overcoming barriers to technology integration, Durff and Carter (2019) reported that a team approach comprised of teachers, administration, and technology support personnel provided training and collegial support with positive results. Limited budget for technology has also been a concern for some schools. When funding is a factor, Wages (2021) suggested exploring the range of free apps available (e.g., Class Dojo, Seesaw, Classtree).

From a parent perspective, the complexity of technology has been described as a barrier. The ease of use was deemed to be critical for parents, defined as the capability and effort required to access the specific technology tool (Osorio-Saez et al., 2021). Another barrier to technology use is the type of information that is appropriate to share. Some parents and teachers expressed concern that digital communication should be reserved for academic issues and concrete information (e.g., deadlines, appointments) and that more "sensitive, complex, and serious" issues should be addressed through personal contact (Bordalba & Bochaca, 2019). The potential for the misinterpretation of digital information has also been identified as a barrier as the lack of nonverbals to support the message can result in disconnects at times (Bordalba & Bochaca, 2019). Access to technology and the internet will always be a key barrier for some families (Bordalba & Bochaca, 2019). In a survey of the National Network of Partnership Schools in eight states, Epstein et al. (2021) described the "digital divide" as very real and highly variable. Schools reported that between 25% and 75% of their students did not have the resources needed to access online classes during the pandemic. Wages (2021) proposed a number of creative approaches to address access concerns such as "hotspot buses" parked in under-resourced neighbourhoods at the end of the day to provide free internet access for families during the evening.

The issue of access also applies internationally. Households in North America and Western Europe own far more digital devices than those living in Eastern and Central Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa (Papadopoulos & Cleveland, 2023). When creating a communication plan, it is important for teachers to consider ways to provide information to the parents of all their students, including those for whom technology is a barrier due to lack of access as well as location (including connectivity challenges in some rural and remote communities).

Time

Lack of time has consistently been described as a barrier to communication for both parents and teachers (Baker et al., 2016; Brock & Edmunds, 2010; Gokalp et al., 2021; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Ozmen et al., 2016; Schneider & Arnot, 2018; Turney & Kao, 2009; Williams & Sánchez, 2011). In fact, a historical review of barriers to communication identified lack of time as an issue back to the 1950s (Gerardi, 2007). The time barrier has also been reported across socioeconomic levels. Lack of time for parents to connect typically reflects their busy lives including family obligations and work schedules. For example, Turney and Kao (2009) noted more than half of parents reported that work schedules prevented their involvement with their child's school. It is noteworthy that many school events (such as assemblies, parent meetings, etc.) are often organized during the school day when many parents are unable to attend.

Several authors have recommended surveying parents to determine times that will accommodate their needs when planning and scheduling school events. This could include an evening event, an extended school day on occasion to meet teachers after school, and/or a weekend activity (such as a school BBQ). As previously noted, video conference options during the workday will facilitate involvement for some parents. Associated considerations have also been noted to encourage parental attendance after school hours, including food provided (to avoid evening meal prep) as well as child care options onsite to allow parents the freedom to engage in the event or activity. Providing notice well in advance of school events has also been recommended to ensure parents are aware and have an opportunity to plan (Williams & Sánchez, 2011).

Additional Barriers and Opportunities

Fiore and Fiore (2017) noted that physical challenges are often forgotten barriers to effective communication. A parent who is visually impaired may miss the nonverbals in communication and will benefit from a focus on clear verbal input. A parent who is hearing impaired may benefit from an agenda to read, a quiet meeting space, and a slower pace of discourse. Similarly, it is important that parents with mobility issues feel welcomed with accessible parking or drop off, clearly marked access into the school, and an accessible meeting space.

Practical barriers to parental involvement in their child's school include financial restraints (Ozmen et al., 2016) and transportation challenges (Hirano et al., 2018). Many schools offer food and some offer prizes and raffles to promote parent attendance at events (Williams & Sánchez, 2011). Some schools have addressed the transportation barrier by designating "visitor only" parking

spots and by providing group bus pick up stops for special evening events at the school. Parent–teacher meetings held in easily accessed community locations near public transportation is another creative way to reach some families.

Parent's own negative experiences (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018) and lack of trust (Ozmen et al., 2016) have both been identified as barriers impacting the willingness and ability of some parents to engage with school staff. It is important for teachers to empathize with parents and to build trust to address these challenges (Gokalp et al., 2021). The development of trust takes time and is based on multiple and purposeful interactions between teachers and parents (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2017). Ultimately "it all comes down to the leadership," according to Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) who reinforced the important role of the principal in fostering a positive school culture where the relationship between school and home is valued. Similarly, Willis et al. (2021) highlighted the importance for school principals to communicate a strong school vision that supports trusting and respectful relationships with parents.

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in the winter of 2020 also significantly impacted parent–teacher communication. Teaching was already listed as one of the more stressful professions (MacIntyre et al., 2020). The pandemic was highly impactful on teacher mental health with high rates of stress and burnout reported (Agyapong et al., 2022; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2021). Similarly, the stress level of parents increased during this time (Adams et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). The pandemic brought with it with multiple pressures related to technology, health concerns, and job security (McCarthy et al., 2022). Educators were forced to communicate with families quickly as online learning platforms unfolded. As stressful as this was initially with many barriers to overcome, the limited research thus far suggests there may have been a "silver lining" to the pandemic with respect to parent involvement (McCarthy et al., 2022).

Interestingly, positive family–school relationships (known to benefit families) appeared to be a protective factor on pandemic-related stress for teachers (Haines et al., 2022). Rather than attending events at the school during the pandemic, new connections were forged between teachers and parents through video meetings, phone calls, and digital communication. "Educators and parents designed new ways to communicate using high-tech and low-tech about children's attendance in class, how work would be collected and graded, children's well-being, health, and education services needed by families, and more" (Epstein et al., 2021, p. 16). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, necessity meant that communication with most families was "attainable" and parents, teachers, administrators, and students "grew to appreciate each other more than ever before" (Epstein et al., 2021, p. 15). It is important that educators continue to build on these connections and the lessons learned.

Future Directions

Communication between teachers and parents is essential to support student learning. As the range of communication opportunities continues to expand, focused research is needed to better understand and strengthen the effectiveness of teacher communication to support student success.

Continued research focused on effective training practices for both preservice and practicing teachers is needed with respect to the application of key communication skills, the effective use of both in-person and digital communication strategies, and the development of culturally responsive practices. In particular, the effect of racial stereotypes on the communication patterns of teachers is a relatively new and important area of research.

With respect to teacher training, Leonard and Woodland (2022) argued that antiracism cannot be achieved in education through "top-down, short-term approaches to school improvement or professional development" (p. 212). Rather, they demonstrated that robust professional learning communities supported teachers to recognize and transform racist beliefs and positively impacted their practice. They described this approach as a powerful way to promote both individual and institutional change. Continued research of such innovative approaches is needed to inform teacher training.

Due to the evolving landscape of technology, including the speed of development of new platforms, it seems that independent research is constantly catching up with the communication technology that is already in use in schools. This is particularly true with respect to the use of various apps by teachers to communicate with parents. DiGiacomo et al. (2022) noted that student privacy and data concerns of communication apps are not yet well understood. More research is needed to better understand how various apps address issues of student, teacher, and parent privacy as well as the retention and storage of student data (e.g., pictures and work samples). Guidelines that school districts, administrators, and individual teachers can use to make informed choices would be welcome regarding the use of apps to communicate with parents.

There has been a significant increase over time in the use of digital technology to communicate with parents (e.g., email, texts, apps); however, research is needed to explore specific themes and trends that may exist. For example, do the parents of young preschool and early primary students tend to prefer text communications, whereas the parents of middle and high school students prefer another format, such as email? On the other hand, it may be that the age of teachers themselves is a critical factor with respect to the type of technology selected for use.

Going forward, it will be particularly important for educators to practice "digital wisdom" (Prensky, 2009) as they apply new technologies to communicate with parents in pragmatic and thoughtful ways. The use of different modes of communication in education is widespread; however, there is a need to more systematically assess the effectiveness of various modes of communication with respect to efficiency, actual reach to parents, and meaningfulness of the message. For example, are texts as effective as emails to convey specific types of information? Future research efforts focused on comparing the effectiveness of different modes of communication for different types of messages will be important to inform practice.

Final Thoughts

Although many barriers to parent–teacher communication continue to exist, it is gratifying to see that many educators and researchers are addressing these challenges in new and creative ways. As teaching becomes more complex and the student population more diverse, better understanding and closer connections between teachers and parents become even more essential to support student success. My son's grade 3 teacher had it right. She understood that communication with parents is critically important and needs to be positive, invitational, and built on relationship, trust, and a shared vision for the child.

The literature suggests that many modes of communication exist with parents and that one size will not fit all (Chappell & Ratliffe, 2021; Schneider & Arnot, 2018). In fact, a range of online communication strategies have the potential to promote quality relationships between schools and families (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021). It is highly recommended that teachers conduct a survey at the beginning of the school year to evaluate and plan for the needs of their diverse parent community with respect to communication preferences (e.g., phone calls, email, texts, apps), technology access, and languages spoken. With this information in hand, teachers are encouraged to start at the beginning of the school year and to make communications with parents personalized, positive, and linked to learning (See et al., 2020). It is important for teachers to streamline so that parent communication is efficient, yet also ensure that the modes of communication are flexible enough to be accessible and meaningful for each parent.

Schools that seek to welcome families as part of the school community will naturally encourage communication with parents. School leadership is key to promote the value of engaging parents through frequent, respectful, and culturally responsive interactions. A systematic communication framework and a consistent platform within a school (especially with respect to the use of apps) have both been recommended to support effective communication between

teachers and parents. That said, the use of technology, while offering many benefits, does not replace a kind voice. Parents, teachers, and administrators reported that "personalized, face-to-face, informal communication best supported positive family–school relationships" (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021, p. 18). The importance of face-to-face communication between a teacher and parent cannot be underestimated, especially when the subject matter is sensitive in nature. Teachers are encouraged to develop and use practical communication skills to support difficult conversations with parents (Graham-Clay, 2024).

It is important for educators to appreciate that every communication exchange with a parent occurs within the context of the exchanges that have gone before (be they positive or negative), and sets the stage for the communication exchanges to come. From this perspective, every interaction with a parent provides an opportunity for the future.

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Difficult Conversations With Parents: Practical Skills for Teachers

Susan Graham-Clay

Abstract

Teachers play a key role in communicating with parents to support student learning. One of the more challenging aspects of this role for teachers is having a difficult conversation with a parent about their child. Difficult conversations, when needed, are best accomplished face-to-face incorporating effective communication skills to promote a positive and productive interaction. This article reviews a number of key practical communication skills that teachers can use when communicating with parents including use of clear vocabulary, active listening, I-messages, questioning strategies, paraphrasing and summarizing, leveled information, as well as attention to nonverbal messages. Strategies to support both planned and unplanned difficult conversations are discussed. Barriers to having difficult conversations between teachers and parents are outlined as well as new directions for research. Effective communication skills are integral for teachers to hold difficult, yet productive, conversations with parents to promote partnerships and to support student success.

Key Words: teachers, parents, communicating, communication skills, teacher–parent communication, school–home communication, difficult conversations, partnerships, family engagement, active listening, clear vocabulary, jargon, I-messages, questioning strategies, paraphrasing, summarizing, leveled information, nonverbal messaging, partnerships, relationships

Introduction

The positive impact of effective parent–teacher partnerships on student success has long been discussed in the research literature (Epstein et al., 2019). Communicating with parents has been described as a key component of effective partnerships. In fact, teacher communication skills have been highlighted as a strong predictor of parent involvement (Gisewhite et al., 2021; Park & Holloway, 2018). In this article, the term "parent" includes those adults in a child's life who may interact with the child's teacher to discuss student progress (including parents, guardians, grandparents, foster parents, etc.).

Contacts between teachers and parents may include in-person meetings (such as yearly parent–teacher conferences), phone calls, and report cards, as well as a range of digital interactions (e.g., email, texts, a variety of communication apps, websites, newsletters; Graham-Clay, 2024). Proactive communications through a variety of formats help to support the development of trusting relationships with parents early in the school year, before there is a need to share any concerns about a student's progress (Leenders et al., 2019).

Razer and Friedman (2017) noted that parent–teacher relationships are "infused with anxiety and other strong emotions" (p. 117) that are usually "undiscussed." The authors suggested that there is a natural shift that occurs from parents having primary responsibility for and control over their child's learning to a shared responsibility when the child enters school. This can be a stressful transition for many parents and may be a source of tension between teachers and parents. Gartmeier et al. (2017) further identified three important differences between teachers and parents that impact their communication interactions and are important for teachers to recognize and appreciate. First is the relationship *to* the child. Parents are much more emotionally attached to their child, whereas teachers maintain an appropriate professional distance and have a more detached relationship with the child. Second is the scope of responsibility for the child. Parents are broadly reponsible for their child in a variety of ways, and many maintain a caring role for their child throughout their lifetime. Conversely, teachers have a time-limited instructional role and may be more objective and realistic as a result. Third is the respective roles that teachers and parents have in the school system. The authors suggested that while parents know their child well, they have "low school-related expertise" (p. 7). Teachers, on the other hand, have a strong understanding of the school system and their instructional role. Because the communication dynamics are complex, Gartmeier et al. (2017) noted that establishing "professionalism" in teacher–parent conversations poses "high demands" on teachers (p. 8).

Given this important communication role and the potential for conversations to become emotionally charged and difficult at times, it is essential that teachers develop effective communication skills that promote positive and productive dialogues with parents. Unfortunately, there is a knowledge gap between highlighting the need for teachers to be trained and the actual skills that need to be trained. The focus of this literature review is to outline a series of practical and effective communication skills that teachers can use to nagivate difficult conversations with parents. This is intended as a companion article to a more in-depth discussion of the broad range of strategies available to teachers when communicating generally with parents (Graham-Clay, 2024).

Teacher Training

Training of communication skills for teachers has been highlighted as both important and needed (Fuentes et al., 2017; Ortega & Fuentes, 2015). However, a significant and ongoing issue for both preservice and practicing teachers has been the continuing lack of training available. Two cross-cultural reviews emphasized the lack of formal training for teachers on family–school partnerships and noted that training was dependent on the priorities of individual instructors (Epstein, 2018; Thompson et al., 2018). Willemse et al. (2018) also noted the lack of such training for preservice teachers based on a review of teacher education in North America, Australia, and Europe. Barriers included the lack of a consistent standard and multiple course priorities.

More recently, Luke and Vaughn (2022) reported that few teacher training programs require courses on collaboration and noted that the "interpersonal aspects" of teaching were not adequately addressed. Beilmann et al. (2023) also emphasized the need to train future teachers in communication skills as well as incorporating communication skills training as an ongoing component of professional development for all educators. They noted that the "variety in parents' educational and occupational backgrounds and skills demands that teachers are prepared to perceive and approach them as different target groups to make the best use of parents' various competences and expertise in school–home collaboration" (p. 10).

While the lack of formal teacher training on communication skills has been a consistent finding in the research, several studies have addressed teacher training initiatives in different ways. In their in-service training program, Symeou et al. (2012) focused on the development of specific communication skills including active listening, asking questions, paraphrasing and summarizing, as well as nonverbal communication. Teachers participated in five afterschool training sessions and reported increased confidence in their capacity to use the skills after the training. The use of simulations, videos, and mentoring have

also been used for training (see Future Directions below). Indeed, a meta-analysis of 39 studies indicated that teacher training initiatives positively impacted skill development for teachers with respect to family engagement outcomes, with communication skills considered a key intervention component (Smith & Sheridan, 2019).

Teacher–parent communication has been described as relational in nature and requires the appreciation that each parent is unique in terms of his/her feelings, beliefs, perspectives, culture, values, and past experiences with school (White, 2016). What is consistent is that teachers must respond to the strong feelings that parents have about their own children (White, 2016) which may lead to difficult conversations at times.

Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations have also been called challenging, courageous, and crucial conversations. The three components of a difficult conversation involve: (1) differing opinions during an interaction when (2) the stakes are high and (3) emotions run strong (Grenny et al., 2022). Although parents want the best for their children, the opinions of parents and teachers may differ with respect to the most suitable approach to take (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016). In the case of difficult conversations between teachers and parents, the stakes of the conversation are high because the result may impact the student's learning and well-being as well as the relationship between the parent and the teacher. Emotions may also run high with the potential that both the teacher and parent may feel that their capacity is somehow questioned.

A review of teacher training programs in England identified communication skills with parents as the most valued element to be taught, specifically the skills needed to prepare and run parent–teacher meetings and to manage difficult conversations (Jones, 2020). In fact, the current reality for teachers may reflect an increasing need for difficult conversations with parents given potential concerns related to a number of factors such as the rising rate of digital learning environments, student progress post-pandemic (COVID-19), varying modes of school–home communication that may not always meet the need, responding to increasing cultural and language diversity of students and their families, as well as changing political landscapes and impacts on education. That said, many educators are legimitately hesitant or actually fearful of having difficult conversations with parents which may include the potential of responding to an unpredictable parent who may yell, intimidate, or become rude or hostile (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016). Teachers who are better prepared to hold difficult, yet productive, conversations with parents will feel more confident responding to these evolving dynamics in education.

Research indicates that difficult conversations are best approached during a live interaction, ideally in person, or potentially virtually or by phone if necessary (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021; Weinzapfel, 2022). Face-to-face interactions are preferred as these provide important nonverbal messages that help to reduce the potential for misunderstandings and provide opportunities to respond to various nuances that may not be as evident in other communication formats. In-person meetings also provide a better opportunity to show samples of student work if needed.

The primary ingredients to support a difficult conversation with a parent are trust and relationship that are built upon a series of positive communications over time. As previously noted, the development of a trusting relationship with parents is important to establish early in the school year "*before* there is anything substantial to talk about" (Leenders et al., 2019, p. 529). A strong relationship allows the teacher to take the perspective of the parent into account during a conversation (Buhl & Hilkenmeier, 2017). Relationship is also essential for a parent to hear information that may not be consistent with his or her perspective about their child without becoming highly reactive, potentially to the point of rejecting the information or even the meeting. Ultimately, positive relationships with parents must be cultivated (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016).

The best way to prepare for and support difficult conversations with parents is to plan for them from the outset of the school year by establishing positive communications with parents. Early positive phone calls home were described as an "ounce of prevention" by Whitaker and Fiore (2016). Additional communication opportunities include home visits or parent–teacher conferences, as well as by providing information through classroom newsletters and websites (Reinking, 2019). The most effective teachers are those who communicate with parents "on a regular and consistent basis" when things are going well and also when challenges exist (White, 2016, p. 64).

When difficult conversations between teachers and parents are needed, it is typically because a teacher has a concern to share about a student's academic, social, and/or behavioral progress. Alternatively, the parent may bring forward concerns about the child's progress. Parents may also express concern about how their child has been treated (Jaksec, 2013). In order to respond successfully, it is important that teachers use a range of effective communication skills to navigate difficult conversations with the primary goal to support student success.

Communication Skills

The following section outlines a series of practical skills for teachers to use when communicating with parents, including the use of clear vocabulary,

active listening, I-messages, questioning strategies, paraphrasing and summarizing, use of leveled information, and awareness of nonverbal messages. These effective communication skills will help a teacher to be "the cool, calm, collected person who does everything they can to help" students (McEwan-Adkins, 2022, ch. 5, p. 15).

Clear Vocabulary

Communication with parents will be enhanced when the vocabulary used is clear and expressed as simply as possible (Kullar, 2020; Weinzapfel, 2022). Examples of more straightforward word choices include "start" for commence, "remembered" for retained, "use" for utilize, and "near" for proximity. Teachers should also avoid using what could be viewed as "loaded" language that may create an emotional response on the part of the parent. For example, a child may have taken an item *without permission* in school, however "stealing" the item adds judgement and a negative connotation that may impact a constructive conversation with a parent about the issue.

Weinzapfel (2022) outlined a number of additional strategies to make communication with parents more conversational. She suggested using short sentences with only one fact per sentence and promoted the use of contractions (e.g., "don't" versus "do not") that are more conversational in nature. Having just one person in mind will help to make the message clearer and more effective. Weinzapfel also suggested avoiding the use of technical terms, jargon, and acronyms whenever possible. Education is fraught with technical vocabulary that is not readily understood by parents. Terms that are absolutely needed should be carefully defined and explained (Weinzapfel, 2022).

Active Listening

Listening is not the same as hearing. Bodie (2019) described listening as multidimensional, involving affective, behavioral, and cognitive processes ("the ABCs of listening"). The affective component involves an individual's personal views about listening and may include potential barriers to doing so. Listening behaviors involve specific actions to engage such as eye contact, leaning forward, and asking questions. The cognitive component of listening involves internal processes such as attending, interpreting, and making sense of what has been said.

Hughes and Read (2012) described listening as the "number one" communication skill and as an "active" process that involves being "fully present" with the goal to form a positive relationship. The authors described the key components of active listening as (pp. 31–33) as:

1. Paying undivided attention to the speaker
2. Showing that one is in fact listening (e.g., by nodding, having an open posture)
3. Providing feedback by reflecting on what the speaker has said
4. Defering judgement by not interrupting and allowing the speaker to finish
5. Responding appropriately by being candid, open, honest, and respectful

Surveyed primary teachers and principals reported using a range of active listening skills including paying attention, listening to the parent's words without interrupting, adopting a neutral attitude, and showing empathy. Educators also asked clarification questions, repeated and summarized the parents words, and attempted to convey an understanding of the parent's concerns and feelings (Chatzinikola, 2021).

McNaughton and Vostal (2010) outlined a specific approach for teachers to promote active listening in order to improve communication with parents. The strategy is based on the acronym "LAFF Don't CRY" and is summarized below (p. 252):

L	Listen, empathize, and communicate respect
A	Ask questions and ask permission to take notes
F	Focus on the issues
F	Find a first step
Don't	
C	Criticize people who aren't present
R	React hastily and promise something you can't deliver
Y	Yakety-yak-yak

The authors promoted "LAFF Don't CRY" as a positive active listening approach for teachers that is easy to remember and to use effectively. Teachers were encouraged to listen, to ask questions, and to focus on the issue at hand, while at the same time avoiding criticizing others, responding thoughtfully, and limiting unnecessary talk ("yakety-yak"). Finding a first step to move forward is key to the model that can be applied to both informal and formal interactions with parents. Preservice teachers trained in this strategy were rated by parents as more effective communicators who were better able to demonstrate empathy and understand parental concerns (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010).

I-Messages

The use of I-messages (also termed I-statements) can be very helpful to diffuse negative emotions and to build connection with a parent during a difficult

conversation. The benefit of using an I-message is that the speaker acknowledges that his/her comment is from a personal perspective, thus recognizing that there will also be other valid perspectives.

To illustrate: Imagine your daughter Lina has recently been late for school on a number of occasions. There is a lot going on at home right now that you have not shared with Lina's teacher, who has asked to speak with you. You are already worried. In your conversation the teacher says: "Lina is coming to school late too often, which is becoming a problem because it disrupts the start of the day for everyone in the class." How do you feel about the teacher's comment? You might feel that your parenting is being judged. You might feel defensive, guilty, embarassed, or a combination. You might even feel angry at the teacher. The flavor of the conversation going forward for you now may reflect a mix of negative emotions on top of your current stressors. On the other hand, perhaps the teacher says: "I feel worried when Lina is late for school because she misses hearing about the plan for the day and the instructions for the first activity." How do you feel now? It would be unusual for a parent to become upset with a teacher who is concerned about their child.

An I-message is intended to convey thoughts and feelings in a way that does not cause the other person to feel shamed, judged, or criticized. I-messages own the concern. Creating an I-message involves three elements: *I feel…when…because….* As per the example above, the statement includes: I feel (identify the feeling: worried) when (describe the concern or student behavior: Lina is late for school) because (explain the effects of the concern or behavior: she misses key information at the start of the day).

In a study on the use of I-messages, Rogers et al. (2018) noted that subtle changes in language were influential and that I-statements had a lower probability of creating a defensive reaction. Use of I-messages can be a very effective way for teachers to respectfully voice their concerns while also promoting an ongoing and constructive conversation with a parent.

Questioning

The use of questioning techniques is an important communication skill when teachers meet with parents to share information and to better understand concerns. Different types of questions will elicit different types of answers, specifically the use of closed and open-ended questions (Stapleton, 2019).

Closed-ended questions are useful to obtain specific information and typically prompt a short response (Stapleton, 2019). This type of question may be particularly helpful at the outset of an interaction. That said, caution is needed not to overuse closed-ended questions as too many may reduce the participation of the parent. Examples of closed-ended questions include:

- questions that can be answered with a yes/no response (e.g., “Does Jo like recess?”)
- selection questions (e.g., “Did she seem angry or sad when she got home?”)
- identification questions requesting a specific piece of information (e.g.,“What is Kai’s favorite sport?”; Stapleton, 2019)

Conversely, open-ended questions are invitational and provide more freedom of response (Stapleton, 2019). Open-ended questions are useful to gain new information, to explore issues in more depth, and to express empathy and concern. These questions also allow parents to provide the information they consider to be relevant. “How does Dara feel about math?” and “Can you tell me more about your concerns?” are both examples of open-ended questions. Further questioning may then follow to sustain the conversation and obtain more detailed information.

When engaged in a dialogue with parents, it is important for teachers to remember that individuals vary in the time it takes to process and respond to questions. This is especially true if a second language is involved. Parents also come with their own educational experiences that may or may not have been positive and may influence their willingness to engage. Some parents will respond quickly to questions, and others will take more time and/or may be reticent to answer. Wait time is important, and it can be difficult to quietly hold space for a response. For a parent who seems shy or anxious, it may be helpful to start with several closed-ended questions to engage the parent, to obtain initial information, and to gain some rapport before moving to a more open-ended approach. Conversely, sometimes closed-ended questions can be helpful with a highly verbal parent to hone in on specific information that is needed. Understanding how and when to use closed-ended and open-ended questions will help teachers to feel more confident when seeking information from parents.

Paraphrasing and Summarizing

The skills of paraphrasing and summarizing are very helpful to clarify meaning during a conversation. First it is important to actively listen to the information before attempting to solve the problem at hand (Boult, 2019). Paraphrasing involves the listener clarifying the points that have been made by the speaker (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2017). This does not involve judgement or evaluation of the content. Rather, the goal is to listen to the meaning of what has been said and to rephrase using your own words (Midwinter & Dickson, 2015). Paraphrasing is intended to be tentative and brief and may contain both facts and feelings (Midwinter & Dickson, 2015). It is often helpful to paraphrase in the form of a question. For example: “It sounds like you

are worried that Jack is struggling to make friends at school. Am I correct?" Paraphrasing enhances a conversation by providing an opportunity to check in with the parent to verify their message has been heard and understood and also encourages clarification if there is a disconnect.

As the conversation proceeds, summarizing involves gathering together the key themes and feelings that have been communicated. This can be an especially helpful strategy when several issues have been raised by a parent. The intent is to provide some "order" to the information, to capture the key points that have been shared for accuracy, and not to add additional information from the listener's perspective (Midwinter & Dickson, 2015). The parent has the opportunity to hear a summary of his or her own words and concerns, and again there is a chance to agree or to clarify. The use of paraphrasing and summarizing demonstrates a level of attention that can help to create a bond between the teacher and the parent (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2017).

Leveled Information

It is important for parents to know that the teacher recognizes and appreciates their child as a whole person. Teachers reported that their communications with parents first focused on positive characteristics of the child followed by a statement of the teacher's concerns (Chatzinikola, 2021). For example, Remi is artistic and athletic, and he also struggles with reading. Kira is very social with many friends, and she also struggles to pay attention in class and is often out of her seat. The first step for the teacher is to identify the student's strengths and the specific areas of concern prior to connecting with the parent.

Tharinger et al. (2008) outlined the application of a conceptual framework involving different levels of information when psychologists provide assessment feedback to parents. This approach may also be useful for teachers when sharing observations of a student and concerns with parents. The three levels relate to how easily the information to be shared fits within the parent's view of their child:

Level 1: information is consistent with the parent's perspective

Level 2: information requires reframing of the parent's perspective

Level 3: information conflicts with the parent's perspective

Level 1 information is consistent with the parent's view of their child and should be noted at the outset. This will provide some initial reassurance and help to reduce parental anxiety. Acknowledging Remi's artistic and athletic skills and Kira's social skills are examples of Level 1 information, typically provided early in a parent meeting, to recognize the child's strengths.

Level 2 information generally involves details such as test scores and student observations that may cause the parent to modify or reframe their view

of their child somewhat, but will not cause the parent to give up "closely held beliefs" or to feel judged (Tharinger et al., 2008, p. 604). Level 2 information might cause the parent to think or to say: "I hadn't thought about it that way, but that makes sense." For example, concerns about incomplete work for a primary child may be reframed as difficulties with writing. A high school student who refused to talk in class was found to have high anxiety. When concerns are being shared, the authors suggested that the majority of feedback typically involves Level 2 information. The parent remains engaged; however, reframing of information allows the parent to shift their view of their child to incorporate a new perspective.

Level 3 information, on the other hand, markedly conflicts with the parent's view of their child (Tharinger et al., 2008). Unless a strong foundation of relationship and trust has been previously built with the parent, this type of information may cause the parent to feel highly anxious or upset, to the point of outright rejection at times. Understanding this possibility helps to explain the hostile reactions of some parents during meetings when significant concerns are shared and reinforces the importance of building relationship and trust with parents through a variety of strategies well in advance and prior to the need for a difficult conversation. Examples may include regular parent contacts regarding student strengths and needs, sharing support strategies in place, as well as encouraging opportunities for parental input and shared goal-setting. It may not always be possible for a teacher to predict what type of information will fit each level for a particular parent. Tharinger et al. (2008) suggested that close attention to the way a parent describes their child at the outset of the conversation will provide helpful clues.

Nonverbal Messages

Nonverbal communication involves sending and receiving messages without using words. "A substantial amount of what we communicate comes through nonverbal behaviors and the information those nonverbal behaviors give others about how we truly are feeling" (Fiore & Fiore, 2017, p. 48). Nonverbal messages have been called our "silent language," and these can "supplement or replace verbal communication" (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017, p. 55). Indeed, verbal and nonverbal communication have been described as complementary to one another and equally important (Zhang & Qin, 2023). Nonverbal communication also exists within a cultural context, and nonverbal messages may be intentional as well as spontaneous.

"Nonverbal communication is often more subtle and more effective than verbal communication and can convey meaning better than words" (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017, p. 53). Our nonverbal messages can help to

reinforce the words we speak or can potentially create misunderstanding if there is a disconnect between the two. In fact, if the listener is faced with a disconnect, the nonverbal message tends to be more trusted than the words spoken (Burgoon et al., 2022). These authors suggested that before a meeting even starts, nonverbal communication provides an advance "frame of reference" for interpreting the words that are to come. Knowing this, it is extremely important that teachers monitor their own nonverbal messages, both at the outset and throughout a meeting with parents.

It is helpful for teachers to be aware of the different types of nonverbal messages and their functions in order to appreciate how these interact and relate to interactions with others. Examples include (but are not limited to):

- Body Language: eye contact, facial expressions, posture, gestures
- Touch: shaking hands
- Paralinguistic: tone, talking speed, volume, pitch, use of silence
- Space (proxemics): the amount of space between the participants
- Physical characteristics: professional attire, hygiene

Soukup (2019) proposed that the range of nonverbal messages serve three important functions during communication. First, nonverbals serve to reinforce the verbal message. Second, nonverbals help to express emotions, such as conveying concern with one's facial expression. Third, the use of nonverbal messages can help to regulate interactions during a conversation, such as encouraging turn taking when talking through eye contact, a gesture, and the use of silence.

According to Kullar (2020) "your body can speak for you even when you are not saying anything" (p. 114). When meeting with parents, teachers are encouraged to present a friendly demeanor, use a positive tone, hold space for silence, consider sitting alongside the parent(s) rather than across a desk, use eye contact respectfully, and present a professional appearance. In addition, displaying interest in the parent, maintaining an open body posture (open versus closed arms), and using a conversational tone are nonverbal messages that will support the words that are spoken. It is also very reasonable to respectfully check one's perception of another's nonverbal messages, such as: "I notice that you are crossing your arms. Are you unhappy with something I just said?" (Fiore & Fiore, 2017, p. 51).

Some nonverbal messages and their meanings tend to be universal while cultural differences also exist (Ren, 2014; Soukup, 2019). For example, smiling is generally recognized as a universal expression of happiness (Okon, 2011), however the frequency of smiling, acceptable occasions, and intent, varies across cultures (Tiechuan, 2016). The use of eye contact also varies across cultures and can lead to miscommunication (Tiechuan, 2016). Similarly, various

gestures have markedly different meanings across cultures (e.g., OK sign and thumbs up; Tiechuan, 2016). In order to enhance the congruence of their own verbal and nonverbal messages with parents, teachers are encouraged to become familiar with the various nuances of nonverbal communication that may be part of the different cultures within their school community.

Difficult Conversations: Planned and Unplanned

Difficult conversations between teachers and parents are often planned interactions where the goal is to discuss specific concerns about a child's academic, social, and/or behavioral progress. Such interactions may occur during parent–teacher conferences or planned meetings with parents at other times during the school year. Planned interactions allow teachers time to prepare in advance, to gather information they may need (e.g., student data) and to identify specific goals for the conversation. However, difficult conversations with parents can also be unplanned and come "out of the blue" (McEwan-Adkins, 2022) when a teacher may be caught by surprise by an upset parent and must navigate a challenging interaction without time to think or prepare (Grenny et al., 2022). A number of strategies are outlined below for teachers to hold both planned and unplanned difficult conversations with parents.

Planned Conversations

Prior to a planned difficult conversation with a parent, it is important for the teacher to take some time to reflect on his or her feelings about the student, parent, and the concern at hand (Sanderson, 2013). This will help the teacher plan how to best approach the interaction. It may help to think of difficulties in terms of situations and actions instead of people (Packard & Race, 2013). The most important step is to prepare. "The worse the news, the more thought and effort we need to put into delivering it" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 108). It may be helpful to consider and plan for the meeting in three phases: setting up the meeting, managing the discussion during the meeting, and bringing the meeting to an end.

Setting Up the Meeting

- Consider which school staff should attend the meeting with the parent. Often the meeting involves the teacher and parent alone. When there is a known challenge with a particular parent, school administration should be part of the planning and may elect to be present. On some occasions it may be helpful to include a staff member who had a positive relationship with the parent in the past and who may be able to support a productive conversation (such as a former classroom teacher). Weinzapfel (2022)

recommended keeping the meeting small so the parent is not overwhelmed and ensuring the parent is aware of the meeting participants in advance.
- Initial steps include extending an invitation to the parent and arranging an appropriate time and location to meet. It is important to be respectful of the parent's schedule as much as possible in order to promote the parent's attendance.
- A home visit may be appropriate in some cases, although typically parent–teacher meetings are held at the school. Sanderson (2013) suggested holding the meeting in a neutral location in the school building (e.g., conference room) rather than in the child's classroom. It is helpful to support nonverbal communication by arranging comfortable seating on adult-sized chairs around a table versus across a desk. It is also courteous to provide water, coffee, or tea (Weinzapfel, 2022; Whitaker & Fiore, 2016).
- Consider any special needs on the part of the parent that will require attention and planning, such as a second language and need for an interpreter, as well as any culturally-based nonverbal messages to be aware of. Also note if the parent has a disability that requires consideration (such as vision loss, hearing loss, or mobility needs; Fiore & Fiore, 2017).

During the Meeting

- Develop an agenda for the meeting. Kullar (2020) recommended structuring the meeting with a clear beginning (introductions and expectations for the meeting), middle (state the problem and discuss), and ending (develop an action plan). It may be helpful to prepare and rehearse a first line (Kullar, 2020). Identify two or three key goals for the conversation (Weinzapfel, 2022).
- Ensure that notes are taken during the meeting (Weinzapfel, 2022), either by the teacher directly or by another staff member attending. When difficult conversations occur, it is important to "write down the details of conclusions, decisions, and assignments" (Grenny et al., 2022, p. 243).
- Honor each participant's time by clarifying the timeframe for the meeting from the outset (Applebaum, 2009). A specific timeframe in mind helps to structure the conversation and provides those gathered with a clear endpoint that will help to manage the meeting flow.
- Acknowledge the talents and abilities of the child (McEwan-Adkins, 2022; Reinking, 2019). This would be Level 1 information discussed above and presented early in the meeting. Reassure the parent that school staff care about and want the best for their child (McEwan-Adkins, 2022).
- Briefly identify the main concern(s) in clear language using a neutral tone. Use of I-messages at this point will help the teacher to own the concern about the student. If the parent has identified the concern and requested to meet, thank the parent for bringing the concern forward to make school

staff aware. Avoid the use of educational jargon and "loaded" language, and present factual information without judgement (Weinzapfel, 2022). It may be appropriate to provide a brief history for context (e.g., review of past supports; Sanderson, 2013). If the concern is academic, it may also be helpful to provide examples of the student's work as well as examples of "average" student work (e.g., a sample of text the student is reading versus grade level text, or a math sheet or writing sample by another student with their name removed that reflects grade level performance).

- During the meeting, utilize the key communication skills previously outlined. Listen actively and use silence to your advantage (Kullar, 2020). Actively seek to understand the parent's concern, and encourage parent input by incorporating open-ended questions to gain information and close-ended questions to confirm details. Check and clarify your assumptions by paraphrasing the parent's comments and by summarizing key points. Reclarify if indicated to ensure accuracy. Acknowledge and validate the parent's feelings throughout the discussion (McEwan-Adkins, 2022). It may also be helpful to clarify what the various participants need to address the problem (Sanderson, 2013).
- Pay attention to the nonverbal messages of the participants in the meeting (e.g., eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, volume, tone). The teacher should also pay close attention to managing their own nonverbal messages. It is important that school staff model the behaviors they wish to see in the meeting. Whitaker and Fiore (2016) emphasized that school staff should "never argue, yell, use sarcasm, or behave unprofessionally" (p. 6).
- School staff should be prepared to understand, even if they do not agree with the parent (Packard & Race, 2013).

Ending the Meeting

- Discuss possible next steps and use summary statements to finalize a plan. When a plan is created, consider asking permission from the parent to carry out a particular course of action with the child (Razer & Friedman, 2017). This approach serves to share control over what happens.
- Wrap up the meeting by summarizing the next steps for each individual involved and end on a positive note (Jaksec, 2013). It may be appropriate to arrange to provide meeting minutes to all participants once the minutes are prepared. Seek to agree to keep the communication lines open (Weinzapfel, 2022). Schedule a follow-up conversation or meeting if indicated.
- When the meeting is over, Weinzapfel (2022) recommended thanking the parent sincerely for attending and offering input. Take time to accompany the parent to the front office or exit door after the meeting has concluded (Jaksec, 2013).

Unplanned Conversations

When an unexpected and unplanned difficult conversation ensues with an upset or angry parent, the first thing to do is to take several deep breaths to calm (Weinzapfel, 2022). In a neutral tone, thank the parent for bringing the concern forward and observe the parent's verbal and nonverbal body language. Paraphrase the parent concern so the parent feels heard and the teacher clearly understands the issue at hand (McEwan-Adkins, 2022). The teacher then needs to determine if their schedule allows time to have an immediate conversation with the parent, if is reasonable to do so, and if another staff member should be present (e.g., principal). Conversely, sometimes it is the school adminstrator who must respond to an unplanned difficult conversation with an upset parent who arrives at the office and must consider who should be present.

If an immediate meeting is possible, invite further conversation and, when possible, move the parent to a comfortable, private, and safe location. Clarify the intent of the meeting and the timeframe available. Take notes. Proceed using the communication skills previously discussed including active listening, questioning strategies, paraphrasing and summarizing, and observing the nonverbals in the conversation. Bring the conversation to a close with a proactive plan if possible. If there is still discontent on the part of the parent, book a follow-up time for a planned meeting. When the meeting is over, take time soon after to review the notes and consult with appropriate school staff to discuss next steps.

If there is not sufficient time to meet with the parent in the moment, book a time for a planned meeting with the parent in the near future. Grenny et al. (2022) recommended reducing the "lag time" between when a problem is brought forward and when the problem is discussed and resolved. The message to the parent is that their concern is heard and there will be an opportunity for further discussion very soon. Sometimes deferring the conversation to another day may result in a calmer parent (although not always the case), but it does allow the educator time to prepare and to investigate the issue (if needed).

For both planned and unplanned difficult conversations, it is important for teachers to have a response plan in the event that a parent engages in angry cricitisms and/or accusations that may include inappropriate language. Whitaker and Fiore (2016) suggested a comment said calmly and slowly, such as: Mr./Ms./Mrs. XXX, "Please don't talk to me like that. I will *never* speak to you like that, and I will *never* speak to your child like that, so please don't talk to me like that" (p. 116). This approach accomplishes two things according to the authors. First, it is a "reasonable and professional request" (p. 117). Second, it is a promise that demonstrates how school staff will treat the parent and the

child. It is challenging interactions such as these that reinforce the need for educators to learn, practice, and actively use effective communication skills to listen, understand parent perspectives, recognize and attempt to diffuse strong emotions, and develop action plans to best support student success.

After a Difficult Conversation

After a difficult conversation with a parent, it is important to take some time to review the notes of the meeting and to personally debrief the experience (Weinzapfel, 2022). If other staff were present, an opportunity for joint reflection is helpful. Teachers should consider their feelings about the meeting including the general experience, the content, the demeanor of the participants, and the concluding plan of action. If the conversation went well, review the strategies that were helpful. If the conversation did not go well, it is helpful to consider the tone and nonverbals during the meeting and for educators to evaluate their own role in the conversation (Sanderson, 2013). Also consider potential factors that may have influenced the outcome (such as differing opinions that became evident, differing goals for the child, and/or strong emotions). Once again, teachers can use the experience as a learning opportunity to consider what could be done differently if a similar situation arises in the future (Packard & Race, 2013) as well as potential next steps. Going forward, it will be very important to carry out the plan arrived at during the meeting, to monitor the student's progress over time, and to follow-up with the parent (Kuhler, 2020).

Barriers to Difficult Conversations

A number of barriers exist that may negatively impact difficult conversations between teachers and parents. Lack of training on effective communication skills has been identified as a primary barrier for preservice teachers in their preparation programs. For practicing teachers, the lack of professional development time and competing educational priorities negatively impact the potential for focused on-the-job training.

The stress involved in having difficult conversations with parents may also create a barrier for teachers. Difficult conversations can be highly stressful, creating strong emotions that may produce a fight or flight response (Reinking, 2019). The flight response for the teacher may be to ignore or to avoid the conversation altogether. Teachers who have had a previous uncomfortable interaction with an angry parent may fear initiating yet another difficult conversation (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016). Teachers may avoid difficult conversations with parents for many other reasons as well, including: a concern the parent

may come to dislike the teacher, discomfort with the topic, fear of confrontation, a "nothing-will-change" attitude towards the parent, time constraints, as well as uncertainty about how the parent will react (Kullar, 2020). There is also the worry about making things worse (Grenny et all., 2022). The potential outcome of having a difficult conversation is that it is handled poorly (e.g., strong emotions get in the way and the conversation is not productive) or that it is handled well, with a clear, go-forward plan and an improved relationship (Grenny et al., 2022).

Parents also face many barriers to having difficult conversations with teachers. Many parents are dealing with multiple and significant pressures such as a lack of positive parenting role models, difficult school experiences themselves, financial and job pressures, stressful family situations, and challenges related to language and cultural diversity. In addition to these factors, parents typically lack knowledge about the school system and curriculum demands and about support services that may be available to them. Parents may also not have a realistic sense of age-appropriate expectations for their child. Any of these factors may affect a parent's willingness to become vulnerable and discuss a concern about their child. Strong parental emotions may also cause parents to avoid difficult conversations with school staff. The source of strong reactions by parents is often fear or confusion associated with not understanding the situation (McEwan-Adkins, 2022) or feeling their child has been mistreated or wronged (Jaksec, 2013). An important premise for teachers to keep in mind is that "parents have their child's best interests in mind and do their best under difficult circumstances" (Razer & Friedman, 2017, p. 127).

Future Directions

Communication skills for teachers are a significant, perhaps underestimated, and certainly less researched component of home–school partnerships. The lack of training for both preservice and practicing teachers has been well documented, and the number of skill sets needed are broad in scope, including in-person communication skills, skills to communicate effectively through various forms of technology, as well as knowledge of culturally responsive practices (Graham-Clay, 2024).

With respect to practical in-person communication skills, continued research is needed to expand the use of innovative approaches to train preservice teachers in the specific communication skills they need to hold difficult conversations with parents. Several innovative approaches to teacher training have been described in the literature, including the use of simulations (Walker & Legg, 2018), videos (DeConinck et al., 2018), and a cross-discipline

certification training course (Miller et al., 2018). In particular, research is needed on strategies to develop the communication skills of currently practicing teachers, such as incorporating the use of role plays during staff meetings, use of mentoring by experienced teachers (e.g., Mosley et al., 2023), as well as the creation of Professional Learning Communities focused on specific skill development (e.g., Wages, 2021).

Continued research is needed to develop effective strategies to train teachers who are communicating with culturally and linguistically diverse families, including effective use of translation (e.g., Yan et al., 2022) and interpretation services (e.g., Tipton & Furmanek, 2016). It is also important that training alerts teachers to the potential racial and cultural biases that may shape their communications with parents (Cherng, 2016) and may negatively impact their interactions with many famlies.

Research on the application and effectiveness of using leveled information (Tharinger et al., 2008) by teachers when sharing assessment information with parents would be most interesting. Lastly, future research is needed that explores the best fit between various topics of communication with parents (e.g., general information, student progress, student concern) and the mode of communication used (e.g., in-person, e-mail, text) to inform effective practice.

Conclusion

Communication between teachers and parents is relational in nature, built upon a range of communication formats (including both in-person and digital interactions), and develops over time. As part of this ongoing communication exchange, the potential for differing opinions and strong emotions between teachers and parents is real and should be anticipated (Razer & Friedman, 2017). In fact, communication is at the root of most misunderstandings (Fiore & Fiore, 2017). The prospect of having difficult conversations with parents can be unnerving for many teachers. Unfortunately, gaps continue to exist in the training of effective communication skills that will help teachers build confidence and maximize effective interactions with parents. This article outlines a range of practical communication skills that teachers can use to hold difficult conversations with parents, and is intended as a companion to the essay and discussion article by Graham-Clay (2024) that focuses on a broad range of strategies that teachers can use when communicating with parents.

Effective communication goes beyond just the exchange of information to include "understanding the emotion behind the information" (Rana, 2015, p. 29). During difficult conversations, teachers are encouraged to use leveled information to engage the parent, to listen actively to the parent's comments and

concerns, and to attend to and monitor the nonverbal messages of the participants in the meeting (themselves included). Use of I-messages will help teachers to own their concern for the child and help to diffuse negative emotions on the part of the parent. Teachers are also encouraged to use open- and closed-ended questioning techniques to obtain and confirm information, as well as paraphrasing and summarizing the parent's message to ensure accuracy of understanding. The vocabulary used by the teacher throughout the discussion should be clear, and educational jargon and loaded language should be avoided.

When a difficult conversation with a parent is needed, teachers are encouraged to plan and prepare in advance (when possible), to remain calm, to seek to understand the parent's perspective, to identify the key concerns, and to use the effective communication skills discussed to promote an open and respectful interchange of ideas to determine a course of action to support the child. When difficult conversations are impromptu and unplanned, there are still effective strategies that can be used in the moment to manage the interaction. Ultimately, each communication exchange provides a learning opportunity for the teacher to inform and support future parent interactions.

Many relational and emotional factors impact the interactions between teachers and parents and may cause communication to become challenging at times. When conversations with parents become difficult, it is important for teachers to remember that "parents do the best they know how" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 4). Use of effective communication skills on the part of the teacher will build teacher confidence to hold difficult conversations with parents when needed and will help to channel the strong emotions parents feel for their child into meaningful and productive partnerships. From this perspective, every communication exchange with a parent provides an opportunity for future positive interactions to support student success.

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How Father-Friendly Are K–12 Schools? Findings From a Community Survey

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Abstract

Fathers make important contributions to children's learning and development; however, schools and community organizations consistently report challenges to engaging fathers in their work. As part of a larger community-based participatory research project, a local fatherhood coalition created and distributed a survey to learn how various organizations and programs supported or marginalized fathers in their work. A mixed methods analysis of survey data indicated that K–12 schools were significantly less father-friendly than social service organizations, with K–12 schools disclosing that little to no services targeted fathers and most family engagement efforts prioritized mothers or assumed father disinterest. Comparatively, some social service organizations reported father-specific programming or early efforts to change policies and practices that unjustly favored mothers. However, most organizations, including K–12 schools, needed greater guidance and resources to become more father-friendly. In this article, we describe how the fatherhood coalition utilized survey results to guide their efforts in supporting local fathers and transforming organizational practices to make family-related programming and activities more inclusive of fathers and other male caregivers.

Key Words: father engagement, community-based survey research, family engagement, K–12 schools, school bias, dads, male caregivers

Introduction

To care about children is to care about families, and to care about families is to care about fathers. For decades, family research narrowly focused on mothers (Parke, 2004), distorting what we actually know about fathers because so much of what we know about families is defined by the maternal role (Amato, 2018; Guterman et al., 2018; Lynch & Zwerling, 2020). Even though research on fathers consistently documents the many ways fathers benefit children's academic, social–emotional, and physical development (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Carlson, 2006; Jeynes, 2015; Hill, 2015), fathers' parenting abilities and desires to be engaged are often dismissed or discounted by schools and communities (Arditti et al., 2019; Fagan & Kaufman, 2015; Miller et al., 2021; Palm, 2014; Posey-Maddox, 2017). Outdated views of fathers as merely "providers" or "secondary parents" continue to obscure the reality that fathers are more present than ever in children's lives (Livingston & Parker, 2019; Trahan & Cheung, 2018; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Unfortunately, these antiquated views slow the response of community programs and organizations to support fathers' evolving roles in the lives of their children (Lee et al., 2016; Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Perry, 2011).

For that reason, a local nonprofit organization assembled a community-based fatherhood coalition to address the biases that fathers often face in parenting and family-related services and activities. The purpose of this community-based research was to support the direction and efforts of the coalition by investigating levels of father-friendliness in a small urban community, as well as by comparing how different community sectors reported supporting the engagement of fathers. In this article, we share our research process and how findings are guiding our efforts to create a more equitable and father-friendly community, especially in educational spaces.

Literature Review

Father and Family Engagement

Father engagement is a multidimensional construct encompassing the various ways fathers can support children and their development (Pfitzner et al., 2017). It might involve specific activities related to their parenting role (e.g., teaching skills, helping with homework, attending child events, contributing resources), building attachment with the child, or finding joy and fulfillment as a father (Trahan & Cheung, 2018; Varga et al., 2017; Yoder et al., 2016). Given the multifaceted nature of parenting, various community roles and sectors intersect with fatherhood, but this topic is especially relevant to social service

organizations and schools, as they serve families and are typically required to set goals for family engagement (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Lundahl et al., 2008).

Family engagement definitions vary slightly, but in general, definitions suggest that family engagement is a shared process across schools, families, and community agencies to actively support children's learning and development in meaningful ways (Allen, 2007; Amatea, 2013; National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2023). One might assume that family engagement is father engagement, as fathers are part of the family unit, and that is the line of reasoning most organizations and school districts use. This belief assumes that since fathers fit within the parameters of who is considered "family," fathers are therefore served by "family" programming and services (de Montigny et al., 2017; Miller & Arellanes, 2023). Unfortunately, that is often not the case. Historically, "family" and "parent" engagement have been inclusive in name only and, in reality, are generally geared toward mothers and other female caregivers (Amato, 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Although *family* and *parent* activities sound inclusive of and welcoming to fathers, they are simply not.

Father Marginalization and Schools

Perhaps the most influential organization in a community is the public school, as schools often serve as the hub for services and information related to children's growth and development (Bergin & Bergin, 2018). However, schools and other educational spaces share a long history of directing communication and programming toward mothers (Lee et al., 2016; Lynch & Zwerling, 2020). For example, McBride and Rane (2018) reported that some teachers and mothers are hesitant to involve fathers in early childhood programming. Similar research finds that mothers are assumed to be the primary caregiver and point of contact for schools, which explains why fathers report experiencing marginalization or, in some cases, even resistance to their engagement (de Montigny et al., 2017; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Posey-Maddox, 2017).

Although many could argue that parents, in general, lack support from social institutions and communities, fathers in particular are devalued, ignored, and often viewed as incompetent caregivers (Osborn, 2015; Wilson & Thompson, 2020). To be "seen" as an involved parent, fathers struggle against socially constructed roles of parents (Amato, 2018; Wall & Arnold, 2007) and often have to initiate contact with schools (Miller et al., 2021). This is likely to reflect an inherent deficit-minded perspective of fathers in society, which is evidenced by the erroneous assumption that males are less willing and less able to nurture their children (Livingston & Parker, 2019; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). This

bias, whether conscious or unconscious, places fathers on the sidelines with fewer inroads to connect with schools and other community organizations.

Today, most fathers want to experience the joys and challenges of parenthood and consider fatherhood as a dominant component of their self-identity (Livingston & Parker, 2019; Palm, 2014). However, if schools and communities continue to view fathers as "accessory parents" who are valued purely for their financial contributions to a child's upbringing, father engagement will continue to suffer. It is a missed opportunity for fathers and schools alike (Possey-Maddox, 2017). The long-standing assumption that mothers care more because they "show up" more ignores the gendered aspects of family engagement (Amato, 2018; Miller et al., 2021). Thus, we argue that although schools may believe that fathers are lacking in parental engagement, it may likely be a result of the mother-focused school structures within which fathers are asked to engage.

Fathers and Community Organizations

Many community organizations are dedicated to social justice and improving the lives of families (McLaughlin et al., 2015). Yet much of the national discourse toward social justice has focused on women, underserved populations, and individuals with disabilities (Unterhalter & Brighouse, 2007). These efforts, though admirable, often ignore fathers, as fathers may not be seen as primary caregivers or as a group facing barriers to engagement (Amato, 2018; Arditti et al., 2019). This discrepancy may be best illustrated by the naming of local and federal programming such as *Woman, Infants, and Children* or *Abused Women and Their Children,* which demonstrate that the service is not for fathers, only mothers.

In a meta-analytic study of fatherhood programs, researchers found that father-specific programming can generate a small but positive effect on father involvement (Holmes et al., 2020). Father-based community programs with positive outcomes can also improve other aspects of family life such as child development (Sarkadi et al., 2008), employment help (Fatherhood Research and Practice Network, 2018), involvement in children's education (Palm & Fagan, 2013), men's health (Rosenberg, 2009), and even breastfeeding support (Bich et al., 2019). Although we celebrate the effectiveness of these programs, many fatherhood programs continue to struggle (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007). Community programs that target fathers often face challenges in getting fathers to participate (Fagan & Pearson, 2020; Perry, 2011), funding (Martinson & Nightingale, 2008), and staffing (Palm & Fagan, 2013). Even when a program is established, a community program alone cannot overcome the widespread systemic challenges that fathers face as parents (Randles, 2020). To address

these issues, research emphasizes the importance of developing consistent programming that resonates with fathers in their community (Perry, 2011), and there is some evidence that social service organizations are moving in that direction (Fagan & Pearson, 2020).

Theoretical Perspective

The fatherhood coalition is made up of over 20 different organizations and groups representing various fields and roles (e.g., school districts, social services, legal groups, libraries, community health centers, etc.). Therefore, the coalition is founded on the idea that to support fathers we must consider the surrounding systems and social factors that shape their lives as fathers—and that community roles and efforts are all interconnected in some way. Without explicitly naming a theory, the principles of systems theory guided the creation of the coalition and all subsequent activities of the group (Amatea, 2013). "General systems theory is likened to a science of wholeness" (Friedman & Allen, 2014) in that intersecting factors from the micro-level to the macro-level determine the experiences and engagement levels of fathers. For example, living with a child may give a father regular access to engage with a child, but cultural stereotypes and conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood will shape what those interactions might look like (Cabrera et al., 2000; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). The coalition approached our research with an understanding that the community plays a key role in a father's engagement, but also recognized that many other systems and factors inform a community's capacity to support fathers (e.g., funding, transportation, cultural beliefs, societal attitudes).

Therefore, this project also draws upon the concept of *deficit ideology* (Gorski, 2011; Sleeter, 2004), also referred to as *deficit theory* (Collins, 1988; Dudley-Marling, 2007) and *deficit thinking* (Valencia, 2012), which can influence what the community looks like and feels like to fathers. Deficit ideology draws attention to institutionalized worldviews of marginalized groups and individuals who are seen for their assumed flaws and deficiencies rather than their strengths or the systemic conditions within which they live (Gorski, 2011; Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Sleeter, 2004). Historically, fathers are positioned as the less competent caregiver (Wall & Arnold, 2007), and men are presumed to be the problem from which women and children need to escape (Wilson & Thompson, 2020).

Deficit-minded professionals and communities assume/portray fathers as either absent or disengaged which, in turn, deteriorates expectations and opportunities for fathers to be engaged in children's lives (Gorski, 2011; Jimenez-Castellanos & Gonzalez, 2012). For that reason, the fatherhood coalition explicitly states that our mission is to better understand and support

fathers' many contributions to children's development, rather than unjustifiably try to remediate *perceived* failings. Further, *deficit ideology* allowed our research process to consider and critique deficit-based stereotypes of fathers within our data and the larger story of father engagement in our community.

Context and Background

The fatherhood coalition emerged from an issue that united many community organizations and programs—failure to effectively engage fathers in parenting and family programming. Conversations across various organizations led to the creation of a fatherhood coalition in 2018 with representatives from various sectors across the community (e.g., community programs, nonprofit agencies, early childhood services, K–12 school districts, universities, faith communities, local residents). The first gathering involved a working lunch with small group discussions about fathers in the community and barriers to program engagement. From there, attendees decided to meet regularly to brainstorm ideas and support one another. To date, over 90 individuals have participated in meetings or coalition activities, with approximately 20 members attending regularly (see Miller et al., 2020).

The fatherhood coalition did not originally envision research as part of our work. However, as the group grew and made movements in the community, we realized that gathering local data was critical to making informed decisions about what we should be doing and with whom (Hacker, 2013; Letiecq et al., 2022). We began our research journey by learning about fathers' lived experiences through interviews and focus groups (see Miller et al., 2020, 2021) and then moved into the current study that focused on the community's levels of father-friendliness.

The unique and diverse dynamics of the group allowed us to adopt principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) to coincide with our ongoing efforts to learn more about fathers and use data to drive our decisions (Schensul et al., 2008; Viswanathan et al., 2004). Such principles included:

- Using techniques from social science to support community activism and change
- challenging elitist structures of higher education by valuing the expertise of the community
- Drawing from community strengths and resources
- Promoting co-learning and capacity-building among all partners
- Maintaining mutual ownership of the process and products

Further, a community-based approach allowed community members to consider the father-related strengths and limitations of our community and ways

to bring about positive change for children and families (Caldwell et al., 2001; Hacker, 2013; Letiecq et al., 2022).

Materials and Methods

Since the design of the study is rooted in the principles of CBPR, the goal was to make the research process a co-learning and capacity-building endeavor (Lantz et al., 2001). Therefore, we exercised shared governance during each step of the research process. First, we collectively generated research questions to pursue in examining community data on father engagement.

1. How do local K–12 schools compare to social service agencies on their reported levels of father-friendliness?
2. How do descriptions of father-related programming and activities compare between K–12 schools and social service agencies?

We selected a concurrent mixed methods design, which included quantitative and qualitative items within one instrument (Ivankova, 2015). This blending of qualitative and quantitative data allowed us to consider general patterns in the community while also interpreting those patterns with the assistance of participants' written comments and insight. To maintain our community-driven approach, the study was designed in a way that community members and schools alike could understand and share the findings from this study, as well as allow coalition members to engage in the full scope of the research process.

Participants

One goal of the survey was to gather information from a wide range of individuals who serve within the community. Therefore, coalition members created a spreadsheet of names and organizations whose work intersected with families and children. Names and email addresses were collected from website directories connected to organizations and programs that served children or families in the local community. We did not check if each recipient's organization offered fatherhood or father-specific programs, just that they offered family services. Additionally, we did not target specific roles, such as administrators, as we desired representation across positions. The spreadsheet remained open to coalition members for their review, which allowed for the addition of names or programs that were missing from the list, based on their knowledge of the community. Ultimately, the distribution list consisted of approximately 500 recipients from a range of sectors (i.e., K–12 schools, social services, family services, early intervention, community health, nonprofit organizations, first responders, government agencies, faith communities), and a total of 122

participants completed the survey listing positions from each of the previous sectors (see Miller & Arellanes, 2023).

For this study, we narrowed the sample to focus on the two largest groups of respondents, participants from the field of social services and K–12 schools. We sent emails to 119 individuals in social services and 125 individuals in K–12 schools. Twenty-eight participants (23.5% of recipients) identified as social service professionals and 24 participants (19.2% of recipients) identified as K–12 school professionals. Of these 52 participants, 11 (21.2%) identified as service providers, 19 (36.5%) identified as educators, 14 (26.9%) identified as school or community administrators, and eight (15.4%) identified as "other" (e.g., specialist, coordinator, board member). Although the county has an approximate size of 130,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), given the interconnectedness of organizations and the familiarity of individuals within the community, participants were only required to report their professional sectors and roles to protect anonymity. All participants completed an IRB-approved consent form before completing the survey.

Data Collection

The coalition used the Father-Friendly Check-up Survey as a starting point for developing a community survey (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2016). The tool was developed for organizations to use in assessing how much they encouraged or discouraged father engagement in programming and activities. The survey contained over 80 Likert-scale questions, from which eight questions were drawn for the community survey. The eight questions (see Appendix) were selected because coalition members believed they were the most relevant to aspects of father engagement in community services spanning areas of *direct services and resources* (i.e., Does your organization offer father-specific services or programs?), *internal reflection and planning* (Has your organization conducted an audit of services for fathers?), and a *contextual/ecological understanding of fatherhood* (Does your organization acknowledge systemic bias against fathers?). Each item prompted participants to select from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) on a Likert-scale.

Some survey questions were constructed to be pro-father friendly. This was done as directional survey questions were more relevant to the research questions than neutral survey questions (i.e., is being father-friendly good or bad?). This decision is supported by previous literature as meta-analyses suggest father involvement in schools is beneficial (Hill, 2015; Jeynes, 2015). The survey also included open-ended comment boxes following each question item to allow participants to explain or expand upon their quantitative responses. Additionally, participants were asked to provide general feedback and ideas for the coalition, followed by questions about their positions and organizations.

Analysis

For research question one, we compared the two subgroups within the sample: social services (*N* = 28), and K–12 schools (*N* = 24). We compared these groups because teachers and social service providers are trained in differing philosophies and approaches to working with children and families (Amatea et al., 2013), wherein teacher education typically positions the student as the focal point with families on the periphery, and social services typically viewing the family more holistically in their work. To compare responses, we conducted independent-samples *t*-tests (two-tailed) for each item on the survey using SPSS Version 29. Comparing each item accounted for eight different areas of father engagement and friendliness within local services. Output scores of assumed equal variance were used, having met the assumption of homogeneity of variance for each item. Additionally, we created composite scores for each participant survey to examine the difference in rank sum for social service and K–12 school participants using the Mann-Whitney *U* test. The Mann-Whitney *U* test (SPSS Version 26) helped us rank participant surveys based on their cumulative responses related to father friendliness. Scores ranged from 1–52 with 52 representing the most father-friendly responses. Thus, we compared eight individual aspects of father engagement as well as the cumulative ranking between social services and schools.

For research question two, we qualitatively analyzed open-ended responses. We began with a collective review of all written comments at a fatherhood coalition meeting. Members met in small groups to review data and create bullet point notes of the main ideas. Next, data were uploaded into NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2012) by the principal investigators, and an inductive coding process was applied to written responses through an open-to-axial coding process, in consultation with the analytic notes generated by coalition members (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Through a constant comparative approach (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013), we determined ways in which responses overlapped and ways in which they diverged between K–12 school participants and social service participants. Initial themes were then presented at monthly meetings for coalition members to review. Coalition members were presented with the data and asked to confirm if they saw similar themes or how themes could be expanded or refined. Coalition members also discussed qualitative themes in relation to quantitative scores (Ivankova, 2015). After three coalition meetings, the group agreed upon final themes.

Results

T-test results showed that K–12 schools are significantly less father-friendly than social service organizations and agencies based on participant reports. Differences were significant (p-value < .05) for every item on the survey, which covered the areas of *programming and services*, *internal reflection and planning*, and *contextual/ecological understandings* of fatherhood and father engagement. Table 1 summarizes these results. Additionally, the Mann-Whitney *U* test showed a significant difference in the sum or ranks between the two groups (U = 131.5, p = .000), with the mean rank of social service professionals (33.8) significantly higher than K–12 school professionals (18.0). Both sets of results provided sufficient evidence that social service organizations are more father-friendly than K–12 schools within our local community.

Table 1. Independent Samples *T*-tests

Survey Item	Social Services Mean (SD) (*N*=28)	K–12 Schools Mean (SD) (*N*=24)	*t*-value	df	*p*-value
Programming and Services					
Item 1: Services specifically for fathers	3.86 (1.35)	1.71 (.95)	6.51	50	.000
Item 2: Services to strengthen fathers' role	4.07 (1.05)	2.54 (1.14)	5.03	50	.000
Internal Reflection and Planning					
Item 3: Building staff capacity	3.43 (1.28)	1.83 (1.01)	4.91	50	.000
Item 4: Review of policies	2.86 (1.27)	1.67 (.92)	3.82	50	.000
Item 5: Hiring males	3.79 (1.13)	2.54 (1.14)	3.93	50	.000
Item 6: Surveying fathers	3.29 (1.18)	1.71 (1.00)	5.15	50	.000
Contextual/Ecological Understandings					
Item 7: Acknowledging bias	3.68 (1.06)	2.17 (.87)	5.58	50	.000
Item 8: Trauma-informed approach	4.00 (1.02)	2.75 (1.19)	4.09	50	.000

Written responses helped to explain the lower quantitative scores from participants working in K–12 school settings. There was some but limited overlap in qualitative coding between these two groups, as most K–12 participants were unaware or unsure as to how fathers were engaged or supported by the district, with some even suggesting the schools created bias and harm toward fathers.

Conversely, some social service participants described specific father-related services or efforts occurring in their organizations or programs as they moved toward more father-friendly practices. However, many social service participants also admitted there was much work to be done for fathers, with some agencies struggling to move beyond the status quo of assuming gender-neutral family services met the needs of fathers. Each theme is described below with explanations as to how themes help explain quantitative results.

Open to Fathers Versus Targeting Fathers

There was a strong sentiment from K–12 participants and some social service providers that fathers were served through their gender-neutral *family* and *parenting* programs, resources, and outreach efforts. In fact, this thinking may have inflated some of the father-friendliness scores if participants assumed that "family" and "father" can be used interchangeably since fathers are part of the family unit. One K–12 school educator wrote, "We do not specifically target mothers or fathers but just generally parents/guardians." Similarly, a K–12 administrator wrote, "Throughout the year, home visits, parent–teacher conferences, events, etc. are offered to strengthen fathers' roles as a parent. Any benefits would apply to all parents/guardians. Nothing specific to fathers."

In comparison, a notable portion of social service responses communicated that *father* engagement was unique to *family* engagement and that targeting fathers was critical to their work with families—setting father engagement apart from general family engagement activities. This suggested that, although fathers could attend family and parent programs or activities, fathers would benefit from programming specific to their parenting identities and needs. For example, one social service provider wrote, "We provide workshops and trainings that are father specific and parent groups for fathers. Collaborative efforts are made to provide fatherhood activities in the county." Similarly, a social service administrator shared they were at the "beginning stages of fatherhood program and group services." Such comments showed that gendered programming was occurring or emerging within some social service organizations in the community. With other community organizations suggesting that although their agency might not yet be at the father-friendly level they desired, there was an openness to change and desire for growth (e.g., "Would love to offer something like this," "I will bring this up at our next meeting," "Great idea!").

Unsure or "Not Applicable"

Most written comments from K–12 participants suggested that participants working in K–12 school settings were unaware of any specific resources, services, or activities for fathers. For example, several K–12 school participants

wrote, "We do not offer any [programs/services] to my knowledge," "I'm not sure we have anything geared toward fathers," "Just haven't done this," and "If they did, they did nothing to make me aware of it." However, there was one response that identified a school in their district that may have hosted a father group in the past but was unsure if it still existed. This comment, although an anomaly, showed that a father-specific program may have existed in the district under the leadership of a male principal.

Interestingly, several K–12 participants wrote "N/A [Not Applicable]" in the comment sections following each survey item, which could be interpreted as not having information to report on this topic or that the participant did not believe it applied to their role or sector. "N/A" was found in the comments section for every survey item at least once. One participant wrote it in every comment box, and several other participants responded with "N/A" for items related to offering father-specific services, strengthening fathers' roles, and utilizing a trauma-informed approach with fathers. Comparatively, zero participants in social service roles responded with "N/A" to any of the survey items. It should be further noted that participants were not required to write in the comment boxes. When proceeding to each new survey item, participants who had not entered a comment received a reminder that they could write comments in the identified box, but the system did not require written text to proceed. Therefore, writing "N/A" was not a necessary step to move forward, indicating it was an intentional response.

Unlike K–12 school participants, those working in social service positions rarely responded with "I don't know" or "unsure" and never suggested this survey did not apply to their work. It was clear that conversations about engaging fathers and some programming were occurring within social service organizations in the community. Even if their agency did not offer fatherhood services, they recognized the value of offering such programs. This helped to explain higher mean scores and rankings for father-friendliness and also transferred into the next theme on an organization's capacity to serve fathers.

Resources and Capacity

We identified a notable difference in the number of resources and amount of time invested in fathers, based on participant responses. For several social service responses, participants described hiring individuals to serve as a father liaison or facilitator within the organization and allocating time for professional development related to engaging fathers. Such comments included, "We have a male program manager and male coordinators" and "We have a fatherhood coordinator." Such comments showed a level of commitment to fathers in the funding attached to these positions.

However, more robustly, participants identified a need for more funding and support to make their organizations more father-friendly (e.g., "need more staff for program growth," "funding is limited at this time," "no staff"). This was true of social service participants and K–12 school participants. Several social service responses described their organization's reliance on volunteers and therefore found it difficult to specifically seek out males/fathers to fill roles, build the capacity to develop surveys for fathers, or conduct audits specific to father engagement. Most organizations lacked the staff and funding to implement services for fathers. Interestingly, several educators talked about a few male hires but explained that this was purely for instructional purposes, and not an effort to support father engagement. One educator wrote, "I've seen males hired, obviously, but never specifically to engage with fathers. I've never even seen an employee be asked to engage specifically with fathers at any time." Such comments help explain the low quantitative scores attached to hiring males to engage fathers.

The theme of *resources and capacity* also intersected with the COVID-19 pandemic response. We collected survey data in the spring of 2022, which overlapped with an academic school year impacted by the pandemic and its accompanying policies and struggles. A few K–12 participants mentioned that the focus of the school year was simply "getting through COVID," which could explain some of the lower rates of father-friendliness. It emerged as a type of disclaimer for several participants who reported low levels of father-friendliness for their school. For example, a few comments stated, "Right now, our efforts have been focused on COVID-19" and "We have been focused on COVID and its effects this year." Further, one educator wrote, "I am new to the district, and COVID has impacted programs. I do not know what was offered in years past, but at this time, I know of no such programs." This comment acknowledged that programs and activities were disrupted or paused during the pandemic (2020–22); this may be especially true for family engagement activities and school districts' wariness of in-person interactions. Interestingly, the pandemic was not mentioned by any social service participants in the study, suggesting that social service positions felt less of the pandemic's impact on their capacity to serve families or fathers in the spring of 2022 or that they experienced greater success in working around those challenges.

Bias and Harm

Social service and K–12 participants discussed bias and harm in written responses but in different ways. Those who served in social service organizations more frequently acknowledged the bias and harm that fathers face in the community or ways they were trying to bring about change for fathers. One

participant wrote, “We see a tendency of bias against fathers in our community. We do try to serve fathers alienated from their families.” Such comments help to explain the more favorable scores related to father-friendliness on quantitative items. In a few responses, participants distinguished between their personal view and their organization’s view. For example, one service provider wrote, “I agree there is bias against fathers. But that is my individual position. Organizationally, we do not have a position on this topic.” Such comments suggested that personal beliefs about fathers and the need for change might not match organizational mindsets or practices.

Conversely, K–12 participants reported a lack of acknowledgment of bias against fathers, with some comments suggesting schools are contributing to deficit views of fathers and the bias they experience as parents. For example, several comments reinforced the view that fathers are lacking and need help. One educator wrote, “Fathers need to be given tools on how to be involved. Fathers need mental health, addiction, job support, etc.” Therefore, rather than acknowledging the systems that may serve as barriers to involvement or accepting some ownership of the problem, such comments directed blame toward the fathers. Another participant had personally experienced that type of negativity from the school as a father and shared:

> Keep your head up. You have picked a tough battle to fight, and even as a school employee and a father of a student in the district, I have accepted that I will be valued less or even treated like a necessary evil in my kids’ lives. It would bother me a lot more if it actually affected my kids’ thinking, but somehow they still seem to love and value me as much as their mother.

This was an interesting quote because it shows the complexity of being negatively impacted by an institutionalized bias while simultaneously serving within a system that enacts those biased practices.

A few participants wrote more critically about a notable bias towards mothers. For example, one participant wrote, “Every bit of outreach I’ve seen [name of district] appears to be catered to women, if not explicitly addressed to mothers.” Other educators reported activities that they viewed as harmful to fathers. For example, one participant shared, “The district ‘resource officers’ (cops who treat schools exactly how they treat prisons) are good at creating trauma in families, but I’ve never seen any positive intentional approach to fathers at all,” suggesting that schools may not just neglect fathers, but actually impose harm. One participant even wrote about the fear of bringing up this issue in the district, “I feel like even voicing that opinion [to create father-specific services and supports] puts a target on my back in the district.” This comment highlights

the political and social pressures within districts and organizations that appeared across several written comments.

Discussion

Recognizing and building upon father engagement is paramount to student success and well-being (Amatea, 2013; Jeynes, 2015), and the lack of father-friendliness reported by K–12 schools was concerning, more so than other sectors in the community. The differences between groups may be best identified by the lens they are bringing to the conversation. Schools were predominantly focused on treating all parental figures as a unified group. They often dismissed the differences between parents or actively disregarded the need for father-specific programming. The social service community programs instead shared a greater openness to father-specific programming, which matches some of the emerging research in this area (Fagan & Pearson, 2020; Holmes et al., 2020). Though some agencies did not currently offer resources for fathers, there was a greater acceptance in considering change within the organization to offer such services (i.e., "This has been part of our discussions"). Comparatively, K–12 school participants viewed such programming as "not applicable" or outside the purview of their role.

Overall, most organizations and schools could benefit from auditing their current family engagement practices and policies. In fact, community organizations as a whole might be doing less than the data communicated, in that organizations that are actively focusing on fathers were more likely to write about those activities in the comments section rather than skip the prompt. Therefore, although findings showed that community organizations were doing "better" than K–12 schools, we do not suggest that they are doing well as a whole (Amato, 2018). By reviewing current practices and policies, organizations and schools could determine how established operations may benefit mothers and marginalize or neglect fathers, which could lead to inclusive changes for fathers (Lee et al., 2016; Lynch & Zwerling, 2020). Additionally, many participants assumed that family engagement activities were also father engagement activities, as fathers are part of the family unit. However, there is a strong need to move beyond the "one size fits all" family engagement strategies and programs that are essentially designed for mothers (Panter-Brick et al., 2014) and recognize that seemingly inclusionary terms like "family" can unintentionally exclude fathers (Guterman et al., 2018).

Survey results also showed that father engagement is a multidimensional concept, with many factors influencing the mindset of professionals and the programs/services available to fathers (Cabrera et al., 2014), from funding to

overarching societal views. A systems perspective asks scholars and professionals to look at the "wholeness" of a phenomenon (Friedman & Allen, 2014), and our data certainly showed the expansive and interconnected web of father engagement influences within the community and schools. Our findings are similar to previous research that suggested father engagement opportunities are limited by participation, funding, and staffing (Palm & Fagan, 2013; Perry, 2011), but it appears that COVID-19 placed additional restraints on schools and community programs in their abilities to deliver father engagement services. Schools noted the lack of bandwidth during this time. Social services noted issues with hiring and retaining qualified male professionals. For that reason, improving community conditions for fathers relies upon a collaborative community effort. Little progress will be made or sustained if organizations and schools continue to operate independently (Hacker, 2013; Lantz et al., 2001).

Deficit Ideology

Negative assumptions about fathers and their parenting roles permeate society and are present in how we view and treat fathers in various fields, including education (Tollestrup, 2018). These negative stereotypes can overshadow the many contributions that fathers make to children's learning and development and can weaken schools' relationships with important family members (de Montigny et al., 2017; Lynch & Zwerling, 2020; Posey-Maddox, 2017). In our qualitative data, deficit ideas and views of fathers appeared across the full data set, especially within comments from K–12 participants, with participants stating that father engagement is not applicable to schools and that fathers need "help" and "assistance." Additionally, some male employees reported feeling devalued as fathers in the school system.

There were also more subtle ways that deficit thinking manifested in the data. When participants stated that family engagement activities are open to all family members but "fathers just don't attend," it perpetuates the stereotype that fathers either do not want to be involved or are less competent parents in knowing how to be involved (Osborn, 2015; Wilson & Thompson, 2020). Accepting the dominant narrative that fathers *could* but *don't* is deficit thinking because it assumes weakness on the part of the fathers rather than our educational practices when, in fact, it is our practices that are failing fathers (Lee et al., 2016; Posey-Maddox, 2017). Schools *could* make activities more father-friendly, but the majority *don't*, as fathers are still viewed through a deficit lens (Wilson & Thompson, 2020).

Realistic Expectations

In defense of schools, K–12 schools are generally tasked with relentless expectations and expected to *do it all,* even during a pandemic (Pressley, 2021). It is an era of accountability measures, large class sizes, changing curricula, teacher shortages, and ever-changing student needs (Burden & Byrd, 2019). Schools should not be expected to do this work on their own. By building greater father-friendliness in the community and then partnering with schools, fathers will benefit (Tollestrup, 2018). We believe that a systems-based perspective is a beneficial response to this problem. Ideally, all schools would have a family coordinator, with ties to the community, who could help facilitate father-related activities and spend time listening to and learning from fathers. These factors and more show the ecological complexity of this issue (Cabrera et al., 2014), as so many intersecting forces inform fatherhood and father engagement with schools.

Considering that social service participants reported concrete and deliberate efforts to engage fathers, it presents an opportunity to bring community organizations together with schools to transfer some of those ideas or partner with educators. Findings also support the need for widening the theoretical and philosophical content in educators' preservice and in-service professional development to incorporate a more holistic and systems-oriented understanding of children and their families (Amatea, 2013). This presents an important opportunity for teacher educators to rethink how father engagement can be addressed within family engagement courses and professional development workshops. The social service field has historically viewed family engagement as vital to their work; however, this perspective is newer to the field of education. It was only in the last few decades that schools pivoted from viewing family engagement as a "nice" practice to a "necessary" one (Burden & Byrd, 2019). We hope conversations and content on family engagement will include fathers as the field continues to move forward.

Community Change

As does most community-based research, our inquiry helped to raise awareness about a local issue and determine how we can reconstruct and reframe social practices to make community organizations more equitable (Ivankova, 2015). The study empowered the coalition to create resources and supports specifically for schools, as well as other agencies connected to schools. We first responded by preparing a summary of our research findings for all organizations serving families, with six recommendations for increasing father friendliness which stemmed from the survey questions:

1. Acknowledge there is bias against fathers, especially against fathers of color.
2. Build the capacity of staff to effectively engage fathers through workshops, written materials, or creating a specialized committee to focus on fathers.
3. Conduct an audit/review of policies to determine your level of father-friendliness and identify changes that can be made.
4. Survey fathers to determine their needs, concerns, and interests related to activities and services.
5. Develop programs, groups, or events that are specific to fathers. Fathers assume "family" programs and events are geared toward mothers.
6. Hire male staff or recruit male volunteers to lead father-related efforts.

Next, we created a video with tips for schools to increase father engagement by spotlighting the words and faces of fathers from the community (5 Tips for Father Engagement in Schools - YouTube). The video served as a platform for discussions with districts and schools about their perceptions of and experiences with fathers and, most importantly, how they could restructure their current family engagement practices to include fathers more meaningfully. For example, one district embedded father engagement in their diversity, equity, and inclusion plan, and another district attached it to their wellness goals. As intended, the community survey led to community action and educational change (Hacker, 2013).

Limitations

Despite the strengths, there are notable limitations to this study. First, our results are limited to one midwestern community. Future research is needed to replicate these findings in additional communities. For instance, comparisons in rural or highly urban areas could render different results. Additionally, though we directed our survey questions to be pro-father friendly, this may have biased our results. As our evidence suggests, some educators or practitioners may not believe that being father-friendly is beneficial. Though we anticipated some level of negativity toward schools being father-friendly, the level of responses was surprising. Future research could address this by utilizing more neutral questions such as, "Is father-friendliness a good thing for schools to consider?" Finally, some of our survey items were compound questions (i.e., two statements in one question). This was done to follow the initial Father-Friendly Check-up Survey (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2016) and to limit participant burnout within the survey to encourage deeper qualitative responses. However, as with any survey, compound questions can be problematic. Future research could adapt the Father-Friendly Check-up Survey to no longer include compound questions.

Conclusion

We encourage communities to create school-based committees or a community coalition to focus on fathers and learn about the barriers to their engagement through community-based research (Lantz et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2016). Using a collaborative process, we realized K–12 schools needed the most support in becoming more father-friendly and created concrete resources that could benefit father and family engagement practices. It is our goal that the current study serves as a model and resource for other community organizations and schools. Together, improvements to father friendliness will not only impact men but the entire family unit. To care about fathers is to care about families, and to care about families is to care about children.

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Authors' Note: This project was a collective effort involving representation from over 20 different programs and agencies in our community. Although there was no funding attached to the project, the expertise and resources of coalition members and their agencies made this project possible.

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Appendix. Father-Friendliness Survey Questions

Please respond to the following questions based on your personal experiences with your organization or program.

Strongly disagree (1)
Somewhat disagree (2)
Neither agree nor disagree (3)
Somewhat agree (4)
Strongly agree (5)

Direct Services & Resources

1. My program or organization offers father-specific or father-only services.

   Comments:

2. My program or organization offers services which strengthen fathers' roles as a parent.

   Comments:

Internal Reflection & Planning

3. My program or organization has implemented specific ways to build the capacity of staff to effectively engage fathers (e.g., workshops, written materials, specialized committee).

   Comments:

4. My program or organization has conducted an audit/review of policies and procedures to determine the level of father friendliness and identified changes the organization might need to make.

   Comments:

5. My program or organization hires male staff to deliver programs or engage with fathers.

   Comments:

6. My program or organization periodically surveys fathers to determine their needs, concerns, and interests related to the organization or program's activities and services.

   Comments:

Contextual/Ecological Understandings

7. My program or organization acknowledges there is systemic bias against fathers and actively challenges this bias through policies and practices.

   Comments:

8. My program or organization utilizes a trauma-informed approach with fathers.

   Comments:

9. What else would you like to share with the coalition about fathers or father engagement?

Students at the Center: Student Voice in Parental Involvement and School–Family Partnerships

Jingyang (Max) Zhang, Barbara J. Boone, and Eric M. Anderman

Abstract

This essay summarizes the literature on the differences in perceptions between adolescent students and parents of parental involvement in education and discusses how such different perceptions are linked to students' academic achievement and other outcomes. We present psychological research on why students' perceptions of parental involvement are stronger predictors of academic outcomes than parents' perceptions. We then highlight empowering student voice as a strategy to improve parental involvement and school–family partnership practices, programs, and policies. Research on student-led parent–teacher conferences is discussed as a real-world example of students actively engaging in school–family interactions. We recommend evidence-based strategies that school leaders and teachers can use to support students in playing an active role in improving school–family partnerships. We conclude by describing gaps in existing research that will benefit from future research on the topic.

Key Words: parental involvement, school–family partnership, student voice, student perceptions, student-led parent–teacher conferences

Introduction

Parental involvement[1] in education can be defined as "parents'[2] work with schools and with their children to benefit their children's educational outcomes and future success" (Hill et al., 2004, p. 1491). Such involvement can take place in school, at home, and in other community settings (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Studies have shown that parental involvement is associated with increased academic achievement and other positive student outcomes (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wilder, 2014). Many may assume that parental involvement becomes less important as children enter adolescence, a time of remarkable physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development marked by a growing desire for autonomy and agency (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles et al., 1993). However, researchers have consistently found that many adolescents,[3] even those who consider their parents overly involved, believe parental involvement is helpful and valuable to their studies (Connors & Epstein, 1994; DePlanty et al., 2007; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Ramirez, 2002; Vega et al., 2015; Xu, 2002). In the meantime, adolescents often perceive parental involvement differently than do their parents, and adolescents' perceptions of and psychological experiences with parental involvement tend to be more closely associated with student outcomes than do parents' perceptions (Barwegen et al., 2004; DePlanty et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2021; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Thomas et al., 2020). Therefore, as Xu (2002) suggests, middle and high schools should reconsider the role of adolescents in parental involvement so that adolescents' need for autonomy and independence "is not viewed as an impenetrable barrier but as a gateway" that leads to improved practices and policies (p. 70).

One important form of parental involvement is parents partnering with the school to support students' educational experiences. Research on school–family partnerships has focused primarily on how adults, namely parents and school personnel, can work together to improve student outcomes. Limited attention has been paid to the roles and impacts of students in partnership practices and programs (Mitra, 2006). This essay serves as a launching pad for researchers and educators as they explore strategies for supporting students to become proactive drivers of their own learning and development, especially in discussions around school–family partnerships.

The primary purposes of this essay are to discuss the research landscape on the topic of student voice in school–family partnerships and to offer evidence-based and research-informed recommendations for educators and researchers. In the first section, we provide a concise overview of the benefits of parental involvement and school–family partnerships. In the second section, we discuss why and how attending to student voice may help improve school–family partnership practices, programs, and policies. Student-led parent–teacher conferences are analyzed as a popular example of students' role being elevated in school–family interactions. Next, we offer evidence-based recommendations to school leaders and educators on engaging students as key actors in school–family partnership efforts. We then conclude by describing potential directions for future research on this topic.

Benefits of Parental Involvement and School–Family Partnerships

Research consistently indicates that parental involvement is positively associated with students' academic achievement across grades, subjects, ethnicities, races, and genders (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007, 2016, 2017; Kim & Hill, 2015; Wilder, 2014). According to a meta-analysis conducted by Kim and Hill (2015), parents' involvement in children's education at both home and school is related to higher academic achievement from prekindergarten to high school. Jeynes's meta-analyses (2007, 2016, 2017) showed that parental involvement is significantly related to positive academic outcomes among urban, Latino/a, and African American adolescents. Studies have identified academic socialization—which includes parents (a) passing on their beliefs about the value of education to adolescents, (b) fostering educational and career aspirations in their adolescents, and (c) helping adolescents with preparing for and planning out their future paths—as having the strongest relationships with students' improved academic outcomes (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Kim & Hill, 2015). Other studies have identified parents' high expectations as a strong predictor of students' academic achievement (Erdem & Kaya, 2020; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2007; Wilder, 2014).

In her now classic and widely cited article, Epstein (1995) pointed out that as "overlapping spheres of influence" (p. 82), schools and families must form close, effective partnerships to support the student. Such partnerships convey consistent messages to students and create safe and supportive learning environments (Epstein, 1995). According to Epstein, not only are school–family partnerships beneficial to students' learning and development, but students also must be considered important members of such partnerships. Hence, drawing on a wide array of existing research, we discuss in the following section reasons why attending to student voice can be an important step towards more effective and impactful school–family partnerships.

Students at the Center

The term *student voice* can be broadly defined as students actively contributing to their schools, families, or communities by identifying problems, looking for strategies to address those problems, making plans, and carrying out solutions in collaboration with adults (Mitra, 2006). According to a study conducted by Kahne and associates (2022), when schools are responsive to student voice, students have better grades and attendance and reduced rates of chronic absenteeism. Besides sharing their observations and providing feedback to

adults, students may collaborate with their families and with school personnel to address the problems that they encounter during their educational experiences (Mitra, 2006). In the following paragraphs, we discuss why student voice matters in discussions about school–family partnerships.

Students' Perceptions Versus Adults' Perceptions

Studies have shown that there are discrepancies between parents' and adolescents' perceptions of parental involvement and that researchers, parents, and educators should take both perceptions into consideration. Parents tend to report higher levels of involvement than do adolescents. For example, Barwegen et al. (2004) found in a diverse sample of high school seniors that parents reported greater involvement than the students perceived. Results of other studies with adolescent populations in both the U.S. and Europe (e.g., DePlanty et al., 2007; Thomas et al., 2020) also suggest that, in general, parents report greater levels of parental involvement than is perceived by students. Such discrepancies in perceptions may be due to self-serving biases, with parents overestimating their own behavior or control and adolescents, who were becoming closer to their peers, underrating their parents' involvement.

Which Matters More?

Given the lack of alignment between students' and parents' perceptions about how much parents are involved, a logical question arises: What matters more for student outcomes—students' perceptions or parents' perceptions of involvement? Research suggests that students' perceptions of parental involvement tend to be better predictors of student outcomes than parental reports (Liu et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). Thomas et al. (2020) found a mild, positive relationship between adolescents' perceptions of parental involvement and student achievement, but no significant correlation between parental perceptions and student achievement. Liu et al. (2021) highlighted that students' perceptions of parent–child communication predicted students' depression levels better than did parent-reported parent–teacher communication.

Psychological Explanations for the Differences

Educational psychological research offers potential explanations for the higher predictive power of students' perceptions of parental involvement. Findings from several studies bolster the notion that parental involvement does not exert its influence on academic outcomes by way of quantity of involvement (i.e., it's not necessarily the case that "more is better"; Pomerantz et al., 2007). Rather, research suggests that the quality of parental involvement (i.e., how adolescents perceive their parents' involvement) is what primarily influences academic outcomes (Pomerantz et al., 2007).

For example, parents' autonomy support has been identified as a strong predictor of positive student outcomes (Vasquez et al., 2015). Parental autonomy support is marked by parents acknowledging and showing empathy for adolescents' perspectives, creating opportunities for and encouraging adolescents to make choices, and solving problems together with adolescents (Lerner & Grolnick, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2017). According to a meta-analysis of 36 studies, when parents' involvement supports students' autonomy, students are likely to experience numerous academic benefits (e.g., in the domains of academic achievement, perceived academic competence, engagement, effort, self-regulation, etc.) as well as psychological benefits (e.g., in the domains of mental health, attitudes toward school, perceived control, executive functioning, etc.; Vasquez et al., 2015). Other studies have shown that parents' autonomy support is associated, directly or indirectly, with adolescents' reduced school worry, decreased disruptive behavior in classrooms, less substance use, and improved subjective well-being and self-esteem (Lerner et al., 2022; Lerner & Grolnick, 2020; Shek, 2007; Wong, 2008). Establishing parental involvement profiles based on levels of parents' involvement and autonomy support, Li et al. (2020) found that adolescents who perceived their parents to be *highly autonomy-supportive* and *moderately involved* reported the most adaptive motivation and the highest levels of subjective well-being, even when compared to those who perceived high levels of both autonomy support and involvement from parents.

Revisiting the Discrepancies Between Students' and Parents' Perceptions

With such findings in mind, let us return to the earlier discussion of the differences between students' and parents' perceptions of parental involvement. Comparisons of results of studies conducted within different cultures shed some light on this topic. For example, in contrast to findings from many studies conducted on Western populations, survey results from a study of 1,550 Chinese middle school students and their parents revealed that the Chinese adolescents reported higher perceived parental academic involvement and parent–teacher communication than their parents reported (Liu et al., 2021). Comparing and contrasting their findings with those reported by DePlanty et al. (2008), who found higher parental reports for all involvement activities, Liu and colleagues (2021) speculated that such cross-cultural differences may be explained by Chinese parents' more controlling parenting styles when compared with their Western counterparts (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011). Chinese adolescents may consider more involvement from parents as contributing to increased psychological control and stress (feelings not shared by parents), thus overrating the level of parental involvement (Liu et al., 2021). Such misalignments of students' and parents' perceptions and experiences illustrate the importance of considering students' perspectives and voices when designing,

developing, implementing, and evaluating parental involvement practices, programs, and policies.

Elevating Student Voice in School–Family Partnerships

Our review indicates that there is an important overlap between the literature on parental involvement and the literature on student voice that has had little investigation. On the one hand, studies on parental involvement have examined adolescents' perceptions of and opinions about parental involvement, but little has been said in the literature about the ways in which the perceptions and experiences of adolescents may translate into real improvement in school–family partnerships. On the other hand, the student voice literature has examined how student voice influences school-related processes and outcomes, but little research has examined the role of student voice in school–family partnerships (Mitra, 2006). Mitra's study (2006) was the first exploration of adolescents' role as bridges between schools and families. Connors and Epstein (1994) and Epstein (1995) were pioneers in the field of school–family partnerships, highlighting the roles of students in the processes. In discussing the rationale for student voice in school–family partnerships, the following sections rely on these older but highly influential articles (e.g., Connors & Epstein, 1994; Epstein, 1995; Mitra, 2006) while also drawing upon the broader literature on student voice. It is our hope that this essay will inspire future researchers to pay more attention to and depict a more nuanced, up-to-date understanding of this topic, especially given how the COVID-19 pandemic may have transformed the relationships among schools, families, and students.

Why Student Voice?

The primary goals of the student voice movement include (a) reflecting on students' aspirations, (b) highlighting students' perceptions of the assets and challenges of their schooling experiences, (c) revealing adolescents' ideas about improving instruction, and (d) identifying ways to pursue equitable access to education (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). Levin (2000) highlights five rationales for including and empowering students in school reforms. First, successful school improvements require participation and buy-in from not only school staff but also students. Second, students can contribute to the planning and implementation of school reforms with their unique knowledge and perspectives. Third, students' opinions can help encourage school staff and families to support and participate in the reform efforts. Fourth, playing a more active role in school will help students improve social skills and learn from peers and adults. Last but not least, students' involvement is fundamental to all school improvement processes because students' academic and developmental outcomes are the core purposes of schooling (Levin, 2000).

Research suggests that engaging students in various school processes is associated with positive school and student outcomes. In their systemic review, Mager and Nowak (2012) discovered that when students participate in schools' collective decision-making processes, schools tend to witness an improvement in school ethos evidenced by students' improved engagement in school, higher attendance rates, higher acceptance of and/or compliance with school rules, better school climate, decreased bullying and racism, and more democratic school processes. Drawing upon student records and survey data from over 10,000 ninth graders from 86 schools in the socioeconomically, ethnically, and racially diverse Chicago Public Schools, Kahne and colleagues (2022) found that a school's responsiveness to student voice at both the individual and organizational levels was associated with higher grade point averages (GPAs) and less chronic absenteeism when controlling for prior academic performance. Finally, Mitra (2004) analyzed data from interviews, observations, and written documentation from Whitman High School in northern California, where the community has a large population of first-generation Latino/a and Asian immigrants, as well as working-class African Americans and European Americans. Whitman High School had two student involvement groups, one focused on providing students with one-on-one tutoring and mentoring, and the other focused on improving students' involvement in school processes at the organizational level. The qualitative data revealed that participating in either student involvement group helped adolescents gain agency, a sense of belonging, and a sense of academic competence (Mitra, 2004). In sum, results from these studies consistently indicate that elevating student voice may lead to multiple positive student outcomes.

Why Student Voice in School–Family Partnerships?

Research on the role of student voice in school–family partnerships has been scant, especially over the past 20 years. Although conducted decades ago, studies by Connors and Epstein (1994), Mitra (2006), and Ramirez (2002) provided the most direct evidence supporting the importance of engaging students in school–family partnerships. This evidence yields several conclusions that can help guide future efforts to enhance the roles that students can play in school–family partnerships. While we speculate that most of the findings from these older studies remain true today, future replications and adaptations of these studies are warranted to investigate today's adolescents' beliefs about their roles and voice in school–family partnerships.

First, many adolescents are willing and eager to participate in school–family partnerships. Surveying students, teachers, and parents from six high schools in Maryland, Connors and Epstein (1994) found that students wanted their

schools to consider them "active and willing partners in school–family-community connections" whose opinions and concerns were heard and addressed (p. 18). Over half of the adolescents surveyed reported that their voices were not being heard by the adults in their schools, and many wanted to be more involved in the decision-making and problem-solving processes for their own education. Connors and Epstein (1994) argued that by engaging students in school–family partnerships, school personnel and families would demonstrate to students that the adults around them genuinely care and are willing to treat them as autonomous, responsible, and proactive contributors to these partnerships. A study by Ramirez (2002) revealed that over 75% of high school students surveyed, being aware of the limited interactions between their teachers and families, indicated an interest in participating in parent–teacher conferences and playing a more active role in school processes.

Second, each adolescent can potentially play a central and active role in the unique partnership between their own family and school. The field of special education offers great examples of ways to effectively engage students as drivers of their own learning and development. According to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (and as later reauthorized), students with disabilities are mandated to participate in Individualized Educational Program (IEP) meetings when appropriate (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1997 Amendments further required that IEP meetings where transition services are discussed must involve students aged 14 years and older (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). Research suggests that students experience a number of benefits by actively engaging in their own IEP meetings, including: (a) a better understanding of the IEP processes and their purposes (Martin et al., 2004); (b) higher motivation and greater ability to pursue and achieve goals (Benz et al., 2000); (c) more positive feelings about the IEP processes (Martin et al., 2006); (d) improved engagement and leadership in their own IEP meetings (Martin et al., 2006); (e) improved self-determination skills, "a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior" (Field et al., 1998, p. 2); (f) improved academic achievement (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010); and (g) better post-school outcomes (Stodden & Conway, 2002). Thus, when designing partnership strategies aimed at elevating students' roles, schools can benefit from consulting the well-established special education research on practices around student voice.

Third, adolescents can be invited and inspired to serve as a bridge between their families and school, helping the two sides to better understand the values, beliefs, norms, and cultures of each other and to become more effective

partners in supporting the adolescents' education (Mitra, 2006). According to Mitra (2006), students are "in a unique position to teach schools how to become more 'family-like' and to help their families become more 'school-like' because students experience both cultures every day" (p. 465). It is important to caution that there are limits to some student roles that bridge family and school. Students should under no circumstances be asked to act as an interpreter or translator for school–family communication. While this may happen in an informal sense at home, schools "may not rely on or ask students, siblings, friends, or untrained school staff to translate or interpret for parents" (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 1). Besides legal protections, Shen and colleagues (2022) found in their meta-analytic review that frequent language brokering—translating and interpreting for their families—is mildly associated with problematic family relationships and adolescents' increased stress and socioemotional problems.

Student-Led Parent–Teacher Conferences

One existing example of students taking a central, active role in school–family partnerships is student-led parent–teacher conferences. Believing in adolescents' potential for helping their schools to develop productive and comprehensive school–family–community partnerships, Connors and Epstein (1994) called on schools to reexamine traditional models of school–family interactions, including parent–teacher conferences, and explore intentional, innovative ways to actively and strategically engage students in these processes. They found that 70% of the high school students surveyed wanted to participate in parent–teacher conferences (Connors & Epstein, 1994). Similarly, Ramirez (2002) found that most high school students surveyed in their study believed that students should be included in parent–teacher conferences. In this section, we describe research on student-led parent–teacher conferences. It is worth noting that most peer-reviewed articles on this topic were published over 20 years ago, with most of them published in the 1990s. Future research is needed to understand how student-led conferences or parent–teacher conferences in general have changed over the past few decades (particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) and assess the effects of such conferences on students in today's schools. Moreover, most articles on student-led conferences were published in practitioner journals and written by educators who used a loose or informal research design, sometimes relying on anecdotal narratives. While these articles provide important, accessible insights into student-led conferences, rigorous longitudinal and experimental studies, as well as high-quality qualitative inquiries, are needed to examine the short-term and long-term impacts of student-led conferences.

What Are Student-Led Conferences?

Unlike traditional parent–teacher conferences, when parents meet individually with their child's teachers to discuss the students' progress and challenges without the presence of the student, in a student-led conference, the student, instead of the teacher, is the main speaker and reports to their parents their recent academic performance (Little & Allan, 1989). Preparing for such conferences often involves the student (a) organizing a portfolio of recent projects or assignments with the teacher's help; (b) preparing a short presentation on their recent progress, accomplishments, and goals; and (c) rehearsing the presentation with a teacher or a classmate (Little & Allan, 1989). It is helpful for schools to organize parent workshops to prepare parents for effectively asking students questions and providing feedback to students in the most appropriate and constructive way during a student-led conference (Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004).

What Has Research Said About Student-Led Conferences?

Although schools across the country have been holding student-led conferences for some time, empirical studies examining the effects and effectiveness of such conferences are scarce, and many are out-of-date and may not reflect current practices. As one of the few studies on this topic that looked at more than one school, Tuinstra and Hiatt-Michael (2004) examined student-led conferences in 30 classrooms in four middle schools across California, Oregon, Texas, and Washington, covering a sample of 524 students and their parents. By conducting focused and open-ended interviews with school administrators and teachers, observing conferences, and surveying students and parents, Tuinstra and Hiatt-Michael (2004) found that such conferences were associated with higher math and reading scores on state tests, reduced disciplinary issues, lower stress about parent–teacher conferences among teachers, increased parent participation in the conferences, and improved self-confidence and focus among students. According to Tuinstra and Hiatt-Michael, both parents and teachers tended to prefer student-led conferences over traditional meeting formats.

Surveying parents after hosting student-led conferences with sixth graders and their parents, Guyton and Fielstein (1989) found that such conferences helped parents better understand children's performance, encouraged student–parent communication on schoolwork, pushed students to take ownership over and responsibility for their learning, increased students' academic performance, and gave parents extra enjoyable time with their children. In general, the extant literature on student-led conferences suggests that this student-centered format is welcomed by parents, teachers, and students; linked to quality school–family and parent–child communication and improved student outcomes; and aligned with adolescents' developmental needs for independence,

autonomy, and responsibility (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Conderman, 1998; Hackmann et al., 1998; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004).

Recommendations for School Administrators and Teachers

According to Connors and Epstein (1994), schools should provide opportunities for students to evaluate whether and how school–family–community partnerships are helping students achieve their personal and educational goals. Practices that elevate student voice need to meet adolescents' increased needs for independence and autonomy while preparing them for the responsibility and accountability that come with growing independence. In this section, we recommend concrete strategies to engage students in parental involvement and school–family partnership practices and programs. These recommendations are not to be used as a checklist; instead, they are broad ideas that administrators and educators can adapt to the unique circumstances and student populations of a specific district or school. It is recommended that schools use a variety of strategies to include and respond to the voices of all students (Mager & Nowak, 2012). Relying solely on a few strategies may lead to a disproportionate focus on a group of enthusiastic or privileged students, creating or affirming existing elites (Mager & Nowak, 2012; Rudduck, 2007). Regardless of which strategies are used, the bottom line is that schools should strive to create conditions where students' voices are taken seriously and have a real impact on improving school–family partnerships (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Wilson, 2009).

Recommendation #1: Students as a Source of Feedback

Understanding and being responsive to student voice is crucial (Kahne et al., 2022). As discussed in earlier sections, how students perceive and experience parental involvement has significant implications for academic and social–emotional outcomes (Vasquez et al., 2016). Schools and districts can adopt strategies to gauge student perceptions as an important source of feedback on the existing parental involvement practices or programs. For example, schools can survey or interview students at least once every school year about their opinions on the ways in which the school and their families have been collaborating and communicating (Levin, 2000). Events such as breakfasts with the principal (Epstein, 1995) create a more direct and informal setting where administrators can hear students' thoughts on how the school and their families can become more effective partners. To gather more individualized feedback, schools can solicit students' ideas about how their families and teachers can best support them during IEP meetings, student–parent–teacher conferences, or early-in-

the-year writing assignments. Most importantly, administrators and teachers should reflect on and implement students' recommendations, with students actively engaged in the design, implementation, and evaluation processes.

Recommendation #2: Students as Decision-Makers and Problem-Solvers

Besides listening to students' voices, schools should create opportunities for students to become key decision-makers and problem-solvers in school–family partnerships (Epstein, 1995). Epstein (1995) recommends including at least two students on the school–family partnership action team. Student representatives should be invited on panels to share with administrators, teachers, parents, and community partners their opinions on the relationship and interactions between their school and their families (Epstein, 1995). Schools should encourage students to form large student councils and organize their own discussions of changes to include input from as many students as possible (Levin, 2000). Ryan and colleagues (2018) point out that incorporating student voice in schools' planning efforts can lead to changes and improvements that appeal to students who are disengaged and likely to drop out. Schools should implement students' ideas in recognizable ways in the school's policies, programs, and practices and highlight students' contributions to the school's decision-making so that students see how their voices are heard.

Mitra (2006) cautioned that supporting student–adult collaboration requires individual and collective capacity building. Students need to be equipped with necessary skills, such as communication, problem-solving, public speaking, and planning skills, in order to become effective partners with adults (Mitra, 2006). Therefore, schools should be intentional about teaching and scaffolding students to practice partnership skills so that both the students and the adults can benefit from the students' increased responsibility and contribution to the partnership (Levin, 2000). For example, Bachman et al. (2021) recommended teachers partner with parents to set healthy boundaries and engage in positive interactions with their adolescents so that students can foster a developmentally appropriate sense of autonomy and perceive that the adults care about them.

Recommendation #3: Students as a Bridge Between School and Family

Having spent a significant amount of time in both the home and school, adolescents in particular are well-positioned to support collaborations between families and schools. Mitra (2006) described a talent night that a school organized for students to demonstrate their skills and talents and attract parents to the school. Students can help with designing, naming, and promoting school

events in ways that are appropriate and appealing to families based on their own families' values, cultures, beliefs, and routines (Mitra, 2006). Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005) suggested that invitations from students are more likely to appeal to parents' wishes to be responsive to their child and to support their child in succeeding in school.

Teachers and administrators are encouraged to take the initiative to learn from students about their families' and communities' cultures, histories, and life experiences, with which teachers can enhance school–family partnerships by designing culturally relevant curricula that draw upon families' funds of knowledge (González et al., 1995; Moll et al., 1990). To create two-way communication, students can also help their families better understand school policies and culture. These strategies could be especially helpful for students and families in minoritized communities because the values and beliefs of these families may be culturally incongruent with most U.S. schools' White, Eurocentric, and middle-class value system (Mitra, 2006).

Recommendations for Future Research

Our review of existing research revealed several directions for future research. First, there is a gap between student voice research and research on parental involvement and school–family partnerships (Mitra, 2006). Future research can fill in this gap by exploring different strategies to elevate student voice in school–family partnerships and examine the impacts and effectiveness of such strategies. Second, building on the previous finding that students are interested in playing a more active role in school–family interactions (Connors & Epstein, 1994; Ramirez, 2002), future research should replicate the studies to gain up-to-date insights and include interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, parents, and school and district administrators to explore practical strategies for schools and districts to support students in playing such roles and making positive impacts. Finally, more rigorous and systemic research, including experimental studies, is needed to determine the qualities and effectiveness of student-led parent–teacher conferences in today's post-COVID, digital era.

Conclusion

Dr. Joyce Epstein, a leading scholar on school–family–community partnerships, highlights that "students are the main actors in their education, development, and success in school" (1995, p. 82). According to Epstein (1995), school–family–community partnerships should "locate students at the center" and "engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their

own successes" (p. 82). In this essay, we discussed how students' perceptions of parental involvement differ from parents' perceptions and highlighted the association between students' psychological experiences with parental involvement and student outcomes. After establishing that students' perceptions of the quality of parental involvement are especially important, we offered a rationale for schools and districts to attend to student voice as a potential engine for improving school–family partnerships. As an example, we discussed research on student-led parent–teacher conferences, a common example of students being active participants in school–family interactions. Then, we provide three recommendations for school and district leaders to develop practices and programs that empower students to have significant impacts on school–family partnerships, unlocking ideas and solutions that are culturally relevant, impactful, and refreshing. Finally, we discuss potential directions researchers can take to expand and extend the knowledge basis of this topic.

Endnotes

[1]We acknowledge the existence of other similar terms, including "parental engagement," "family involvement," and "family engagement." Discussing the distinctions among these terms is beyond the scope of this article.
[2]In this essay, we use the term "parent" instead of "family" because the former has been used more widely in existing research articles on the concerned topics. We use the term "parent" loosely to represent any adult family members, guardians, or caregivers that play an essential role in a child's education and development.
[3]In this essay, we use the term "adolescents" to refer to an approximate age range of middle and high school students who are, on average, aged 12 to 18.

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Inspiring and Preparing Underserved Middle School Students for Computer Science: A Descriptive Case Study of the UNC Charlotte/Wilson STEM Academy Partnership

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Abstract

Students from underrepresented populations—females, working class, and youth from marginalized racial/ethnic groups—are less likely than their middle-class Asian and White male peers to study computer science (CS) in college. The dearth of CS undergraduates from these groups contributes to projected labor force shortages. Sources of the dilemma include weak or absent inspiration and CS preparation in middle schools and negative stereotypes suggesting certain groups do not belong in CS. This case study describes three years of a community collaboration between a local university and a nearby middle school attended by primarily low-income students of color. The University of North Carolina Charlotte/Wilson STEM Academy Partnership focused on undergraduates majoring in CS teaching monthly workshops designed to inspire and academically prepare the middle schoolers for college and CS majors by teaching them coding and computational thinking while also challenging stereotypes about who belongs in CS. Post-workshop assessments, reflective essays, interviews, and administrative data were thematically coded. Findings suggest the workshops sparked interest in college and CS, undermined toxic stereotypes, and nurtured the academic self-confidence of middle schoolers. The Partnership provided the undergraduates with opportunities to meet their

own academic goals while “paying it forward.” Results suggest that the Partnership can serve as a model starting point for disrupting the disproportionalities in female and underrepresented minority students in CS.

Key Words: middle school, computer science, community–university partnership, racialized minorities, females, college readiness, careers, majors

Introduction

The United States’ economy and basic scientific research foundations require increasing numbers of adults trained in the sciences. Projected shortages of appropriately educated adults for occupations in health care, education, manufacturing, media, public health, security, transportation, and the built environmental infrastructure are looming (Georgetown University, 2021; Justice et al., 2022; Veenema et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic made painfully clear that access to the intersection of education and technology—including devices for virtual learning, high speed internet, and courses in technology—remains highly stratified by social class, rurality, and race/ethnicity in the nation’s secondary schools (Kamenetz, 2022). For a variety of reasons, too many secondary schools fail to inspire or prepare youth for pursuing the study of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM; Business-Higher Education Forum, 2011). This is especially true for the field of computer science (CS). Far too many high school graduates enter the workforce and higher education without an interest in or academic skills for pursuing CS (Code.org, 2021).

At the same time, social norms suggesting women and certain ethnic groups are not optimally suitable for scientific or technical careers persist in popular culture, many families’ ethos, secondary school curricula, instructional practices, and school organizational characteristics (Archer et al., 2010; Cheryan et al., 2015; Fisher & Margolis, 2002; Hanson, 2008; Margolis, 2010; Master et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2015). At present, the vast majority of students studying technology in the U.S. are males from middle-class White, South Asian, or Asian Rim ethnic groups such as Chinese, Japanese, or Korean (Fry et al., 2021). Lower-income youth from all racial/ethnic backgrounds, females, and students from Black, Latino/a, Native American, South Asian, and Asian and Pacific Islander (AAPI) backgrounds (including Southeast Asian nations, Guam, and Hawaiian, Polynesian, Melanesian, and Micronesian ethnic groups) are underrepresented in CS relative to their proportion of the overall population. Because individuals with these backgrounds are relatively absent from college CS majors, the current 21st century domestic technology labor

force only draws from a pool with more than half of the adult population missing. Moreover, because CS careers are stable, prestigious, and relatively well-paying, those precluded from the technology workforce face an additional obstacle to upwardly mobility.

Together, these trends require a multipronged response aimed at different aspects of this complex challenge. Stakeholders readily acknowledge that the uneven quality of secondary education looms large as a significant source of the apparent dearth of STEM-ready students. This article is a descriptive case study of an intervention designed to improve the likelihood that low-income, female, and underserved racial/ethnic minoritized middle school youth will be inspired to gain the skills necessary for pursuing CS in high school and college. The article describes the first three years of community collaboration between the College of Computing and Informatics (CCI) at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC) and the Wilson Middle School STEM Academy, one of the 49 middle schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School district. The UNCC/Wilson STEM Academy Partnership (henceforth, the Partnership) offers academic and psychosocial support for a cohort of motivated Grade 6, 7, and 8 students enrolled in middle school CS at Wilson. The Partnership also provided the undergraduates with a service learning opportunity that complemented their own lived experiences as a female or low-income and racially marginalized secondary student with aspirations to pursue CS.

Since 2019, the Partnership workshops have been designed and delivered by the UNCC undergraduates as part of a service learning course. Workshops provided Wilson students with hands-on, informal, supplemental instruction in technology skills; support for developing their CS identity; inspiration for college aspirations; and exposure to non-stereotypical gender and race/ethnic CS role models who challenge societal norms about who can become computer scientists. The workshops offered the undergraduate tutors/mentors a host of psychosocial and academic experience that helped prepare them to be successful professionals in the tech fields. The Partnership offered the community an opportunity for the CCI and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School district to collaborate on achieving complimentary goals.

The immediate aims of the Partnership were to inspire middle school pupils to consider college and CS careers, to develop introductory coding and computational thinking skills, and to gain self-confidence as CS learners through informal supplemental workshops. The Partnership also offers UNCC undergraduates an opportunity to sharpen their own CS identities and "pay it forward" by mentoring and assisting the next generation of youth. The long-term goal of the Partnership was to develop a model intervention that will help address the low levels of interest in and weak preparation for college CS

majors, particularly among groups of students currently underrepresented in the field. Another long-term goal addresses both institutions' desire to seize the opportunity for town–gown collaborative efforts that advance both schools' goals centered on increasing low-income, female, and underserved minoritized youth majoring in CS.

This descriptive case study details the aims, history, and components of the Partnership and its supplemental workshops. The article connects the Partnership's components to the larger literature about CS education, especially for younger members of underserved populations. Following a review of relevant literature, the manuscript identifies the research questions that guided this study, the methods used in it, and findings from the Partnership after its first three years. The article concludes with implications of the UNCC/Wilson Partnership as a model for beginning to address the disproportionalities central to the current and projected tech challenges in North Carolina and across the nation.

The Contours of the Underrepresentation Problem

Nationally, females, low-income students, and youth from underserved racial/ethnic minoritized groups enroll as college CS majors at rates relatively lower than their share of the undergraduate population. As of 2019, 19% of U.S. undergraduates pursuing a CS degree or related major are women, 23% are Asian, 5% are African Americans, 11% are Latino/a, and 45% are White, with multiracial and international students comprising the remaining 16% of CS majors (Zweben & Bizot, 2022). With the exception of Asian male students from India and the Pacific Rim nations of China (PRC), Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, proportions of CS undergraduates who are female, AAPI, Black, Latino/a, Native American, and White are smaller than their share of the overall undergraduate population. The potential lost talent has negative implications for meeting the nation's labor force demands in occupations requiring technology degrees and for the individuals' social mobility given the prestige and compensation associated with technology occupations.

The challenges to enrolling as CS majors faced by underrepresented students are rooted in a variety of factors including weaker secondary school academic preparation, fewer role models, and greater lack of financial resources for college compared to more affluent White and Asian male undergraduates. Prior research has revealed numerous obstacles to the pursuit of CS over the course of these students' K–12 educational career. Obstacles often include lack of access to college preparatory curriculum, to rigorous math and science sequences, or to highly qualified teachers in low-resourced secondary schools (Bottia et al., 2021; Code.org et al., 2021; Fisher & Margolis, 2002; Margolis, 2010; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022). While these struc-

tural factors present significant external obstacles to preparation for pursuing CS, normative and cultural forces can also lead to some students opting out of technology career paths. For female students and youth from low-income underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, there is often weak or absent inspiration, encouragement, or a sense of belonging in the CS field (Rainey et al., 2019; Zweben & Bizot, 2022). Adults and adolescents from underrepresented groups often have misconceptions of what it means to be a computer scientist, and because of absent role models or mentors, they often are uncertain that people like them have a place in the field (Archer et al., 2010).

Sparking Interests in CS During Middle School

Students begin to think about their future careers during their early adolescence (Archer et al., 2010; DeJarnette, 2012; Hall et al., 2011; Hammack et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2013; Settle et al., 2012; Wyss et al., 2012). They can be influenced at home, by role models in their immediate lives, popular culture, their communities, and by career counseling in school (Rogers & Creed, 2011). Secondary schools can be important agents for disseminating career information, particularly for students who do not have access to this information from family members in STEM occupations (Deslonde, 2017). However, not all counselors and teachers in middle and high school are well-informed about STEM occupations and may therefore be unable to guide students to STEM careers (Bottia et al., 2021; Engberg & Wolniak, 2013; Hall et al., 2011; McKillip et al., 2012; Woods & Domina, 2014). When lack of career information is compounded by the prevalence of negative stereotypes about who does or does not belong in STEM, high school students from lower socioeconomic class families, marginalized gender, or racial/ethnic groups can face a toxic brew of misinformation (Hanson, 2008; Palmer & Wood, 2013).

For these reasons, middle school is a developmentally appropriate time to begin youths' preparation for the pursuit of STEM in college. Numerous studies indicate that the middle school years are a suitable time to provide the academic skills, inspiration, and preparation for succeeding in high school STEM (Rogers & Creed, 2011; Settle et al., 2012; Wyss et al., 2012). During middle school adolescents begin to form perceptions of various occupations they may wish to pursue (DeJarnette, 2012; Hall et al., 2011; Hammack et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2013; Rogers & Creed, 2011; Wyss et al., 2012). If they are immersed in stereotypical accounts of occupations suitable for people like themselves, they are unlikely to challenge the gendered and racialized norms of who can and cannot pursue certain careers. If they rarely encounter gender and racial/ethnic role models who undercut notions of who belongs in CS, they are unlikely to aspire to technology careers (Hall et al., 2011; Hanson, 2008;

Palmer & Wood, 2013). If youth are unsuccessful in obtaining the motivational and academic foundations in middle school, they are unlikely to enter college ready for STEM.

Based on the review of the literature that points to obstacles for greater participation in CS by youth from marginalized groups, several directions for action emerged and led the authors to develop an intervention designed to address them. Figure 1 presents the logic model of the UNCC/Wilson Partnership, which is designed to combat the lackluster inspiration, weaker academic preparation, missing role models, and negative stereotypes of who belongs in the technology field that often become barriers to majoring in CS. The Partnership begins to address these barriers for a group of low-income, female, or racially minoritized youth who attend Charlotte-Mecklenburg School's Wilson STEM Academy.

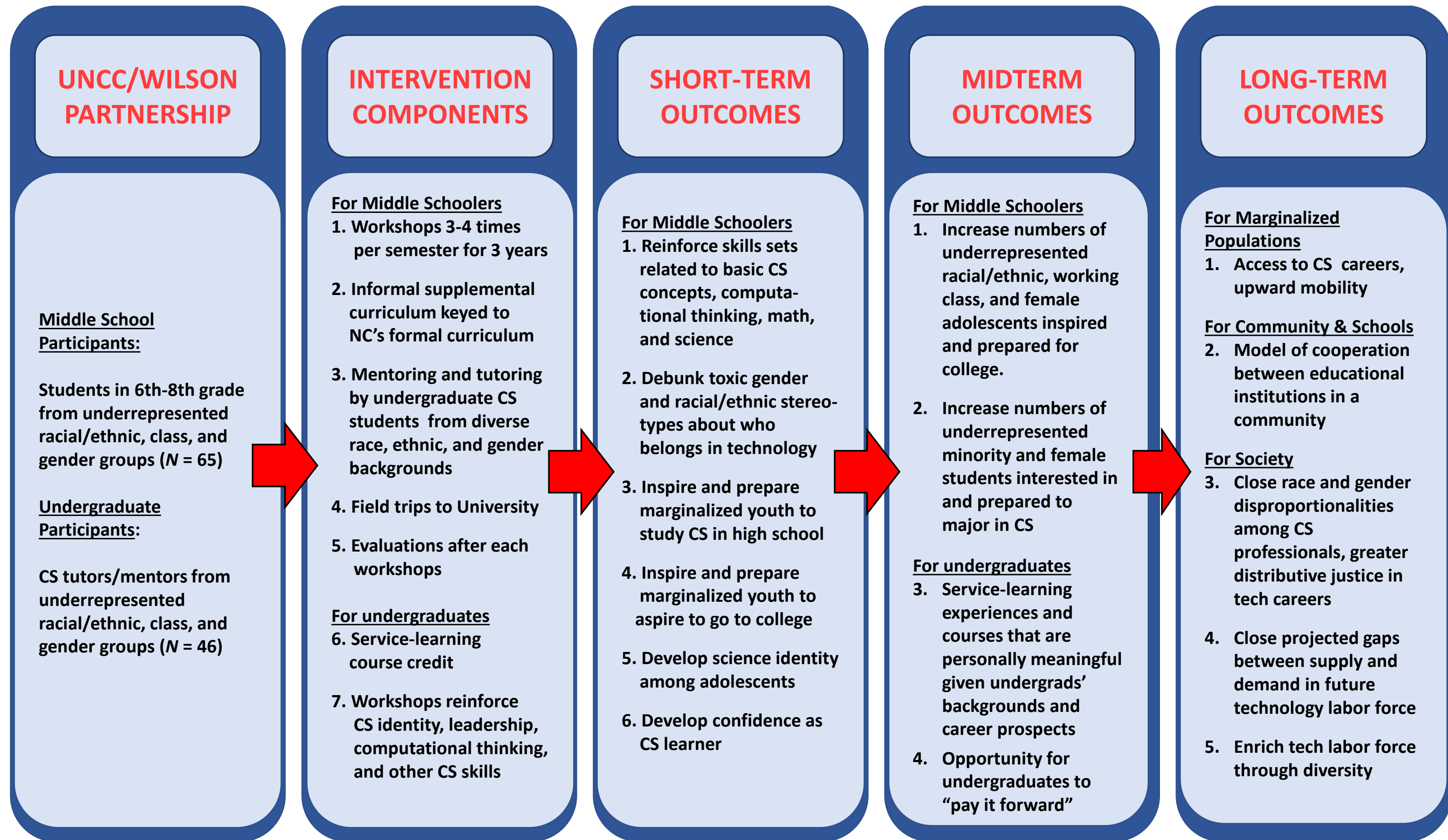
The UNCC/Wilson Partnership: History and Overview

In the spring of 2018, the Dean of the CCI at the UNCC appointed a university-wide committee to make recommendations after reviewing CCI's organization and undergraduate curriculum. This article's faculty authors served on the committee. The resulting White Paper offered several recommendations to advance CCI's goals including organizational, instructional, and curricular reforms, and the development of partnerships with organizations in the Charlotte community (CCI, 2018).

Greater diversity, equity, and inclusion and increasing town–gown collaborations were fitting goals given the weak pipeline between the local public school system and CCI. With close to 150,000 students, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools was the eighteenth largest K–12 school district in the nation. However, district graduates did not matriculate to CCI in numbers commensurate with its size and proximity to the university. A 2019 CCI report emailed to staff indicated that only 9% of applicants to the freshman class were graduates of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (M. Perez Quiñones, personal communication with R. A. Mickelson, April 29, 2019). Certainly, many district graduates interested in CS applied to other UNC campuses or to out-of-state schools. Other factors undoubtedly contributed to lower application rates of district graduates to CCI including poverty and racism in the local community and its public schools (Chetty et al., 2014; Mickelson et al., 2015; Nelson et al. 2015).

An additional source of the low matriculation rate was weak secondary school preparation for the pursuit of technology college degrees. Inspiring and preparing first generation, low-income, female, or underrepresented minority youth to pursue CS at college are goals consistent with the White Paper's

Figure 1. UNCC/Wilson Partnership Logic Model



recommendations and matched Wilson STEM Academy's needs for community support (J. Cook, personal communication with R. A. Mickelson, September 2022). The resulting collaboration, the UNCC/Wilson Partnership, sought to engage middle school students in ways that met several shared organizational goals: increasing Wilson students' access and exposure to CS, sparking interest in the field, improving their academic skills in science and mathematics, and increasing their aspirations to pursue postsecondary education in CS. The Partnership also aimed to accomplish several sociocultural goals: undermining negative attitudes and stereotypes about who does or does not belong in technology, enhancing youth's sense of belonging the CS field, and stimulating students' nascent CS identity and confidence as learners. These elements have been previously identified as critical to student engagement and academic success in STEM (Rainey et al., 2018, 2019), and prior research demonstrates that stimulating interest in CS among underserved populations is more effective if done early in students' academic trajectories (Cheryan et al., 2015; Vincent-Ruiz & Schunn, 2018).

Designing and Implementing the UNCC/Wilson Partnership

The UNCC/Wilson Partnership's design team consisted of Wilson's Principal and faculty and several UNC Charlotte faculty with expertise in CS and sociology of education. The intervention supplemented the formal curriculum taught in Wilson's CS classrooms, *Computer Science Discovery* (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022). The Partnership's informal curriculum was delivered in monthly workshops given by the UNCC undergraduates serving as tutors, mentors, and role models for their younger peers. Designing and implementing the supplemental curriculum was a portion of the academic work product required for UNCC undergraduates enrolled in the service learning course associated with the Partnership.[1]

Wilson is an ideal site for a collaboration with CCI. Wilson is a Charlotte-Mecklenburg School system middle school (Grades 6-8) designated as a partial STEM immersion magnet where all students are required to take introductory CS courses. In 2022, about 90% of its 490 students lived in the Wilson assignment zone, while roughly 10% enrolled via the magnet program. Roughly 96% of Wilson's pupils were racialized minorities, and 98% of them came from low-income families. Less than 20% of Wilson students scored as proficient or above on their NC end-of-grade standardized tests in reading and mathematics (U.S. News and World Report, 2022). These statistics obscure the fact that Wilson was one of a handful of the district's 176 schools that made substantial academic improvement in the 2021–22 academic year (J. Cook, personal communication with R. A. Mickelson, September 2022).

The Intervention: The Supplemental Curriculum and Computational Thinking

The Partnership launched during fall of the 2019–20 academic year with Wilson sixth graders (*N* = ± 25) chosen by their CS teachers because of their interest in CS. Wilson pupils participated in two field trips to UNCC's campus during the 2019 fall semester. Activities included lunch in UNCC's student union; tours of the CCI classrooms, maker's space lab, sports, and library facilities; and informal CS workshops designed by the UNCC undergraduate tutors with the guidance of their faculty advisor and in consultation with Wilson's CS teachers. The three additional workshops planned for the spring of 2020 were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UNCC undergraduates and Wilson 6th graders are flanked on the far left by their Principal, Mr. Cook, and on the right by their Advisor, Mr. Sherman (crouching) in Fall 2019. (Note: Wilson's staff obtained signed consent forms, including for photos, from the middle school students' guardians prior to the field trip.)

Initially, all Wilson students were taught the same informal curriculum. After several semesters, they were split into beginners and intermediate groups. New sixth graders learned coding using Scratch (https://scratch.mit.edu/), a simple introductory coding language/visual interface that encourages computational thinking and allows users to create games and animations among other creative projects. A second group, returning seventh and eighth graders, were instructed in Python (https://www.python.org/) and EduBlocks (http://edublocks.org/). Python is an easy-to-learn programming language used by CS

professionals (Dorodchi et al., 2021). Python offers a greater challenge for students compared to the Scratch interface. Both are excellent starting points for young students to become involved with CS as these languages do not require users to handle difficult syntax and concepts in complex environments.

From the onset of the workshops, activities were designed to augment the *Computer Science Discovery* formal curriculum taught in Wilson's CS classrooms. They introduced concepts and techniques inherent in programming languages while exposing computational thinking skills to the Wilson students. Computation thinking skills are built into the supplemental curriculum based on the recommendations of prior studies (Barr & Stephenson, 2011; Dorodchi et al., 2021). Computational thinking is a problem-solving skill set inspired by fundamental computing science principles (Voskoglou & Buckley, 2012). It teaches learners to reformulate complex problems and efficiently solve them using techniques such as abstraction, recursion, and heuristic reasoning. In other words, middle school students learn how to solve problems by analyzing them, decomposing them into a manageable sequence of steps leading to a solution, learning to identify patterns, following algorithms, and detecting and correcting errors. The benefits of incorporating computational thinking into a middle school curriculum can be extensive because the skills are widely applicable to a multitude of other disciplines and life course dilemmas (Wing, 2006).

The Partnership's Pandemic Pause and Reboot

The Partnership endured even though it paused during the Spring of 2020 because of the pandemic closure of in-person teaching and learning at both UNCC and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. It began its second year in the fall of 2020 with a series of virtual workshops on Zoom. Thirteen new Wilson sixth graders joined the continuing students, now seventh graders. In the Partnership's third year (2021–22), incoming sixth graders were added to the continuing seventh and eighth graders. The resumed workshops occurred every 3–4 weeks via Zoom. As the pandemic waned in early spring 2022, the workshops switched to a hybrid format. In-person tutors came to Wilson's campus and presented the material didactically with video illustrations, while Zoom tutors worked one-on-one with Wilson learners. In June 2022, the first cohort of eighth grade Wilson students who participated in the Partnership for three years graduated with plans to enter high school in the fall of 2022.[2] Figure 2 presents the dates, context, and sequence of events in the development and implementation of the UNCC/Wilson Partnership.

Figure 2. Timeline of Key Events in Design and Implementation of the UNCC/Wilson Partnership

21st Century Technology Challenges: 2017–18

- Gender, social class, and racial/ethnic disproportionalities in CS college enrollments and incumbents of current technology occupations.
- Projected short falls in future technology workforce.
- CCI Task Force white paper articulates goal of greater town–gown partnership.
- Internal report identifies very few local high school graduates of local school system matriculate to UNC Charlotte as freshmen computer science majors.
- UNC Charlotte faculty (Cukic, Dorodchi, Mickelson) receive NSF funding for I-PASS Project designed to support underrepresented minority, female, first generation, and low-income undergraduates majoring in computer science.

Partnership Design Year: 2018–19

- I-PASS faculty choose Wilson STEM Academy as site for town–gown collaboration and service learning opportunity for undergraduate I-PASS Scholars.
- Wilson teachers and administration, I-PASS faculty develop objectives, goals, and preliminary contours of Partnership.
- Informal supplemental curricula will be delivered by UNCC tutors during four workshops per semester, will be split between UNCC and Wilson's campuses.

Implementation Year 1: 2019–20

- Partnership launches in Nov., with Nov. and Dec. UNCC campus visits by Wilson students; 25 Grade 6 students participate in first cohort of middle schoolers.
- I-PASS Scholars (*n* = 16) serve as tutors, mentors, and developers of Partnerships. They enroll in a service learning course each semester they participate as tutors.
- Workshops' informal supplemental curriculum features games, coding, instruction in core concepts, vocabulary, and essentials of computational thinking with one-on-one tutoring/mentoring by UNCC undergraduates.
- Partnership pauses in Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic in-person school closures.

Implementation Year 2: 2020–21

- Workshops resume via Zoom in Fall 2020 with 13 new sixth graders joining first cohort members who are now seventh graders.
- In Spring 2021, CCI undergraduates interested in Partnership join continuing I-PASS Scholars as additional tutors and mentors via Zoom workshops.
- Informal supplemental curriculum split into Scratch lessons for new incoming sixth graders and Python for more experienced continuing seventh graders.

Implementation Year 3: 2021–22

- Workshops continue in Fall 2021 via Zoom with new cohort of sixth graders joining returning seventh and eighth graders. A mix of I-PASS Scholars and interested CS undergraduates serve as tutors and mentors.

- Memo of Understanding between UNCC and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools finalized and signed by organizations' legal counsels after two years of negotiations, permitting UNCC to access anonymized post-workshop survey assessments.
- In spring 2022, the Partnership's activities switched to a hybrid format. In-person tutors and mentors come to Wilson to deliver didactic lessons with new material and lead games, while remote tutors work with middle schoolers via Zoom.
- June 2022, the first cohort of eighth grade students who participated in Partnership for three years graduates from Wilson STEM Academy and readies for high school in the fall.
- Hybrid format workshops commence Year 4 in Fall 2022. New cohort of sixth graders begins Partnership workshops, while seventh and eighth grade participants return.

<u>Implementation Year 4: 2023–24</u>

- National Science Foundation funding for I-PASS ends in Spring 2023.
- Professors Mickelson and Dorodchi take sabbatical leave in Fall 2023.
- The Wilson Partnership continues with tutors using the Partnership's curriculum and materials. However, the Partnership is now part of the UNC Charlotte STARS Computing Scholars program. Through STARS, undergraduate CS majors participate in team-based computing service learning projects in local middle schools.

Assessments

Wilson staff administered confidential post-workshop assessments to Wilson participants after the first workshop and continued to do so through the concluding workshop of the spring 2022 semester. Post-workshop surveys asked pupils about their perceptions of the session, their mentors/tutors, the effects of the workshop on their future college and career aims, educational goals, sense of belonging in CS, and self-concepts as a science learner. All student responses were identified only by a Charlotte-Mecklenburg School student ID number. For three years, these survey data were collected by middle school staff members for Wilson's own purposes and later shared with UNCC researchers after the district granted them permission in 2022.

Research Questions

Based on the social class, racial/ethnic, and gender disproportionalities in CS enrollments; the uneven secondary education provided to many low-income minoritized youth; the literature's identification of likely structural and cultural factors at the core of their frequently less than optimal preparation for the pursuit of CS in college; and the prior literature suggesting the importance of middle school educational experiences for future STEM education, this case study was guided by several questions:

1. Do Wilson students who participated in the Partnership indicate that they are inspired to go to college and major in CS because of the Partnership?
2. Are Wilson student participants more academically prepared to go to college and major in CS than their peers who did not participate in the workshops?
3. Do the tutoring, mentoring, and role modeling by UNCC students influence the Wilson participants' beliefs that people like them belong in CS?
4. In what ways, if any, does participation in tutoring, mentoring, and role modeling of Wilson students affect UNCC undergraduates?
5. Does the UNCC/Wilson Partnership offer a model for community interorganizational collaboration among educational institutions that share common goals?

Methods

To answer the guiding research questions, we drew upon our mixed methods descriptive case study of the Wilson STEM Academy/UNCC Partnership. We utilized a variety of qualitative data sources and some quantitative indicators collected during the Partnership's planning period (academic year [AY] 2018–19) through the first three years of the workshops' implementation (AY 2019–20 through AY 2021–22).

Samples

Wilson STEM Academy Sample

In 2019, about 25 Wilson student participants were selected for the Partnership. Wilson's Principal Jeffrey Cook consciously targeted sixth graders for the first Wilson cohort so that the same students could experience three years of the Partnership's supplemental instruction before they moved on to high school. Subsequent cohorts of sixth graders joined in Fall 2020 and 2021, with preferences given to students who opted into Wilson's magnet program rather than those with residential assignments to Wilson (J. Cook, personal communication with R. A. Mickelson, September 2022).

UNCC/CCI Sample

Initially, all undergraduate tutors were I-PASS Scholars. The acronym I-PASS stood for *Improving the Persistence and Success of Students from Underrepresented Populations in Computer Science* (Mickelson et al., 2022). I-PASS Scholars were undergraduates from low-income families who are either female, from rural communities, or underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. They received scholarships designed to foster the persistence and graduation of underrepresented students in CS. All I-PASS Scholars participated in at least three

of the six semesters of the workshops. Roughly half of the Scholars participated in all six semesters discussed in this case study. All tutors were required to enroll in a service learning course aligned with the Wilson Partnership.

As word spread throughout CCI about the Partnership, undergraduates not affiliated with I-PASS requested permission to participate as Wilson tutors and mentors. Enrollment in the service learning courses opened to all CCI juniors and seniors interested in them in the Partnership's second year. Thirty CS undergraduates not associated with I-PASS, mainly from low-income families and/or marginalized racial/ethnic communities, volunteered as tutors and mentors beginning in the Partnership's fourth semester. Over the Partnership's first three years, 46 undergraduates participated in it. Every semester, undergraduates that volunteered at Wilson were required to enroll in a service learning course aligned with the Wilson Partnership. The service learning courses were team taught by Professor Dorodchi, who concentrated on the CS components of the workshops, and Professor Mickelson, who focused on sociological aspects of the Workshops, including curricular and instructional guidance, and the gender, race/ethnicity, and social class dynamics of the intervention.

Data

This case study employed a variety of qualitative data, including 15 sets of confidential, open-ended surveys collected from Wilson's middle school participants immediately after each workshop, interviews with participants, field notes from observations at workshops or team meetings, and approximately 220 reflective essays written after each workshop by UNCC tutors as assignments in their service learning college course. Reflective essays described the tutors' experiences and were a major part of their academic coursework. In addition to the undergraduate tutors' reflective essays and the Wilson students' post-workshop survey responses, other sources of qualitative data included field notes from planning meetings and in-person observations of workshops. The first author conducted interviews with Wilson staff and teachers and the undergraduate tutors, as well as exit interviews with I-PASS Scholars who graduated with their bachelor of science degrees.

The post-workshop open-ended surveys were designed and administered by Wilson's staff to ascertain the middle school pupils' perceptions of the workshop's influences on their attitudes about college, STEM, CS, and the development of their science identities. All student responses were identified only by a Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools student ID number. Wilson student data was collected systematically, but only shared with UNCC researchers after the Partnership's Memo of Understand was signed by both educational institutions' legal teams and administrators in 2022.

Analytic Strategies

Coding the Qualitative Raw Data

Members of the research team participated in a multistage process to develop a general coding scheme for all qualitative data that included four interviews conducted with Wilson educators, undergraduates' 220 reflective essays regarding their experiences as tutors in the Partnership, three years of field notes from workshop observations conducted by the first author, 16 exit interviews with graduating I-PASS Scholars—all of whom participated in the workshops between three and eight semesters, and 15 sets of open ended post-workshop assessment responses completed by Wilson students after every workshop (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Krippendorff, 2019; Miles et al., 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The analysis method involved an iterative process. Some preliminary codes came from an early screening of data and the existing literature, which were then applied to the data (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The research team also used an inductive approach associated with grounded theory to identify new codes as the various data sources were analyzed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Research team members then met to discuss the themes present in various elements (interviews, field notes, reflective essays) of the qualitative data. Once members reached agreement regarding the major themes, the research team achieved consensus about how certain data should be coded as the major themes. Next, each of the 220 reflective essays, the 16 exit interviews with I-PASS Scholars and four Wilson educators, and observational field notes were coded by teams of researchers that included the first two authors and several other graduate student coauthors.

The same teams of researchers and graduate students conducted content analyses of pupils' responses to post-workshop assessments. This process revealed patterns across individuals, workshops, and semesters. Researchers compared emergent themes and resolved any discrepancies in coding categories by consensus. Once themes were established, the teams independently coded all students' responses, conducted interrater reliability checks, and in some instances counted the instances where a word or phrase appeared as representations of themes.

Triangulation

Findings generated from the various sources were triangulated across data sources to ensure reliability of interpretations. These included reflective essays, observations, interviews, and survey responses from Wilson. For example, evidence supporting Wilson students' interest in attending college and majoring in CS was drawn from tutors' reflective essays and middle schoolers' answers to post-workshop assessments.

Confidentiality and Reliability Checks

Wilson students' words and responses are not attributed to an identified student. All undergraduates whose insights are quoted are identified by their chosen pseudonym to guarantee their confidentiality. Because of the salience of gender and race to the problematics examined in this study, the description of UNCC tutors' gender and racial/ethnic characteristics reflects their actual identities. Wilson faculty and staff's comments are attributed to them by their actual names and positions. In addition to the UNCC faculty authors, the undergraduate and graduate student co-authors, and Wilson staff members involved in the Partnership had the opportunity to read, clarify, extend, and verify the findings and their interpretations to enhance the manuscript's reliability.

Findings and Discussion

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data. The middle school students identified their interest in going to college, learning to code, studying CS, their role and importance of their mentors and tutors, having fun, and future ambitions involving CS careers. Themes that emerged from UNCC undergraduate interviews and reflective essays included opportunities to address the gender, race, and socioeconomic disproportionalities in CS that they experienced before college and as undergraduates; warm supportive attachments among themselves as mentors and their Wilson mentees; the reinforcement of the undergraduates' CS identities; and opportunities for them to "pay it forward"—that is, instead of repaying those who helped them reach their CS goals, they are helping the next generation reach theirs.

Findings for Wilson Students

Inspiring Enthusiasm for Coding

One of the central aims of the workshops was fostering Wilson students' skills and enthusiasm for coding. According to the Wilson post-session assessments that asked students to complete the sentence "This Partnership is important to me because ________", the opportunity to gain coding skills was a key motivation for many middle school participants. Responses to this question referring to coding over the three years of workshops indicate it was the most common answer to why the Partnership was important to them (*N* = 88).

UNCC mentors agreed that the supplemental curriculum's opportunity to teach middle schoolers coding was invaluable for the middle schoolers.

> You can tell when working with them that many of them have never seen anything like this before. Coding is a whole new world for many of

> them, and it is exciting and rewarding to watch them experience it and make connections. (Karl, Black male)

Sparking College and Career Goals

Acting as both ambassadors for UNCC and the college experience, the undergraduate tutors sparked interest in college as an option for Wilson students. Over the course of the workshops, Wilson students became increasingly excited about the idea of going to college and what their future careers could be. A sixth grade male student enthusiastically blurted out during a workshop session, "I am coming to UNCC to study CS. I belong there!"

Twenty-five respondents mentioned going to college when they completed the sentence "this Partnership is important to me because________" on the post-workshop assessment surveys. Another assessment survey question asked Wilson youth "what, if anything, the session left them wondering about." A middle schooler wrote, "what life in college would be like" for her. Another Wilson student stated the workshops left her wondering "how she could improve her chances of going to college." An I-PASS Scholar described the reactions she witnessed among a few Wilson students with whom she was interacting during a workshop: "I was sitting in the back talking with a few students about what college is like and their faces lit up like a Christmas tree" (Natalie, Black female).

Workshops also inspired the middle school students to think about technology and STEM careers; 35 students answered the post-workshop assessment question "this Partnership is important to me because__" by indicating their career aspirations involved technology. A common response to the open-ended survey question "After today's session with UNCC, I am wondering about_____" pondered how CS intersects with other fields. One student declared, "I love STEM and art, and I will make that my future," while another pupil wrote, "I want to be an architect, but I [now] think about having a minor in computer science."

> The idea is that we are giving middle schoolers a chance to explore CS early on in their life, allowing the students to grasp the very basic ideas…. [Early exposure to CS creates] new opportunities that they did not know existed in the beginning. (Melanie, Asian female)

Undermining Toxic Stereotypes of Computer Scientists

Several Wilson students told their UNCC undergraduate tutors (who also served as mentors) that they were one of the main reasons the middle schoolers were now considering technology careers. "At the end of the [semester's workshops], one girl said that we made her want to be a computer scientist and actually join the field" (Lena, Black female).

Undergraduate mentors were able to connect with the lives of many students that they worked with in the Partnership. Wilson students named specific tutors 27 times in answers to the assessment question "this Partnership is important to me because________." Most of the UNCC undergraduates shared Wilson students' demographic profiles as members of low-income families and underrepresented ethnic and racial groups. Most stereotypes of computer scientists exclude females, Blacks, Latinos/as, and non-Pacific Rim Asians. Stereotypes influence youth forming notions of who can and cannot participate in a profession. Three-quarters of the tutors were females and/or students of color. This means that a large number of tutor/mentors not only attended college, but also defied pervasive cultural stereotypes of who should or should not become computer scientists. The mere presence of the female and racially/ethnically diverse undergraduate mentors conducting Partnership workshop sessions challenged these norms.

Several Wilson participants' statements reflect the influence of their norm challenging workshop role models from UNCC. One written comment captured many Wilson students' reactions to this aspect of Partnership workshops, "Today's experiences help me believe people <u>like me</u> can be computer scientists" (emphasis in the original). Another Wilson student declared, "if they are capable [of doing CS], then I am too." These sentiments were echoed by the middle schooler who stated, "if that guy can do it [CS], why not me?"

Wilson Students' Learning Curve

This study was not able to obtain pre- and post-intervention assessments of academic outcomes for Wilson student participants and a matched control group of nonparticipants. Without any empirical indicators of academic progress, our research relies on perceptions of the tutors and Wilson CS teachers regarding the academic influences the Partnership had on the middle school students.

UNCC undergraduate tutors and Wilson teachers noted what appeared as a learning curve among the Wilson students over the three years of the Partnership. For example, UNCC tutors described how Wilson students exhibited shyness and were reticent to speak at the beginning of each new semester's series of workshops.

> We used *Kahoots* for both warm-up activities and as a test of knowledge at the end of the session. Students show friendly competition and interest in participating. The good rate of answer accuracy also demonstrates the effectiveness of our lessons and the ability of students to understand conceptual questions related to computational thinking. (Kirsten, White female)

Over time, Wilson students' learning became apparent to their mentors. By the fifth semester of the program UNCC tutors observed that

> As weeks go by, lesson plans seemed to speed up more because the students are beginning to understand what [we ask them to do], and they understand the tasks at hand. The students have been able to stay proactive in making sure they are in sync with those covering the lesson plans as well as taking the proper time to practice things on their own and not wait on further instruction but using their time wisely to explore things. (Quintin, Black male)

> Some students are still more engaged than others…the ones who were engaged seemed to be enjoying this lesson more than the last one. [The] sense of competitiveness between them…only pushes them to try new things even more, which is really great to see. (Tanya, Latino/a nonbinary)

Wilson's CS teachers also noted the workshop participants' academic growth.

> I have had students who, as I'm teaching something in class, um, it triggers a memory or some knowledge that they have gained through your program, and they've even said, "oh, we learned this with the UNC Charlotte group." (Mr. McCormack, Wilson CS teacher)

Nurturing Learners' Self-Confidence and Computer Science Identity

After several workshops, numerous Wilson students recognized that they were capable of following a CS path. The statement "this Partnership is important to me because__" prompted one Wilson student to write, "...because anyone can be a computer scientist as long as you push yourself." Based on five semesters of post-session assessment surveys, we found participation in the Partnership appears to foster Wilson students' insights into their own senses of themselves as learners and budding computer scientists. Emblematic of many answers to post-assessment surveys over the three years of the Partnership, one adolescent articulated the ways that the Partnership affected her self-confidence, "[I am] proud, excited, confident...." Another middle schooler described his nascent science identity development, "I can most definitely be a computer scientist if I put my mind to it and study more about it." A necessary stage in developing a CS identity is the person's acknowledgment that she/he can develop the skills necessary for success (Archer et al., 2010). Students must both believe that they are allowed to be and have the capacity to be a (computer) scientist. Science identity encompasses believing that not only that one can *do* the science, but one can *be* a scientist. The previous comment directly captures this aspect of the middle schooler's development of his CS identity.

Interviews with Wilson's CS teachers contrasted the classroom behaviors of the Workshop participants with the other students in their classroom. When asked if the workshop participants are more self-confident learners, a faculty member replied,

> I would say yes…in terms of self-confidence as a learner, they're more likely to, if they're struggling with something, keep at it themselves, it, as opposed to shutting down or, um, calling for help. I have a lot of students who'll take one look at it and just raise [their hand and say] "I need help, I can't do this." But those students who are in the program, many of them will at least attempt it a couple of times and really live in that struggle a little bit, um, trying to, trying to solve whatever the problem is on their own as opposed to relying on someone else to kind of walk them through it. (Ms. Johnson, Wilson CS teacher)

Some Wilson participants' previous self-perceptions of their capabilities meant they shied away from considering CS as an academic pursuit. As Wilson students moved through the workshops, however, they learned of the ways that their mentors also struggled and had learned from their mistakes. As the knowledge that their role models' learning included overcoming challenges, Wilson students' self-confidence in their own abilities to succeed in CS grew.

> [The Wilson student] would say things like "Oh I'm so sorry, I'm not really good at this" or "I'm sorry, I can never understand this," and I would reassure her that it is okay to make mistakes, and all of us are here to learn, including me. In the end, she started saying things that really made me feel proud of our work so far. She was saying statements like "I like doing this. I think I should be a computer scientist" and "I think I should go to [UNCC] and study CS." (Zinobia, Asian female)

An Unexpected Finding: Workshops as a Safe Space for Academic Efforts

The Wilson teacher interviews revealed an unanticipated finding regarding the contrast between participants' behaviors in the workshops and the same students' behaviors in their regular CS classrooms. The teachers expressed surprise to learn that in the workshops Wilson pupils exhibited enthusiasm for CS. Participants paid attention to their tutors and, amidst their chatter, waved their hands in the air while shouting out answers to queries, competed to win in *Kahoot*, and enthusiastically engaged in the workshops' various activities. According to both teachers, these behaviors starkly contrasted with the distracted demeanor, flat or blasé affect, and undistinguished classwork the same students displayed in their CS classrooms.

Wilson's CS teachers described the distribution of students in a typical classroom. Roughly 25% of their students are high flyers who "zoom through the

coding [and] help others." They get their work done, turn in their assignments, and are very interested in excelling academically. High flyers' behavior was not the norm—even among Partnership students. Instead, workshop participants "…get the work done, but they don't seem like they're interested in going into the field. They're not submitting assignments and things like that. They're completing it. They're not turning it in" (Ms. Johnson, Wilson CS teacher). When asked by the interviewer what, if anything, might account for this apparent contradiction between positive affect and academic effort among workshop participants and suboptimal classroom behaviors among the same individuals, teachers focused on negative peer pressure.[3]

> They're pressured. It's still going on that if you're smart, you're a nerd, and then that's a negative thing. And then they don't want to try to learn because the other ones are trying to say, look, we don't want to do this. (Mr. McCormack, Wilson CS teacher)

> And they talk negative about school all the time, "But I'm not going to do this. It's not the cool thing. It's not the cool thing to do." So that was, that's what gets them off track. (Ms. Johnson, Wilson CS teacher)

We have no observational data regarding the extent of workshop participants' contrasting classroom and workshop behaviors, nor can we investigate the underlying dynamics of those who engage in it. But against the backdrop of well-established norms against visible academic engagement captured throughout the literature about underrepresented minority youth (Fryer & Torrelli, 2010; Harris, 2011; Horvat & O'Conner, 2006; Ogbu, 2004; Tyson, 2002.), the CS teachers' hypothesis is plausible. Unlike in the classroom settings, in the workshops students could be enthusiastic and engaged. All the students in the workshops were interested in technology and coding, so no one had to deal with peer pressure to be "cool" by feigning disinterest in CS or academic effort. The Wilson Partnership workshops offered a safe haven from negative peer pressure. As one middle schooler explained, "This Partnership program is important to me because I can be myself." Another eighth grader wrote, "The members [of the workshop class] are cool, and I don't like being in class, and its better in [here] and I learn a lot."

Summary of Findings for UNCC students

Addressing Social Inequities Through the Mentorship

Many Wilson students had limited early exposure to coding, few of their families had home computers available for children to use, and their residential internet service was compromised or absent.[4] UNCC undergraduates' interest in providing CS skills instruction and encouragement to Wilson students

was informed by their own understanding of what life is like as a member of a low-income family and/or socially marginalized youth seeking to join the CS community. Many I-PASS Scholars' experiences as working class females and/or members of underserved racial/ethnic groups sensitized them to Wilson scholars' challenges and limited opportunities in CS.

Wilson students at times experienced aspects of the digital divide rooted in the socioeconomic, gender, and racial/ethnic inequities in Charlotte and the city's school system (Chetty et al., 2014). One undergraduate, first in his family to go to college, attended a high poverty local middle school with very limited curricula or extracurriculars devoted to technology. He and others observed:

> I never heard of coding until I got to high school. Even then, I didn't think much of it. [Because of the Partnership, Wilson students] get to learn at an early age and get to know what coding is. (Raymond, Southeast Asian male)

> When I asked if they think they could create software programs or do simple coding to get a certain result from the computer, they replied "no." They couldn't even think about how they could reach the desired outputs of software by coding. They could vision the end result, such as using games and computers, but they couldn't vision the process and how the programmer/developer got the game or computer to do what it does. (Arlene, Black female)

> Many Wilson Scholars may not have such support at home, in school, or in their communities. Therefore, this supplementation [workshop] is very important to the fueling of their scientific interests. The students of Wilson…are exemplary examples of talented individuals that are swept under the rug by the tech industry. They [come from] underrepresented [groups], mainly Blacks and females. (Kirsten, White female)

> The girls that I had in my group were also all minorities in multiple aspects such as gender and race, similar to myself. They might experience similar hardships that I had experienced when they eventually enter the field….Therefore, I made sure to bring awareness to the fact that we were all part of the minority in some aspect, one way or another; however, this did not mean that we were lesser than others who were not in the minority, it just meant that we might have to work harder to maintain ourselves in our profession. (Beatrice, Pacific Islander female)

Attachment Between Mentors and Mentees

Over the course of the three years the Partnership operated, the undergraduate mentors supported the Wilson students and received a great deal in

return. Given the events of the past few years (the pandemic and its sequela, the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing civil protests, personal and family crises), it is not surprising that some undergraduate tutors considered the positive feedback from Wilson students to be emotionally sustaining. They became attached to their mentees. Finding that they had an impact on Wilson youth motivated the UNCC undergraduates to keep working in the Partnership. As one undergraduate said, "the outpouring of support from many of the [Wilson students] was very encouraging." Another said,

> I love seeing their excitement and engagement with us, especially when they recognized our names and would occasionally mention us in the chat room.[5] I felt like just by recognizing our names alone, we have made an impact in their lives. If they can remember our names then I am positive that they remember all the things that we have done together throughout the semester, and I wish for the memories and the knowledge to stick with them for a long time. (Zinobia, Asian female)

Tutoring Wilson Youth Reinforced UNCC Undergraduates' CS Identities

UNCC tutors' own CS identity solidified as undergraduate CS learners developed their role as a CS tutor and mentor for Wilson youth. They found working to identify and address the obstacles that Wilson students face also helped them to appreciate how they developed their own CS identity. The connections between the two groups of students, especially the ways the middle school youth's STEM pathways mirrored the journeys of the undergraduate mentors, reinforced the college students' own CS identity. This occurred through not only their identification with their younger counterparts, but also through the process of being a mentor.

> I've learned a lot from the Wilson [students] just by talking to them about their interests. If research like this [Wilson Partnership] was around when I was in middle school, I think I would've found computer science earlier and maybe known for a fact what I wanted to do before coming to college. (Lena, Black female)

> [The Wilson Project] helps me as a developing computer scientist better recognize the various applications of my growing skillset. I find it quite empowering to be able to utilize my problem-solving and computational thinking abilities in various real-work and academic scenarios. This allows me to expand my personal identification from beyond a "computer scientist" to someone who is also a good problem solver, logical thinker, and methodical worker as a result of my computer science education. (Cathleen, White female)

One of the UNCC undergraduates, now employed as a computer scientist at a major corporation, described her involvement with the Wilson Partnership,

> Honestly, when I went through the [job] interviews, that's all I talked about, and then the [interviewer] was like, "Oh, you're actually teaching these kids." Well, she was impressed. She was like, "Oh, that's really cool." [By] just asking the question, just kind of like asking about the [Partnership] program, you know, [she was] checking my skills and stuff. (Zinobia, Asian female)

Paying It Forward

Many UNCC undergraduate tutors' reflective essays articulated a need for them to give back to the community from which they came. The Partnership actually gave the undergraduates a chance to pay it forward; that is, instead of looking backward to repay their own mentors and teachers, they look forward and assisted the next generation of youth like themselves. For some this took the form of efforts to create an atmosphere that would allow for hometown peers to follow in their footsteps to college and major in CS. For others, it was desire to benefit their community. Several I-PASS Scholars aspired to teach CS in secondary school but demurred when they discovered how low starting teaching salaries are in North Carolina. For I-PASS students and the other CCI tutors, the Partnership offered an opportunity to pay it forward. The middle school cohort was seen as a potential part of the CS community more broadly and worthy of an investment of their time, caring, and intellectual resources.

> I enjoy mentoring the Wilson middle students because it provides me a chance to give back to the community and be a positive force for change. I have always planned on being able to tutor students and help build interest in CS in the future; however, the problem I would always encounter is "what platform am I gonna use to tutor the kids." Luckily the I-PASS program gave me a platform to help give back, and being able to give back has really made me glad that I am a computer science student. (Peter, Black male)

> Being able to teach these Wilson students felt like it was my way of giving back to the computer science community after so many others had helped me to such a great extent to develop my identity as a female programmer so many years ago. (Alexis, Asian female)

Conclusions

The findings allow us to begin to answer our guiding research questions. The first one asks if the Partnership inspired Wilson students to go to college

and major in CS. Responses to the Wilson post-workshop assessments suggest that many Wilson students began to develop CS identities, a sense of belonging in CS, and greater self-confidence as a CS learner. Their desire to learn to code, go to college, and major in CS were also themes in the data from Wilson pupils and UNCC mentors. These results suggest workshops influenced students' growth in these areas.

The second question asks if the Partnership academically prepared Wilson pupils for college and CS majors. The nature of this study's research design did not permit us to collect objective indicators (such as high school math and science course enrollment, grades, SAT scores) on this question. Because of the necessity for student confidentiality, high residential mobility among low-income families, the three-year lag between graduating from Wilson and possible matriculation to college, and the bureaucratic difficulties of obtaining student data from the district, it was not possible to answer the second question with empirical indicators. Instead, we turned to the perceptions of the tutors and CS teachers for a tentative answer. They noted that many of students exhibited behaviors consistent with academic growth and that if the behaviors were to continue during high school, Wilson students would be more prepared for college and a CS major than comparable peers who did not participate in the workshops. However, this answer is merely speculative.

The effects of mentors as role models formed the third question. The old chestnut of wisdom comes to mind: "You can't be it, if you can't see it." Both Wilson and UNCC students confirmed that the Partnership met its goals of exposing Wilson youth to role models from demographic populations still marginalized in CS, people whose backgrounds are similar to their own. Several pupils mentioned the importance of specific mentors. Wilson pupils explicitly stated that after participating in the Partnership workshops with their tutors, they are now thinking about going to college and majoring in CS. One Wilson middle schooler's comment summarized the answer to the question, "Today's experiences help me believe people like me can be computer scientists." The findings from the interviews we conducted with mentors, their reflective essays, and the responses to the post-workshop surveys suggest that the diverse mentors provided role models who debunked toxic stereotypes of who can be a computer scientist. Importantly, the positive effects of the role models were not only because the tutors shared racial and gender identities with the Wilson Scholars. The role models were also the middle schoolers' tutors and mentors who, over the course of six semesters, demonstrated that they cared about their young Wilson peers. The mentors, many of whom returned year after year, created an authentic relationship with the mentees. This goes beyond simply sharing a racial or gender identity with the middle schoolers. The

undergraduates built human connections with their mentees while they undermined stereotypes that people like them did not belong in CS.

The study's fourth question concerned the effects the Partnership had on the UNCC undergraduates. Did they perceive that involvement in the Partnership affected their sense of belonging in CS, their own career goals, and their capacity to shape social justice in their own communities and the technology field? The 220 reflective essays collected over three years from all undergraduate tutors and the exit interviews with every I-PASS graduate strongly suggest that for most undergraduates, experiences at Wilson positively shaped their CS identities and sense of belonging in the discipline, reinforced important academic and social skill sets, and in some cases gave them the opportunity to address the social and educational inequities that they experienced themselves in their own journeys to CS by paying it forward at Wilson.

The final question asked if the Partnership offers a model for community interorganizational collaborations among educational institutions that share certain common goals. The tentative answer is yes. The Partnership was tailored to Wilson's particular student population and the educators' requests for assistance with their CS students. Any successful collaboration must be crafted to address a community's needs and the educational institutions' capacities. While no case study is generalizable, the findings suggest that the components and implementation of the Partnership as presented in the logic model (Figure 1) offer a potential roadmap for future cross-institutional collaborations in communities seeking to address the gender, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic gaps in their schools' STEM courses to help diversify the prospective technology labor force.

Limitations

In addition to the absence of external validity of any case study, this study's findings do not have empirical indicators of the efficacy of the intervention. First, it lacks baseline measures of Wilson participants' beliefs about going to college, interest in STEM and CS, or norms about who does or does not belong in the field. Findings only report possible changes in these beliefs based on district and university statistics, Wilson students' post-workshop assessments, and the impressions of CS teachers and UNCC undergraduate tutors involved in the workshops. Second, findings are limited by the absence of empirical short-term outcome data about participants' academic performance in their middle school CS classes or their actual enrollment in high school CS courses or other STEM subjects. Third, we do not have long-term outcome indicators about college and CS major compared with their otherwise similar peers who did not participate in the workshops. Without these empirical indicators, our

findings reflect only the aspirations of the Wilson students themselves and the impressions of their CS teachers and undergraduate tutors. A fourth limitation concerns the self-selection of the Wilson students and UNCC undergraduates involved in the Partnership. The characteristics of the self-selected samples raise issues of selection bias and further preclude drawing definitive conclusions from any findings.

Importance

The many limitations notwithstanding, the study's findings suggest a potential model for a collaborative intervention to address the technology challenges many of our schools face. The workshops appear to spark marginalized middle school youth's interest in going to college, in coding, and in CS careers. The workshop experiences appear to augment development of CS identities and build the self-confidence of the middle school learners. These tentative outcomes are important because prior research indicates science identities are central to success in all STEM fields (Cohen et al., 2021; Johnson, 2020). The case study illustrates the potential importance of exposure of young adolescents to successful role models for motivating them to consider technology careers despite computer scientist stereotypes that exclude them. At the same time, workshops appeared to reinforce the CS skill sets of the undergraduate tutors and permitted them to engage in service learning that was meaningful to them. Finally, the Partnership offers a model for a community collaboration to achieve common goals.

This study began at the intersection of several trends that coalesced during the last decade, the structural roots of which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The trends include the growth of the importance of technology in all aspects of public and private life, the likely disjuncture between projected labor force needs and the number of adults trained in the sciences, the numbers of youth entering college with the requisite interests and preparation for CS majors, and the untapped talent and potential of youth who do not have access to preparation or believe they do not belong in CS. Additionally, the persistence of gender and ethnic/racial underrepresentation in the field has implications for the maintenance and reproduction of social and economic inequality. The findings from this case study are consistent with prior research on the importance of inspiring and preparing adolescents for STEM learning during middle school. Results also support the significance of informal active learning for reinforcing the formal curricula and fostering development of adolescents' CS identities. Our findings that the UNCC tutors helped undermine toxic gender and race/ethnic stereotypes about CS confirms the existing literature pointing to the importance of consistency, reliability, and authenticity of

mentors who developed caring relationships with their mentees. The concept of paying it forward is not new. However, it does not appear in the literature on low-income undergraduates of color in CS service learning courses. The Wilson Partnership offered UNCC undergraduates an opportunity to meet their service learning requirements while working to create a more inclusive tech community.

This case study offers a model of a focused intervention—the creation and implementation of a community collaboration between a university and a public middle school that begins to address both the weaker inspiration and preparation among low-income middle schoolers who are females and/or underserved minoritized youth and many of the exclusionary stereotypes at the heart of the technology challenges that face the nation. The UNCC/Wilson Partnership itself cannot solve the dilemmas that contribute to the low numbers of inspired and prepared undergraduates from these backgrounds, nor can the Partnership eliminate the persistent disproportionalities among those who enroll as technology majors once they arrive on a college campus. Fully addressing these challenges must await systemic institutional reforms that tackle the structural foundations of these long-standing social problems.

Endnotes

[1]The following URL links to the Spring 2022 Scratch and Python supplemental curricula lesson plans for the UNCC/Wilson Partnership: http://tinyurl.com/CTMiddleSchool. Lesson plans were revised each semester as needed.

[2]Data collected from the Partnership's fourth year (2022–23) are not included in this article.

[3]We are well aware of the voluminous and contentious literature about the anti-academic peer pressure some underrepresented minority youth experience, but engaging it is beyond the scope of this article.

[4]This manifestation of the class/race digital divide at Wilson was eased by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system's provision of laptops to all students and of hotspots at libraries in communities with poor internet access.

[5]The tutor inadvertently misspoke when she referred to a workshop's Zoom session chats among students and tutors as a chat room.

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Exploring Parents' Views on Supporting Their College Student With an Intellectual Disability to Develop Agency

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Abstract

College opportunities now exist for young adults with intellectual disability. Because of this, it is common for these individuals' parents to express a desire for increased student agency (Miller et al., 2018). Yet, little is known about how parents feel about how to best support agency development for their young adult child. In the current study, authors surveyed 64 parents with a student attending an inclusive postsecondary education program to examine their perceived level of confidence related to supporting their student in developing agency. Further, we looked at parents' responses to their perception of the most important skills related to supporting agency development. Findings showed that parents felt least confident in supporting students' financial independence and felt supporting navigation of intimate relationships to be least important. Implications for practice and directions for future research are presented.

Key Words: self-determination, agency development, intellectual disability, parental engagement, transition

Introduction

The transition from high school to adult life can be challenging for students with disabilities (Newman et al., 2011; Shogren & Wittenberg, 2020). This

transition can be even more challenging for students with intellectual disability (ID; Osgood et al., 2005). In fact, the postschool outcomes for students with ID are of drastic contrast compared to their peers without disabilities. Specifically, students with ID lag in almost every postschool area: employment, community participation, and college access and completion (Newman et al., 2011). As a result of the dismal outcomes, there have been many efforts aimed at improving postschool outcomes. One effort that has gained momentum over the last decade has been inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs on college campuses, with 332 programs in existence nationwide (Think College, 2024). The passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) in 2008 has propelled this movement by providing federal money to support the development of more IPSE programs across the country.

Transition to adulthood can be a stressful time of life for families of students with disabilities, particularly those with ID (Bianco et al., 2009; Bouck & Joshi, 2016; Gauthier-Boudreault et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2011; Shogren & Wittenberg, 2020). Parents of students with disabilities often express a less optimistic vision for the future and greater discomfort with the transition process than parents of children without disabilities (Blustein et al., 2016; Martinez et al., 2012). Transition-age students with ID face unique challenges during this period. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition-Text Revision* (DSM-5-TR) classified ID as a deficit in intellectual abilities (e.g., abstract thinking, learning, understanding cause and effect, problem solving) that results in impaired functioning to meet independence and social responsibility in one or more areas of the individual's daily life (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Individuals with ID may require support with self-care, social communication and relationships, understanding and reciprocating or responding to social cues, and independently understanding risks and consequences (Zisman-Ilani, 2022). Compounding the extra support that may be needed during the transition to adulthood and the common stress that is associated with this stage is the fact that outcomes for adults with ID continue to fall short compared to those without disabilities.

Parents desire the smoothest transition possible for their child with a disability as they enter adult life environments (Bianco et al. 2009; Blustein et al., 2016; Grigal & Neubert, 2004). This includes working competitively, living independently, achieving meaningful social relationships, and living a life of autonomy. The literature is replete with studies conveying the desire of parents of students entering IPSE to receive more support during this time. Specifically, parents with a child transitioning into an IPSE program report that they need more information and/or support in the following areas: (a) how to "let go"; (b) how to allow their young adult child to experience risk; (c) emotional support;

(d) family-to-family networks; (e) information about the adult services available to their child; (f) information about the laws pertaining to their young adult child (e.g., FERPA, ADA), and (g) how to shift from caregiver to advisor for their young adult (Bianco et al., 2009; Bumble et al., 2021; Francis et al., 2019; Francis et al., 2016; Gauthier-Boudreault, 2017; Thorin et al., 1996).

Research has shown that parent involvement is crucial to student success (Jones, 2022; Kohler, 1996; Test et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2012), yet parents of students with ID often report not knowing how to best support their child as they transition into college and adulthood (Francis et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2016). The evolution of a parent–child relationship as the child approaches young adulthood can be fraught with dilemmas and conflict for any family, particularly for families of children with disabilities. Instead of growing more independent of their families as typical young adults may do, young adults with disabilities may find themselves more dependent on parents for support in navigating adulthood and postsecondary options (Bianco et al., 2009).

New Possibilities: IPSE Programs

IPSE programs are housed at a variety of institutions of higher education, from trade and technical schools (3.7%) to two-year community/junior colleges (33.4%) to four-year colleges and universities (59.8%; 2.9% classified as "other"). Most programs (82.4%) are at public institutions, and almost 40% of IPSE programs offer housing for students. In order for students to access federal financial aid, despite not taking coursework for credit or maintaining full-time status, programs must meet certain requirements around degree of inclusivity, satisfactory academic progress, and clock/credit hours (among others) to receive designation from the U.S. Department of Education as a Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Program (CTP). At the time of writing, 46.1% of the IPSE programs listed on thinkcollege.net have CTP status (Think College, 2024).

IPSE programs nationwide provide students with ID access to academic courses, employment preparation, and campus membership including social access typical of college students without ID (Think College, 2024). The practice and purpose of IPSE programs includes five contexts of authentic student experience that help support belonging, learning, identity, and contribution (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012). These five contexts include: academic, social, associational, employment, and family. Although there is some level of inclusion afforded across most recognized programs, this is based on a continuum, as some programs are completely inclusive across all domains, and some may only have inclusive opportunities in one or two domains (e.g., social and academic; Hart et al., 2006). There is variability across IPSE programs in many

areas including the degree of inclusivity, autonomy given to students, residential options (i.e., college dorm or apartment), overall student population, and programmatic policies to promote personal and professional growth (Plotner & Marshall, 2015).

While many IPSE leaders strive for typicality in all program aspects including the frequency and intensity of parent involvement (Grigal et al., 2012; Think College, 2024), the need to balance truly inclusive opportunities and the most appropriate and effective supports can create a paradox. While many IPSE programs strive to reflect what is typical for college students in their interactions and relationships with parents, research indicates that a parent support component to IPSE programming could better prepare parents to positively support their student's evolution into an agentic individual (Bianco et al., 2009; Francis et al., 2016; Francis et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2019; Graff et al., 2019; Grigal & Neubert, 2004; Henninger & Taylor, 2014; Martinez et al., 2012).

The paradox in supporting their student's autonomy and independence while simultaneously balancing the role of advocate was described by parents in Bianco et al.'s (2009) phenomenological study of nine families of young adults with ID. Parents in the study described wanting to support their child in developing self-determination and self-advocacy skills, but also feeling those desires were mediated by their children's ongoing needs for assistance (Bianco et al., 2009). Parents of young adults with disabilities transitioning to adulthood are engaged in a balancing act rather than automatically assuming a less active parenting role (Thorin et al., 1996). This dilemma includes elements of risk and "letting go." Parents of students attending an IPSE program may understand the importance of independence for their young adult child but could be unaware of their child's capabilities or are unwilling to allow them to take risk (Bumble et al., 2021; Graff et al., 2019; Thorin et al., 1996). This acknowledgement of parents' desire for their student with ID to assume more autonomy yet inability to support student risk-taking indicates that parents may require support to allow for dignity of risk in college and to help create opportunities to enhance their child's self-determination. As autonomy is cultivated for students, it is natural to assume that parents need new skills and supports to aid the transition and appropriately encourage newfound agency for their child. Building on research that shows the importance of the family–school–community partnership to enhance transition outcomes, parental engagement can be a facilitator of self-determined behavior in educational and community settings (Chatenoud & Odier-Guedj, 2022).

Self-Determination and Agency for Young Adults With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Wehmeyer (2004) defines self-determination as "acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influences or interference" (p. 351). Self-determination is recognized in the field of special education as a skill that is highly important and to be encouraged throughout the lifespan but particularly during the transition process (Field et al., 1998; Wehmeyer, 2004). In fact, self-determination has been shown to be an important predictor of post-school success and enhanced quality of life for youth with disabilities (LaChapelle et al., 2005; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2021; Test et al., 2009). There is a changing and complex interrelationship between the individual, family, and community factors that have a major impact on independence for young people with disabilities, particularly during the time of transition from high school. A key component of self-determination involves making one's own decisions, and for all individuals this can involve some level of risk. There is well-documented value in risk for gaining independence and new skills on the path to adulthood (Bumble et al., 2021; Dubberly, 2011). Indeed, the term "dignity of risk," coined by Perske (1972), identifies the vital connection between choice, risk, and human dignity. Perske posits that people without disabilities are faced with decisions that involve a degree of physical or emotional risk, and to deny these choices and risk to people with disabilities is to diminish their human dignity.

This difficulty in transitioning to adulthood for young adults with disabilities may be compounded by the families' dilemma in deciding what is acceptable risk. Stokes et al. (2013) propose that young people with disabilities, like their peers without disabilities, need the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. Research also shows that it can be challenging for parents to foster independence, self-determination, and agency for their child with a disability. Parents want their child to become an independent adult, but they also must consider the realities of adult life: less reliable and consistent services, real-world dangers, and the potential lifespan of their child (outliving parents; Hirano & Rowe, 2016). Research with adults with disabilities indicates that participation in more inclusive living environments correlates with higher levels of self-determination (Shogren et al., 2007). Participation in an IPSE provides the contextual opportunity for agency development while also lending the supports students with ID may need during this time of transition.

If self-determination is the ability to make one's own choices and decisions free from the influence of others, then agency is the volitional action and the

environmental and contextual opportunities to achieve goals related to those choices and decisions (Shogren et al., 2015). The development of agency and agentic action in students with disabilities involves supporting students in developing "skills necessary to advocate on their own behalf. The focus should be on supporting students how to be assertive, how to effectively communicate their perspective, how to negotiate, how to compromise, and how to deal with systems and bureaucracies" (Wehmeyer et al., 2018, p. 58). These skills, coupled with volitional action and opportunities for skill expression, are at the heart of agency. "The agentic self has a sense of personal empowerment, which involves both knowing and having what it takes to achieve one's goals" (Little et al., 2002, p. 390).

The skills necessary to enable the growth in self-determination and agency, including allowing for reasonable risk-taking, are a very real set of skills that parents need in order to realize their desired outcomes for their children as they transition to adulthood. This study seeks to determine parent perceptions of their own support needs as their young adult child transitions into and through an IPSE program. IPSE programs are uniquely situated to foster agency-building for students with disabilities, yet parents remain a key stakeholder in ensuring that students remain the primary agent in their post-school lives. To date, several studies have examined the roles and expectations that parents have as their students attend an IPSE (Francis et al., 2016; Graff et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2010; Grigal & Neubert, 2004), yet none have identified the supports that parents may need to assist their child in establishing and sustaining agency while in college and beyond. The purpose of this study is to examine parents' perceived levels of confidence and perceptions of importance of supporting their college student with ID in developing agency in multiple domains of life. Specifically, two research questions guided this study:

1. What are parents' levels of confidence in supporting their college student with ID in becoming an agentic adult, and how important do parents believe these domains to be?
2. What are parents' levels of confidence in supporting their own development as the parent of an independent adult with ID, and how important do parents believe these supports to be?

Method

Participants and Procedures

An online survey, the *Inclusive Postsecondary Education Parent Supports Survey (IPSE-PS)* was disseminated to IPSE programs nationwide from email addresses retrieved from the Think College database. One programmatic point

of contact was asked to send the survey out to parents of current students in each respective program. Eight IPSE programs reported sending the survey via email to the parents of students currently enrolled in their program. The average enrollment for the eight programs involved in the study is less than 20 students. A total of 64 parents completed the survey. The 64 retained surveys were not missing any data on the Likert-response items.

Table 1. IPSE-PS Survey Respondent Demographics (*n* = 64)

Category	*n*	%
Relationship to Student		
Mother	50	78.1
Father	13	20.3
Grandmother	1	1.6
Respondent's Highest Level of Education		
High school diploma	4	6.3
Associate's degree	3	51.6
Bachelor's degree	33	32.8
Master's degree	21	3.1
Doctorate	2	3.1
Other	1	1.6
Student's Current Year in College		
Freshman	38	59.4
Sophomore	11	17.2
Junior	13	20.3
Senior	2	3.1
Race/Ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latino/a	0	0.0
Black or African American	7	10.9
White	51	79.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	1.6
Native American or Indian American	0	0.0
Other	4	6.2
Prefer not to answer	1	1.6

Of the 64 respondents, 50 reported they were the mother, 13 the father, and one the grandmother of a student currently attending an IPSE program. The majority of respondents, 51.6% (*n* = 33), answered their highest level of educa-

tion was a Bachelor's degree. Nearly 80% (*n* = 51) of the respondents identified as White, nearly 11% (*n* = 7) identified as Black or African American, one respondent identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 6% (*n* = 4) identified their race/ethnicity as Other, and one respondent chose not to answer the race/ethnicity question. Fifty-nine percent (*n* = 38) of respondents answered that their IPSE student is a freshman at the time of the survey. Junior parents made up 20% (*n* = 13) of the respondents, sophomore parents made up 17% (*n* = 11), and senior parents made up only 3% (*n* = 2) of survey respondents. See Table 1 for participant demographic information.

Instrumentation

The researchers developed the survey instrument, the *IPSE-PS,* for the purpose of this study. Survey items were generated based on literature related to postsecondary education for students with ID and related to parent perspectives of IPSE for students with ID (Burke et al., 2020; Francis et al., 2016; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Graff et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2018; Stokes et al., 2013). After the initial draft of the instrument was constructed, two employees of an IPSE program, one current doctoral student in special education, and one parent of a student with a disability piloted the survey and made editing recommendations. Based on feedback from the stakeholders, minor edits were made to question formatting and rewording for clarity. The final survey instrument consisted of three sections. The sections included demographics, parent level of confidence in supporting their student in various domains of college life as well as their perceptions of the importance of those domain supports, and parent level of confidence in accessing the supports they themselves may need related to supporting their student as well as the importance of those supports.

Specifically, demographic questions included respondents' relationship to the student attending an IPSE, race/ethnicity, and year of their student in college. The second section focused on three specific domains related to respondent confidence to support their student in aspects of college life: personal development, social engagement and communication, and independent living. There were six 4-point Likert-type rating scale questions pertaining to parents' confidence in supporting their students in the areas of agency development, self-awareness, self-advocacy, risk-taking, future planning, and leadership. A definition for agency was provided: "*agency is defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices.*" Respondents could select *extremely confident*, *somewhat confident*, *somewhat unconfident*, or *not at all confident* for each question. The personal development domain also included a question where respondents were asked to rank specific personal development-related skills based on perceived importance, including *knowledge of skills to support my*

student's self-advocacy, knowledge of skills to support my student's ability to navigate risk, and more. The student social engagement and communication domain included five 4-point Likert-type rating scale questions ascertaining respondents' confidence to support their student in areas including peer connections, navigating conflict, intimate relationships, difficult conversations, and friendships. Respondents were also asked to rank the importance of these skills in supporting their student in social engagement and communication. Specifically, seven questions relating to supporting student independent living skills were included using the same 4-point Likert-type rating scale for respondents' confidence. This section also included a perceived importance ranking of skills related to independent living: community safety, cooking/grocery shopping, financial independence, transportation skills, accessing health resources, and accessing adult service agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation.

The final section of the survey asked four 4-point Likert-style rating questions related specifically to the respondent's (parent's) confidence in navigating their own support needs while supporting a student with ID in college. This included items such as "*how confident do you feel in your knowledge or skills to support* your own *emotional well-being during your student's transition to adulthood?"* and "*how confident do you feel in* your own *knowledge or skills to support your student in making his or her own decisions?"* And respondents once again were asked to rank these items by importance, on a scale of *most important* to *least important*.

Data Analysis

The survey was created in SurveyMonkey©, an online platform that allows users to create, send, and analyze web-based surveys. Survey Monkey© responses were downloaded into SPSS© to analyze the survey data. Data analysis included running descriptive statistics for questions related to student support factors and parent support factors. Percentages, frequencies, and means were calculated. Each of the domain areas for parental confidence ratings and importance rankings are reported.

Results

Research Question 1: What are parents' levels of confidence in supporting their college student with ID in becoming an agentic adult, and how important do parents believe these domains to be?

In response to research question number one, respondents were asked to rate their confidence in supporting their college student in developing agency

and independence over three domains of life: personal development, social engagement and communication, and independent living as well as the importance of these supports. The mean for the confidence rating responses in the personal development support domain was 3.2. The mean for all confidence rating questions in the social engagement and communication domain was 3.0, and the overall mean for all items in the independent living domain was also 3.0. The overall mean of respondents' importance ranking for each of the three domains is 2.0. Table 2 includes response details for both the confidence ratings and the importance rankings.

Confidence and Importance in Supporting Their Student in Personal Development

In the personal development section, the first item read "*How confident do you feel in your knowledge or skills to support your student's agency?*" An overwhelming majority of respondents, 89% (n = 57), indicated they were *extremely confident* or *somewhat confident* in supporting their student's agency. Similarly, 90.6% (n = 58) reported they were *extremely confident* or *somewhat confident* in supporting their students' self-advocacy, and just over 81% (n = 52) reported they were *extremely confident* or *somewhat confident* in supporting their students' self-awareness. The mean response for supporting their student in navigating risk is also 3.2; however, the percentage of respondents who are *somewhat unconfident* in supporting their students' navigation of risk in college was at 20% (n = 13). Even more responded as feeling *somewhat unconfident* in supporting their student in having realistic expectations for the future: 23% (n = 15). Finally, the smallest mean response for this domain was for supporting students' leaderships skills, at 2.9; 34% (n = 21) of respondents said that they felt *somewhat unconfident* or *not at all confident* in supporting their student in developing leadership skills while in college.

In response to ranking the importance of these personal development-related skills, respondents ranked supporting their student's self-advocacy as of highest importance, with 53% (n = 31) choosing *most important* for this support. A close second was supporting their student's agency development with 49% (n = 28) ranking this support as *most important*. These skills also received the highest overall mean ranking of 2.4. Respondents ranked supporting their student in developing leadership skills as the least important support in this section with 65% (n = 41) selecting *least important*, for a mean ranking of 1.5.

Table 2. IPSE-PS Survey—Student Supports Item Responses (*n* = 64)

Knowledge or skills to support…	Mean Confidence Rating*	Mean Importance Ranking**
Personal Development Domain		
your student's agency? (Agency is defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices.)	3.3	2.4
your student's self-advocacy?	3.3	2.4
your student's self-awareness?	3.2	1.9
your student's determining and navigating acceptable risk? (e.g., weighing outcomes and making decisions in potentially risky situations such as dating, drinking alcohol)	3.2	2.2
your student's ability to have realistic expectations for the future?	3.0	1.8
your student's development of leadership skills?	2.9	1.5
Social Engagement and Communication Domain		
your student's social engagement and connections with peers?	3.0	2.4
your student in navigating conflict resolution?	3.1	2.0
your student's ability to have difficult conversations with friends or family members?	3.0	1.7
your student in navigating intimate relationships?	2.4	1.8
your student in navigating friendships?	3.3	2.2
Independent Living Domain		
your student in being safe in the community?	3.2	2.6
your student's financial independence (i.e., paying bills, budgeting, maintaining a checking account)?	2.8	2.5
your student's cooking and/or grocery shopping?	3.4	1.8
your student's transportation skills (i.e., accessing Uber/Lyft, accessing the bus system, obtaining a driver's license)?	3.2	1.9
your student's knowledge of adult service agencies and how to access them (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, Social Security Administration)?	2.5	1.8
your student in navigating resources to support their own mental health?	2.8	1.7
your student in accessing resources to support their own physical health?	3.1	1.6

Note. *4 = *extremely confident*, 1 = *not at all confident*; **3 = *most important*, 1 = *least important*

Confidence and Importance in Supporting Their Student in Social Engagement and Communication

Five questions related to social engagement and communication in relationships were included in this section of the survey (see Table 2 for response details). When respondents were asked how confident they were in supporting their student's social engagement and connections with peers, 70% (*n* = 44) reported they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in doing so. Most (83%; *n* = 53) reported they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student in navigating conflict. Numbers dropped slightly in reports of feeling *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting students in having difficult conversations with friends or family: 74% (*n* = 47). Numbers dropped even more steeply as only 50% (*n* = 32) reported feeling *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student in navigating an intimate relationship. The mean rating for supporting students in navigating intimate relationships was 2.4, the lowest confidence rating for any item on the survey. Indeed, 11% of respondents (*n* = 7) reported feeling *not at all confident* in intimate relationship support.

Many respondents (65%; *n* = 38) ranked knowledge or skills to support their student's social engagement and connections as a *most important* support, and 55% (*n* = 36) of respondents indicated that knowledge or skills to support their student's navigation of friendships also falls in the *most important* category. Respondents ranked knowledge and skills to support their student in having difficult conversations with friends or family as the least important support in this category, with 60% (*n* = 36) choosing *least important*. Respondents indicated that supporting their student in navigating intimate relationships was also on the lower end of the importance scale, with a mean of 1.8 for this item. All other skills related to social engagement and communication were ranked in the *medium importance* range.

Confidence and Importance in Supporting their Student in Independent Living

Parent respondents were asked seven questions related to supporting their students in the independent living domain (see Table 2 for response details). When asked how confident they were in supporting their student's safety in the community, an overwhelming majority, 94% (*n* = 60) reported they felt *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in doing so. The second question in this section asked respondents' confidence in supporting their student's financial independence, and 42% (*n* = 27) of respondents indicated they were *somewhat unconfident* or *not at all confident* to support their student in this way. A

question regarding confidence in supporting students' grocery shopping and cooking skills elicited 84.5% (*n* = 54) responding they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in this; this question received the highest mean score in the domain as well at 3.4. Eighty percent (*n* = 51) responded that they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student's transportation skills, which could include obtaining a ride via Uber© or Lyft©, navigating a bus system, or obtaining a driver's license.

The final three questions in the independent living section related specifically to accessing disability-related services and healthcare. Just 57% of respondents (*n* = 36) reported they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student in accessing adult service agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, and Social Security Administration. Slightly more (66%; *n* = 42) reported they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student in navigating resources related to mental health. Eighty percent of respondents (*n* = 51) reported they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student in navigating resources related to their physical health.

Overwhelmingly, 70% of respondents (*n* = 42) ranked knowledge or skills to support their student in being safe in the community as one of the *most important* skills in the independent living domain. Second to this, 59% of respondents (*n* = 35) ranked supporting student's financial independence as a *most important* support as well. Many respondents, 43% (*n* = 27), ranked knowledge or skills to support their student in navigating mental health as the *least important* skill. Knowledge to support their student in accessing adult service supports such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Social Security Administration was ranked by 40% of respondents (*n* = 25) as one of the *least important* supports.

Table 3. IPSE-PS Survey Parent Supports Item Responses (*n* = 64)

Knowledge or skills to support…	**Mean Confidence Rating***	**Mean Importance Ranking****
Your own emotional well-being during your student's transition to adulthood?	3.5	2.0
Your own parent-to-parent connections with other IPSE parents or parents of IPSE graduates?	3.1	1.5
Your own ability to "let go?" (i.e., enabling your student to become as independent of you as possible)	3.3	2.2
Your own ability to support your student making his or her own decisions?	3.3	2.4

Note. *4 = *extremely confident*, 1 = *not at all confident*; **3 = *most important*, 1 = *least important*

Research Question 2: What are parents' levels of confidence in supporting their own development as the parent of an independent adult with ID, and how important do parents believe these supports to be?

In response to research question number two, respondents were asked to rate their confidence in their knowledge and skills to support their own development and transition as the parent of a college student. There were four questions regarding respondents' perceptions of their own support needs as they support their young adult child with ID to transition from high school and into and through an IPSE program (see Table 3 for response details). Question one asked about the responding parents' confidence in supporting their own emotional well-being as they support their students transition to adulthood. Over half (56%; *n* = 36) responded that they were *extremely confident* in their ability to support their own emotional well-being during this time of transition, and 39% (*n* = 25) reported they were *somewhat confident*. The overall mean response for this item was the highest in the domain at 3.5 when a numerical value is assigned to the Likert responses, where 4 = *extremely confident*, 3 = *somewhat confident*, 2 = *somewhat unconfident*, and 1 = *not at all confident.* Only 5% (*n* = 3) reported they were *somewhat unconfident* in supporting their own emotional well-being. Eight percent of respondents (*n* = 50) reported they feel *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in building parent-to-parent connections with other IPSE parents. The majority, 87.5% (*n* = 56) reported feeling confident in their ability to "let go" as their student transitioned through an IPSE and into adulthood and independence. Finally, 94% of respondents (*n* = 60) reported feeling confident in supporting their student in making his or her own decisions.

In evaluating the importance of these items, respondents ranked knowledge and skills to support their student in making their own decisions as the most important item with 48% (n = 30) ranking this item as *most important*. The mean ranking for this item was 2.4. Respondents ranked their knowledge of parent-to-parent connections with other IPSE parents lowest on the list, with 58% of respondents (*n* = 34) marking it of *least importance*. The mean ranking for this item was 1.5. Parent emotional well-being and their ability to "let go" were ranked of *medium importance* by the majority of respondents, with mean responses of 2.0 and 2.2, respectively.

Discussion

To frame the discussion of the findings from this survey, we use Arnett's (2007) theory of emerging adulthood as a framework for understanding the

lives of transition-age individuals, ranging from late teens to early 20s. Arnett frames this time of life as a time when individuals "benefit from growing social cognitive maturity, which enables them to understand themselves and others better than they did as adolescents" (2007, p. 70). As well, emerging adults enjoy their freedom to focus on themselves, and they often take satisfaction in their progress toward self-sufficiency (Arnett, 2007). This framework gives some context for the typical experience and expectations for emerging adults, which research has indicated is not necessarily different for people with ID (Hall, 2017; Shalock, 2005; Voermans et al., 2021) but may be more nuanced in specific ways such as the level and type of support needed to achieve adult life goals.

Parents report overall confidence in having the knowledge and skills to support their student's agency development, with an overwhelming 89% (*n* = 57) reporting they are *extremely* or *somewhat confident* in this. This overall confidence may be a reflection of the fact that the students of the parents surveyed are currently enrolled in an IPSE program. Other researchers have found that parents of students with disabilities feel that school environments are "secure and predictable" places for their children (Cribb et al., 2019, p. 1775). As well, this confidence is likely a reflection of the privilege inherent in the demographics reflected in our study's participants. An overwhelming majority of respondents (88%, *n* = 56) reported having earned a Bachelor's degree or higher. This fact alone likely positions them to better support their student through emerging adulthood than parents with less education. Kim and Kutscher (2021) found that parental educational level was highly correlated to student achievement in college, specifically academic outcomes and self-confidence.

Despite the high confidence levels of respondents to support their student's agency development, respondents grew increasingly less confident in their report of supporting their student's development of specific agency-building skills, including self-awareness (81%, *n* = 52), risk-taking (80%, *n* = 52), and assuming leadership roles (66%, *n* = 42). This finding could indicate that parents are not clear on the component skills comprising the construct of agency. Further research should be conducted to better understand the reasons behind parents feeling less confident to supporting student development of these specific skills, but some IPSE researchers have found that risk in particular is a more difficult construct for parents to embrace and support for their student with ID (Rooney-Kron et al., 2022). Some young adults with ID describe their parents making most of their decisions about what they can and cannot do (Hemm et al., 2017), giving them nearly no opportunity to practice risk-taking.

Much of the extant literature on dignity of risk touts the benefits of providing opportunities for prudent and informed risk-taking for all emerging adults,

including those with ID (Bumble et al., 2021; Perske, 1972). Additionally, parents of students with ID who graduated from IPSE programs suggest that providing students with opportunities to take risks is essential to supporting the student's transition to life after college (Francis et al., 2018; Rooney-Kron et al., 2022). Risk-taking, experimentation, and exploring possibilities and options are all typical manifestations of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007; Doyle & O'Donnell, 2022).

Almost half of respondents (45%; *n* = 29) said they were either *somewhat unconfident* or *not at all confident* in their ability to support their student in navigating intimate relationships. Aligned with this low confidence rating, 46% of parents ranked supporting their student in intimate relationships as one of the *least important* skills within the social engagement domain, with this item receiving a 1.8 mean ranking on a 3-point importance ranking scale. While parents do not seem concerned with their lack of knowledge and skills in this area, research shows that young adults with ID express a desire for sexual intimacy (Gil-Llario et al., 2018). In fact, the level of sexuality interest of young adults with ID is no different from their peers without disabilities (Castelão et al., 2010). The parent responses in this study are similar to other findings regarding parent perceptions of discussing intimacy with adolescents with ID (Pownall et al., 2012). Although parents seem uncomfortable supporting students in developing intimacy knowledge or unconfident in their ability to develop this knowledge, the field of special education is clear on the ethics of providing comprehensive sexuality education to students with ID (Stinnett et al., 2021). Perhaps parents in our study are relying on the IPSE program to provide education surrounding intimacy to their student. This assumption by parents that IPSEs are providing skill-building and knowledge of navigating intimate relationships may be misguided, however, according to a 2019 survey of IPSEs. Stinnett and Plotner (2023) found that only 40% of IPSEs surveyed (*n* = 88) were providing their students with proactive sexual intimacy education.

The primary concern for parents appears to be financial in nature. Parents report feeling less confidence in their student's ability to reach financial independence, which may be tied to parent reports about feeling less confident in their student's preparedness for successful employment. Parents also feel supporting their child's financial independence is one of the most important independent living skills, with 59% (*n* = 35) ranking it as of highest importance. This relates to past findings, reiterating that parents of children with disabilities often worry for their financial future especially as they approach adulthood (Chambers et al., 2004; Burke et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2018). This finding is not dissimilar to findings from a survey of over 3,700 parents con-

ducted in 2022 by the Pew Research Center: nine of ten parents surveyed said that it was *very* or *extremely important* for their child to become financially independent post-college (Minkin & Horowitz, 2023).

Overall, the parent respondents report immense confidence in their ability to support their students in the majority of the domains and skills related to agency on the *IPSE-PS* survey. This perceived confidence may be due to the fact that respondents are overwhelmingly parents of current freshmen students attending an IPSE (59.4%, *n* = 38), so they very recently prepared for this major life transition. Additionally, parents of students attending an IPSE may have parent support provided by the IPSE program or other parent networks and resources like Facebook groups or resources from federal TA centers for IPSEs, and this may be contributing to their confidence levels. Francis and colleagues (2018) found that parents of students in IPSE report that they do want parent-to-parent relationships for support, and parents in their study requested that the IPSE assist in fostering those connections. We found that overwhelmingly parents report they are either *extremely* or *somewhat confident* in their ability to "let go" (87.5%, *n* = 57) when it came time for their student to transition to college. Other studies have reported that often parents of young adults with disabilities struggle with the concept of "letting go," (Miller et al., 2018). As the *IPSE-PS* survey is a self-report, it is possible that parents may be overestimating their abilities (*Dunning-Kruger effect*; Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

Recent reports regarding parents' worries for their children speak to their high levels of anxiety related to mental health concerns (Minkin & Horowitz, 2023). Some of the spike in mental health issues for children and young adults are related to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, mental health concerns for emerging adults have been trending upward even before COVID-19 (Chen et al., 2019). While our survey respondents did not reflect this specific worry related to supporting their students' mental health, we wonder if responses may have been different if the survey had been administered during the COVID-19 pandemic or more recently, in the post-COVID era.

There are a number of limitations of this study, including the small sample size. Additionally, the majority of our respondents were female (*n* = 50); it would be interesting to see if confidence and importance ratings may be different between parenting partners. Most (88%) respondents indicated they have a Bachelor's degree or better, therefore lack of diversity in parent educational background is a limitation. Finally, 51% of survey respondents identified as White, therefore lack of racial and ethnic diversity was a limitation of the study. While acknowledging our study participants' lack of racial and ethnic diversity as a limitation, we would be remiss to not mention that this is largely a reflection of the students enrolled in IPSE programs nationally, at least

TPSID-funded programs. In 2021–22, students enrolled in TPSID programs self-reported their race and ethnicities as follows (n = 494): 56% White; 15% Black or African American; 11% Hispanic; 7% Asian; 3% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native; 3% more than one race, and 4% race/ethnicity unknown (Grigal et al., 2023).

Implications for Practice and Future Research Directions

While the goal for many families and transition-age students is to become as independent as possible through education and experiences offered in an IPSE program, the natural support offered by immediate family, namely parents, is recognized by research as substantial and valuable (Kohler, 1996). Parents can use the information in the current study as a guide for what areas to consider when supporting their student as they enter into and progress through an IPSE program. The findings of this study can be used by IPSE program staff when or if planning family involvement and programming, namely new student and parent orientations and ongoing education activities they provide for parents and families. IPSE programs could adapt survey items on the *IPSE-PS* and administer to the parents of incoming freshmen to gauge parent confidence in supporting their student development and the perceived importance of supports across domains. Having this information prior to students arriving at IPSE programs could help staff better understand the support needs of students and their parents as they make the transition to college.

While this study includes survey responses from eight IPSE programs across four states nationwide, future research should explore parent responses from more states and compare responses across regions. Researchers could collect additional demographic data about the level of support provided by the student's IPSE and then compare responses across IPSEs of varying support levels. Notably, the current study did not ask respondents if their student lived at home or on-campus while attending the IPSE. As well, more specific information related to student support needs could be beneficial when analyzing parent responses. Specific support domains, namely the independent living domain items such as transportation and cooking, could take on a different level of importance for parents of students who were living on-campus. Therefore, future researchers should examine whether certain supports and their perceived importance of these supports correlated with students' residential context.

Future research could also explore how other stakeholders, especially students in IPSE programs, IPSE program staff, and other family members of students with ID in IPSEs may rate their confidence to support student self-determination development as well as their perceived importance of specific supports across domains. Accessing parental perceptions of the supports

discussed in the current survey through different methodologies, namely qualitative methods such as focus groups or one-on-one interviews, could help uncover the fine-grain contextual factors that are often missing from survey responses. More specific information regarding family makeup, socioeconomic status, rurality, and many more factors would only better illuminate our understanding of parent needs related to supporting their students in becoming agentic young adults.

Because the survey we sent out was collected pre-COVID-19, future research could produce very different results in terms of parents' comfortability with "letting go," supporting their students to take risks, and other aspects of college life, simply due to the complicated nature of sending a student off into a post-COVID world. Future research should also investigate whether parents are aware of their student's desire for intimacy and, if so, if they expect IPSE programming to support their student in this domain. This is an area for attention, as more than half of young adults with ID report that they did not receive sexuality education in high school (Barnard-Brak et al., 2014).

There are decades of research stating the importance of self-determination skills for students with ID as they transition from secondary education to postsecondary education and into adult life. While parental support of these students likely changes during this time, it never completely wanes. It is important for IPSE programs to better understand parental needs related to supporting their student to develop self-determination and agency as well as their perceived importance of these supports. A better understanding of stakeholders' confidence in supporting students will inform the education and training IPSEs can provide families and ultimately enhance self-determination outcomes for students with ID.

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How Built Space Impacts Parental Engagement: Contextual Dimensions of Policy Enactment

Megan Smith

Abstract

Current education policy in Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa is the country's indigenous Māori name) requires schools and teachers to engage with parents and the school community to enhance student educational experience and achievement. The broad wording in these policy statements allows schools and teachers to tailor their parental engagement practice to specific community contexts. There is, however, little attention given to the built space of the school itself as an aspect of the material context within which parental engagement occurs. This article draws on a case study analysis of a single, bounded primary school in Aotearoa New Zealand, to examine how the school's built environment influences parental engagement. It involves the analysis of plans and other school artifacts, semi-structured interview transcripts of staff and parents, and the mental maps of parents. The findings reveal that multiple meanings are read from built space, with staff at risk of underestimating those readings and their agency to author new stories that better support parental engagement.

Keywords: built space, school context, policy enactment, parental engagement, school environment, Aotearoa New Zealand

Introduction

During primary schooling, the first contact between many parents and teachers occurs in the school's built environment. Parents read from the built space just as readily as from their interactions with teachers and staff. Built

space conveys meaning in the same way as nonverbal cues, which are crucial to face-to-face communication, and similarly, it is trusted as part of the real message being told (Yanow, 1995). However, school leaders and teachers frequently overlook the stories conveyed by the school's built space, but they are necessary to attend to. This is particularly important for those who wish to prioritize engagement with their parent community. As such, this article considers how built space as a contextual factor affects how parental engagement policies are enacted by schools and experienced by parents. Further, by foregrounding Yanow's (2014) approach which highlights the material forces of policy, this article contributes to education policy analysis by illuminating and attending to the "taken-for-granted" spaces which shape and are shaped by policy.

Parental Engagement

Parental engagement with schooling has been subject to greater policy attention since the 1980s and has become an established education policy concern in Aotearoa New Zealand (AoNZ; Aotearoa is the country's indigenous Māori name), as in many countries. This can be seen in a variety of policy documents (e.g., Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007) and reflects similar emphases in other countries (e.g., Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2018; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Broadly defined, parental engagement is "parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children" (Jeynes, 2005, p. 245). This may occur within the school or elsewhere and can be overt (e.g., participation in school activities) or subtle (e.g., high parental aspirations). Scholarship on the topic (e.g., Epstein et al., 2002; Hornby, 2011; Jeynes, 2014; Jones & Palikara, 2023; Mapp et al., 2022; Vincent, 1996; Winthrop & Ershadi, 2021) has grown alongside increased policy attention, with some researchers emphasizing the positive impact some forms of parental engagement can have on student achievement (e.g., Hattie, 2009; Jeynes, 2010, 2024). Jeynes (2010), for example, has drawn attention to how the nature of the engagement is important, with subtle, harder to measure engagement, such as parents having high expectations of their child, being most influential. The basis for more positive forms of engagement can be assisted by strong links between home and school (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011). These links are seeded in the school grounds during a child's initial years at school. Education policy seeks this engagement which is located in the particular physical and sociocultural context of a school.

In AoNZ, education policy is situated in a context of self-managing schools, where, essentially, the intention is that the Ministry of Education provides direction, and schools make their own decisions (MoE, 2019b). So, while

legislation and regulation mandate particular actions such as reporting, consultation, and governance such as the Education Act 1989 and the National Administration Guidelines (Minister of Education, 2017), other forms of policy set out the principles schools are expected to follow as a guide such as *Ka Hikitia* [The Māori Education Strategy] (MoE, 2013b) and the *New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC; MoE, 2007). This second form of policy allows enactment by individual schools to meet the needs of their specific situation or context.

The basis of policy guidance to schools on parental engagement is a *NZC* foundation principle, which states: "The curriculum has meaning for students, connects with their wider lives, and engages the support of their families, whānau, and communities" (MoE, 2007, p. 9). Whānau is a Māori term which translates to English as "family group or extended family." In education it has also been used when referring to just parents and/or immediate family. A Ministry update presents various cases that followed different approaches to enacting the principle "…recognising that each school's relationship with its local whānau and community will be different" (MoE, 2010, p. 1). These statements frame parental engagement as something driven by schools and unique to each school's context. Therefore, the Ministry recognizes a school's specific context as influential in shaping the nature and extent of parental engagement. An obvious example is whether a school teaches primary, intermediate, or secondary students. These observations raise questions about how we understand the impact of context on parental engagement enactment and the implications for policy and practice.

Context

The wide-ranging scholarship on context in education draws attention to differing contextual concerns and definitions (e.g., Braun et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2018; Thomson & Hall, 2017; Woolner & Cardellino, 2021). For example, Braun et al. (2011) defined context as broadly considered and covers a range of conditions under the categorizations of situated contexts, professional cultures, material contexts, and external contexts. These categories cover conditions school actors may have some agency to change (e.g., teacher commitments) to those they do not (e.g., school histories). The purpose of this broad conceptualization of context is to provide a framework or heuristic device for policy analyses by which context is "taken seriously" (Braun et al., 2011, p. 595). In contrast to this broader definition, Thrupp (2018) prefers to restrict contextual factors (external or internal) to those that school actors cannot easily change. In doing so, school actors can better push back against a "politics of blame" which attempts to "hold teachers and schools responsible for problems beyond their control" (p. 93).

For my purposes, context captures a broad range of factors, drawing attention to both those that can be changed and those that cannot. Firstly, this aims to promote action in response to factors where the possession of agency and the option of action may have become concealed or forgotten. For example, a myriad of pressures—both "must do" and an avalanche of "could do" (Smith et al., 2019)—exist on schools and teachers; as a result, school actors can become stuck in their responses to some issues or may simply no longer "see" them due to a severe constraint on time and resources available. Secondly, following Thrupp (2018), I seek to add to the understanding of contextual factors in order for school-based policy actors to "speak truth to power" (Wildavsky, 1987). Research such as this can help raise relevant voices to speak those truths (e.g., Beckett, 2016). Thus, this article contributes to a fuller understanding of school context and how it can constrain or enable parental engagement.

Built Space

This article focuses on one particular aspect of material context: the physical environment or built space. Thinking and theorizing about space has shifted from viewing space as separate and independent, to theories of spatiality, particularly through the work of Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1989), where space was reimagined as through "triadic conceptualisations" emphasizing the "dialectical relations among conceptualisations of space, sociality, and temporality" (Benade, 2021, p. S15). This shift proposes that spatiality and social life are dynamic and entwined—both produced and producing (Soja, 1989). While these works were part of a spatial turn in social theory in the latter part of the twentieth century, a similar focus has been late to occur within education (Gulson & Symes, 2007). Benade (2021, p. S14) also finds that spatiality theories are not well developed in education, nor is spatial theorizing commonplace in the discourse. Nevertheless, what does exist reveals a range of approaches being used to examine space including Lefebvre's triad (Kellock & Sexton, 2018), new materialism (Charteris et al., 2017), and school climate framework (Cardellino & Woolner, 2020).

In this article, I introduce Yanow's (2014) interpretive approach as a further way to think about and analyze space in the education context. In assuming a hermeneutic relationship between design elements—such as those described below—and meaning-making (e.g., by designers and users), Yanow (2014) allows consideration of the (policy) meanings conveyed by built space and centers space as an important contextual element for education research. By speaking of "built space, rather than buildings or place," her work emphasises the role of people in shaping spaces (producing spaces) and how diverse spaces communicate "social–political–cultural meanings" (produced by spaces; Yanow, 2014, p. 370).

Yanow's (1995, 2014) approach highlights how space communicates meaning to users despite the way they form a "taken-for-granted backdrop [within our] cognizance" (Yanow, 2014, p. 369). Built spaces author "stories" through a vocabulary of design elements, including construction materials and physical characteristics, particularly located within the cultural or societal context; design gestures, which communicate relationships such as status; proxemics, proximal spatial relationships or orientations; and décor, including signage, furniture, and art (Yanow, 2014). These stories are "read" by passers-by and users. This terminology demonstrates the type of shorthand Yanow's (2014) approach uses, for example, "built space tells a story" represents "the buildings comprise of elements that their designers intended to use to convey…," and "users read" represents "users and passersby interpret these spatial elements to mean…" (p. 383).

There are several critical dimensions to the study of built space and the meanings they convey. Firstly, it examines the symbolic relationship of buildings as representations of values, beliefs, and feelings. Secondly, it is an interpretive inquiry drawing on the firsthand spatial experiences of the researcher and other users. Thirdly, both the built space and the researcher are situated entities. Finally, whilst the shaping of behavior and acts can indicate or enact a power relationship, users of a built space are not without agency (Yanow, 2014). Yanow's (2014) methodological approach to analyzing built space grounds this article.

Drawing the Threads Together

School spaces provide a foundation for parent–school relationships, both as sites of interaction and a mode of communication—as built space communicates social–political–cultural meanings (Yanow, 2014). The scholarship distinguishes between parental *involvement* (typically school-based, where schools have agency) and parental *engagement* (typically home-based, where parents have agency; see Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Jeynes, 2018; Pushor, 2007). Built space can support parental *involvement* by welcoming parents (e.g., communicating a sense of belonging by displaying relevant cultural artefacts in decor) and their participation (e.g., through easy wayfinding, access to appropriate spaces). Martin and Vincent (1999), for example, identify "a sense of 'belonging" as a key motivator for parental involvement, which they call active volunteerism (p. 144).

A study of principals who successfully foster parental *engagement* in student learning (Willis et al., 2018) found they used a number of strategies linked with the built space. The strategies included developing a "welcoming, inclusive school climate" (Willis et al., 2018, p. 9), open-door policies and opportunities for incidental and face-to-face interactions between teacher and parent (p. 39),

and celebrating multiculturalism (p. 20). These strategies can be supported by the same type of elements noted above, for example, clear wayfinding, open "all-weather" spaces around classrooms, easy access to grounds and classrooms, décor or architectural elements demonstrating cultural appreciation, and an ability to host parents in culturally appropriate ways such as gathering for food or performances. Goodall and Vorhaus (2011) identified that any strategy for enhancing parental engagement must be a "whole school approach" (p. 5), and given the way space communicates meaning to users, built space must be considered within that scope.

Despite these observations about the support that built space can offer parental involvement and engagement, there is little discussion about it as a factor in parental engagement. One rare example is Pushor (2007) on the relevance of space and place for parents. Pushor (2007) uses a place-oriented term, school landscapes, to capture physical and sociocultural aspects of schooling. She suggests educators need to see themselves as "guest hosts" rather than owners of school landscapes, describing the need for parents to feel a sense of their place in the school space.

This article's primary focus is the impact of the physical environment as one of the more underemphasized and underestimated aspects of context, particularly regarding parental engagement. Just as we use many cues to interpret meaning in our interactions with each other, policy meaning is derived from "not only…literal policy language, but also…contextualizing acts and objects, including spaces" (Yanow, 1995, p. 407). Drawing on hermeneutic tradition, Yanow (1995) uses the terms "narratives," "stories," and "reading" to describe the way built spaces can "be read as if they were texts" (p. 408). She argues that where policy directs the creation of spaces, these are part of the "textual nature of policy enactment" (p. 408). Further, where sources of meaning (or artifacts) contradict, we tend to trust cues from other sources (e.g., actions, tone, spaces) over "literal words" (p. 407). In this way, built space can be understood to communicate policy or policy stories.

The findings of this article show that relevant to parental engagement policy, members of the public (e.g., parents) read—interpret and make sense of—built space. Their readings are based on their own experiences and cultural capital, resulting in multiple meanings being read. Some of these readings support the school's policy intentions (such as its open-door policy for parents), and some constrain it. Readings are further influenced by physical and sociocultural borders and individuals' wayfinding abilities using the décor of the built space. In addition, teachers are at risk of becoming detached from the embodied experiences and meanings read by other users of the school space; however, they have some agency to author new policy stories. Repositioned as

"guest hosts" (Pushor, 2007), teachers can probe the beliefs and practices that create a more welcoming space for parents.

This case study offers insights into the relationship between context, policy, and action, which could be helpful to teachers and administrators as they engage with their parent community. In addition, the analysis provides a perspective that those in schools and classrooms frequently don't have the time, energy, or resources, to consider but have some agency to influence.

Methodology

This article contributes to a broader study (Smith, 2020, 2021) examining how policy goals of parental engagement in the provision of primary education in AoNZ are enacted by policy actors, while paying particular attention to the impact of contextual dimensions at schools as sites of enactment. The policy enactment study is a single bounded case. The research question "How do contextual factors affect the way policies of parental engagement get enacted by schools and experienced by parents?" was one focus of semi-structured interviews of staff and parents (including board of trustees members) at the primary school, identified here by the pseudonym Korimako School. Pseudonyms are also used for participants identified in the article.

At the time of the study, Korimako School had approximately 600 students, which was roughly comprised of the following ethnicities: 50% NZ European, 25% Māori, and 25% a combination of ethnicities (particularly Asian). Korimako School is categorised as an urban, full (school years 0–8 or Grades K–8, approximately ages 5–12) primary school, serving a broad socioeconomic catchment. Geographically, Korimako School experiences a temperate oceanic climate, with greater rainfall in winter and spring.

Participants

Participants ($n = 21$) were recruited through a variety of methods including purposive (to gain a representative mix), self-referred (responding to conversation or notices), and snowball (referred by other participants). Of the parent participants ($n = 8$), two were members of the board of trustees (BOT), 25% were Asian, and of the remaining parents, half were Māori and half NZ European. Boards of trustees (typically 6–9 members) are mandated for all state and state-integrated schools in AoNZ, and their role focusses on governance. Along with being a board member, the principal is the educational leader and day-to-day manager of the school. There is also an elected student (at high school level) and staff representative. Parents (or community) representatives form most of the board membership. Elections are held triennially.

Methods

I developed field notes (including photographs) and personal reflections on the built environment on visits to the school and conducted a discourse analysis of published school material. I also used mental mapping (also known as mental sketch mapping; Gieseking, 2013) with the non-BOT parents ($n = 6$) to explore their experiences of the built space of the school and community.

Mental mapping is a multidimensional approach, undertaken in this study with interviews (see Appendix), which allowed parents to share their cognitive maps, stories, and experiences of the school's built space through their own hands using a "lens of space and place" (Gieseking, 2013, p. 723). Cognitive maps are created through a mental process whereby "an individual acquires, codes, stores, recalls, and decodes information about the relative locations and attributes of phenomena in his[/her] everyday spatial environment" (Downs & Stea, 2005, p. 9). Cognitive maps are stored in our memory. Using the mental mapping method, participants capture their cognitive map on paper. They are asked to add elements to their drawing as the discussion about their experiences progresses. Questions and prompts are used to facilitate this, for example:

> I would like you to picture yourself on an average visit to the school. On this visit, where do you enter the school? What people do you interact with? What are the paths or places of importance? Are there any places you wouldn't go to in the school? Are there any invisible or visible boundaries for parents in the school?

This method provides a richness of data not available by interview alone. Two maps are included in this article to illustrate how distinct parent experiences of the school can be.

The research expresses a constructivist epistemology and an interpretivist research paradigm. Following a constructivist epistemology, "truth and meaning [knowledge]…are created by the subject's interactions with the world" (Gray, 2018, p. 22), enabling a multiplicity of understandings of a single phenomenon to exist. Further, knowledge claims are made from an interpretivist stance, as "*interpretivism* allows the [researcher's] focus to be fixed on *understanding* what is happening in a given context" (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2014, p. 65, emphasis in original). This interpretivist research paradigm is expressed through an interpretive analysis approach (Yanow, 2000, 2014) and the policy enactment framework proposed by Ball et al. (2012).

Findings and Discussion: Built Space Stories at Korimako School

Research and analysis of built space is necessarily an embodied process—the bodily experience gives the researcher an understanding of the language of a space and "what is being 'said'" (Yanow, 2000, p. 64). This understanding grounds the researcher's interpretations of the meanings made by others, as "the intentional effort to understand what it means to another entails a projective imagining that draws on the researcher's own experience of the space" (Yanow, 2014, p. 371). The Korimako School case explored in this article is concerned with parental engagement, and access into a school is one of the first opportunities for the built environment to impact parents and their engagement. For my first approach to Korimako School, I drew on experiences as a parent, former teacher, and board of trustees member (all at other schools); I have a broad knowledge of New Zealand schools. What follows is drawn from my notes about my first visit to Korimako School via the main entry.

> I used a Google Maps search to direct me as I approached the school, by car, for a 2:00 pm appointment. I needed to search for a carpark as there were only very short-term parking options in front of the school, and cars were parked up and down surrounding streets. Feeling a bit anxious about the time impact this might have, I managed to find a [place to] park a block away on a residential street. After parking, I walked quickly back towards the school, which is distinct from its residential neighbours by its scale. There is a wide street frontage with a long weatherboard building fenced off from the street and running along much of that frontage. As I approached, I was uncertain as to where to go, so I looked for signs on where to head for the main entrance. A process of deduction led me to it. I had already passed (on the street of the school address) what I took to be a secondary entrance (due to its lack of signage and no noticeable office), so I decided it must be further along the fence line. The fence ran behind a long wooden building with high windows and only one door (onto a fenced-in deck). On reaching the end of the fence, I saw a letterbox and a ramp entrance to a set of doors. I still hadn't seen any signage for the school but noticed a small "office" sign tucked above an adjacent window. I entered through the doors into a hallway of sorts with class photos and some student work on one wall. On the other wall was a partly frosted internal window that incorporated the first sign I had seen with the school logo, and on rounding the corner, I found the main office desk and sign-in book.

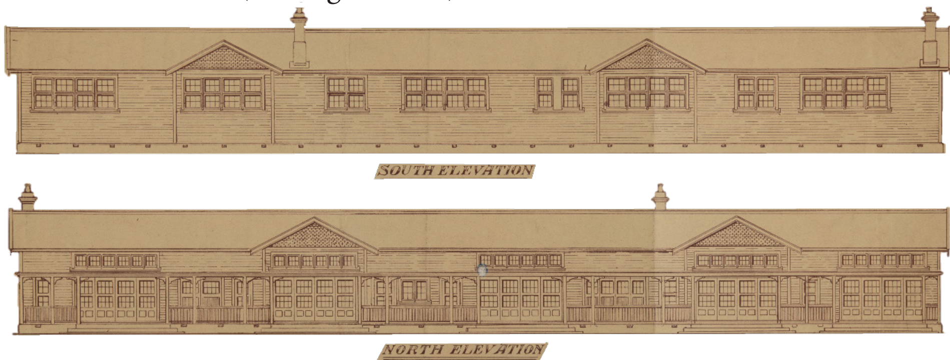
This experience of uncertainty and searching for the entrance prompted me to consider more critically how built space impacts parental engagement. Although researchers are themselves "instruments" in interpretive methods research, their "interpretations are always provisional" (Yanow, 2014, p. 372), and in this research on built space, the meanings I read from Korimako School cannot be assumed to be the same for others.

The findings are organized into two categories; the first, Authored Stories, examines the spatial elements chosen by the designers and occupiers of the school and analyzes the stories, "values, beliefs, and/or feelings" (Yanow, 2014, p. 371) they represent. I identify occupiers as the board of trustees and staff who inhabit the school and now add to or change the stories authored in the original development of the built space. These stories are then examined concerning the aims and intentions expressed in relevant policy and other documents and contrasted—in the following section and second category, Reading Spatial Elements—with the differentiated readings of the built space by school staff and parents. Guided by the literature, four main themes were drawn from the participants' readings of Korimako's built space: reading an open-door policy; the influence of borders, barriers, and boundaries; how space is navigated; and user agency to influence built spaces. These are examined in turn.

Authored Stories—Conveyed by Spatial Elements

Korimako School campus was established at its urban site in the 1940s. It is located near business districts and serves a culturally and economically diverse community. It currently features a mix of early-to-mid-twentieth century buildings and newer classrooms from later in the 1900s to this century. The campus also includes a school field, playgrounds, mature trees, and numerous gardens. School campus development reflects the era and beliefs operating at the time. Following government policy of an "open-air principle" for classroom design from the 1930s (Kellaway, 1981, p. 189), the core Korimako School classrooms were built as open-air pavilion-style rooms in what was termed a "linear design" (pp. 163, 191) or "open air veranda blocks" (Ministry of Education, 2013a), consistent with the example from another school shown in Figure 1. As per guidelines, these were oriented north for light and air (Kellaway, 1981). Including central administration housing, the linear blocks were "very formal, [and] impressive" (Kellaway, 1981, p. 191). Despite the addition of many other buildings to the school landscape, the original linear block at Korimako remains an impressive and dominating feature. This building tells a story of similarity in that the building style and materials align with the behaviors sought (Yanow, 1995, p. 417): an early twentieth-century sensibility of formality, order, and deference to authority; this combined with a growing desire for improved health and connection to the outdoors are evident in the building.

Figure 1. Linear/Open-Air Veranda Block: Sydenham School: George Penlington/David Hutton (Penlington, n.d.)



The majority of the other buildings, including those built in the last 10 years, represent a variety of single-cell classroom designs, some of which attend to modern requirements for light and ventilation. These typically include decks and verandas or porches for shelter and school bag storage. This style of modularized, cost-effective classrooms tell stories consistent with the industrial era and frequently characterize an "authoritarian and transmissive" approach to education (Alterator & Deed, 2013, p. 315)—something Nair and Fielding (2005) referred to as a "cells-and-bells" (p. 17) approach to education. Within single-cell classrooms, the layout of doors, windows, and fixed surfaces (including whiteboards, display surfaces, and floorcoverings) often limits movement and furniture placement. The classrooms are occupied in a semi-organized way by year level teams (e.g., Junior Team years 0–2), although this is not consistent across the school. The classrooms feature room numbers—typically on the door to the classroom—but are not always in numerical order. There is no school map on the school grounds or website.

A story of valuing history, the environment, and te ao Māori (the Māori world) can also be read from the built spaces at Korimako. These values can be read from the historical–cultural (celebrating past events and people relevant to the school) and environmental projects (outdoor classroom, gardens) visible in the school grounds and promoted to the school community. It can also be read from the displays in the administration foyer—an artwork created to celebrate the school's heritage using materials from an old school building and a prominent Māori weaving. Being able to read and identify with the values of the school and, even better, see themselves represented through artifacts are ways in which a sense of welcome for parents is enhanced, thus helping to create "a sense of place and engagement for parents" (Pushor, 2007, p. 6).

The stories authored by the designers of these spaces can be supported or countered by policies and other documents. Korimako School promotes an

open-door policy to parents (Smith, 2021), while current government policy objectives focus on learner-centered education that draws on the support and partnership of parents and whānau (Ministry of Education, 2007, 2019a). The school property strategy 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2020) supports those objectives; however, schools live with the "ghosts of… architects" (Meighan & Harber, 2007, p. 81), and the buildings at Korimako have not been designed to welcome the participation of parents in the way currently envisaged for them. For example, classrooms do not cater to parents' presence as observers or participants through the furniture size and placement and the overall lack of space for additional adults. McGregor (2004) states that the long-lived nature and form of structures like classrooms "reflects and affects the persistence of certain forms of pedagogic or classroom practice, where (power) relations are inscribed and embodied in the material" (p. 355). In another example, signage and the organization of classrooms are confusing and underdeveloped, creating barriers for parents' movement within the school (see Navigating Space—Wayfinding below). These factors do not create an environment that welcomes parents, making them feel relaxed or valued as partners in education. This story being read from the built space contradicts the policy stories of the government and the school.

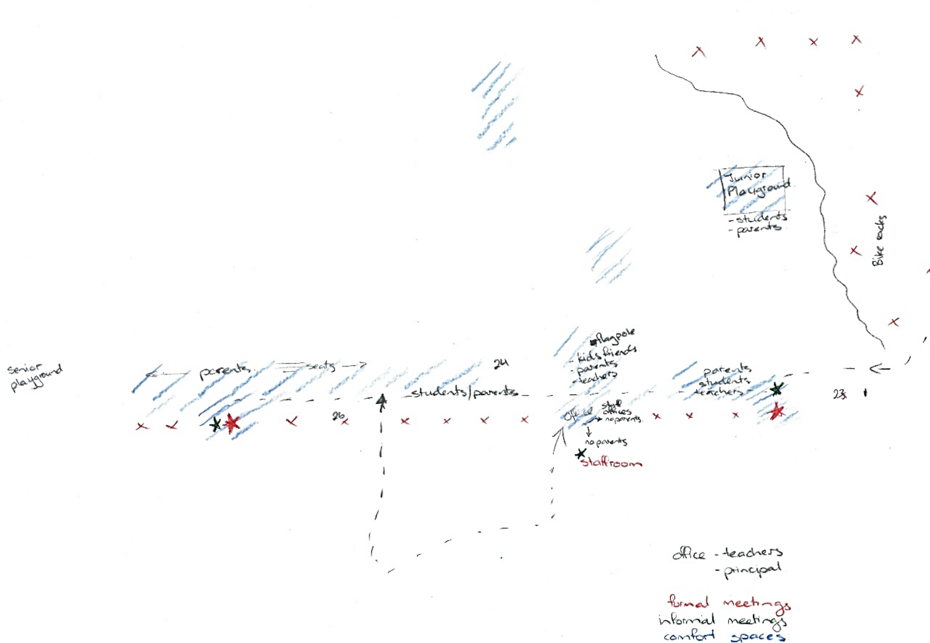
Reading Spatial Elements

The presentation and analysis of the stories authored through the spatial elements of the previous section provide the context for the readings contained in this section. Readings of built space are personal due to the experiences, values, and cultural capital users bring to their reading. Murray et al. (2015) found several aspects of cultural capital to influence parental involvement, which are equally relevant to the reading of built space. They include parents' level of education and their cultural background—including language and ethnicity. Multiple readings also occur because users physically experience space differently, which is a critical element of their meaning-making (Murray et al., 2015; Yanow, 2014). User readings are understood through "physical-kinesthetic means: feeling on and through our bodies the mass and scale and ambient environment" (Yanow, 2014, p. 376).

This section presents and analyzes some of the diverse readings taken of Korimako School under subheadings. However, I begin with an illustration of the differentiated readings of parents as users of school space by introducing two parents, Michelle and Paula, with their mental maps. While I have provided a brief contextual biography of each parent, I have not attempted to analyze the experiences or demographic factors that have made their readings distinct. Instead, their mental maps demonstrate, as per the article's focus, how spatial elements can be read as telling different stories.

Michelle is a parent of New Zealand European heritage with two children at Korimako School; she is also a parent–teacher association (PTA) member and administers the school Facebook page. She has been involved with the school for approximately four years, and her children are in classes between Grades 1 and 4. Michelle displayed immediate recognition and confidence when a school map was presented to her, even noting some room number changes. She was articulate and thorough when asked to map out her movements and experiences as a parent on the school campus. Michelle's map (Figure 2) demonstrates the high level of comfort and familiarity she has with the built space while also showing how active she is across the school grounds in her roles as Facebook administrator and PTA member.

Figure 2. Michelle's School Map



Note. A map of the school campus was placed under an opaque sheet of paper and parents were asked to record their typical movements around the school. Questions like those outlined in the methods section help to draw out details about their route, where they do and don't go (and why), and other observations about the space and its relationship to parents.

Paula is a Māori parent with one child at Korimako School and has been connected to the school as a parent for approximately five years. Her child is in a Grade 7 and 8 class. Paula works shift hours, so she is not always available to come to the school. As the map (Figure 3) shows, Paula makes limited movements around the school, typically coming and going from the same access point.

Figure 3. Paula's School Map

Welcoming Spaces? An Open-Door Policy

According to Piro (2008), school architecture often needs to strike a balance between different needs. Concerning parents, the balance may need to be struck between engaging with parents (e.g., open-door policy) and managing their time and activities within the school and with teachers (e.g., signing in, perimeter fencing). This presents an increasing challenge in creating a welcoming environment for parents and illustrates the further potential for different stories to be read from the built space.

Some Korimako users read an open-door story; this story aligns with one of the strongest aspects of the policy narrative of the school (see Authored Stories above). Teachers generally thought there was either no or positive impact from the built space on its enactment:

> Sam: I like to think that parents do feel they can come in…we do have the rooms with the big open doors that can slide open…I kind of feel like it's quite welcoming and doesn't really restrict parental engagement as such.
>
> Greg: It's pretty open, so it's pretty easy to find your way around, isn't it? Sort of one long building in a kind of an L over here and then nothing else.

The openness of the playground and the folding glass doors are read and analyzed in relation to proxemics, the relationship between, and orientation of, parts of built space (Yanow, 2014). The openness of the playground forms the spatial surrounds of the classrooms and can invite parents to congregate or move freely across. This openness can contribute to a sense of comfort as, for

example, their "personal space" (the physical space around a person that they consider theirs for comfort and safety) can be maintained (Hall, 1966).

Many parents also read this from the built space—after their initial reading had been tempered by other experiences which layered different meanings. For example, Michelle, Samuel, and Chhavi all thought the built space of Korimako was open and welcoming; however, they also spend lots of time at school active in a variety of ways. Chhavi reflected that when she first came to school, finding her way and knowing where she was "allowed" to be "was a bit funny…a bit awkward," but now, due to her time spent there and positive interactions with individual staff members, she felt very comfortable. This adjustment can be compared to how initial negative impressions of people can be moderated by their behavior and additional information we receive about them—if we stay long enough to receive that information. This alignment of readings between parents, staff, and the open door policy story assumes two things. First, parents will have the cultural capital and interest to stay beyond any initial negative impressions, and second, there are counter, positive stories being authored and read—this particularly concerns how teachers can "act on built spaces" constructing different stories (Yanow, 2014, p. 373—see Agency below). Counter stories might come from, for example, orientation for new parents that welcomes them to the school and helps develop a sense of place (see Pushor, 2007) or individual teacher efforts to seek out and value the contributions of parents in their class.

A story that contrasts to one of welcome was read by some staff who saw barriers to parental engagement in the built space. They identified a lack of appropriate space for parents acting as partners in education, both collectively and individually:

> Ben: The nicest space we've got here in our school is our library, and you know, that's where we have things like [group parent meetings]….[But] you don't sit in there and think, "Oh, this is a nice, comfy chair. I can relax." You sit in there and think, "Oh, yeah. I'm in a kid's library." So… you're not going to just really settle in and then be like, "Okay, sweet. Let's flow. Let's talk." You know, that's just not [set up for parents].

> Bridget: I have…had that happen where [parents] want, need, to speak quietly, so I've either tried to see if there's a room next door that we can use, or I've even gone down to the toilets with the parent…[or to] the cloak bay area, or I've gone to see if the office is available…so even though we're pretty big…every room's sort of taken.

A welcoming entrance is one of the key built features of a school, and it can support parents (and the wider community) in their engagement (Nair et

al., 2013). As described earlier, my experience of visiting the school and looking for the main entrance read a story at odds with a welcoming entrance. It is missing the design elements (e.g., a covered entry, a broad open expanse, contrasting colors or materials, clear signage) that make it distinct from the surrounding built space. The main entrance is examined further under Navigating Space—Wayfinding.

Borders, Barriers, and Boundaries

The built space of a school is defined by borders that direct the movement of parents and other users within. Borders can be physical, such as walls, fences, or signs (Steele, 1973) or sociocultural and an expression of norms, rules, and relationships. They are an aspect of the proxemic analysis of spatial surrounds and encourage or dissuade certain activities (Yanow, 2014). The mental maps developed by parent participants showed their borders for movement within the school varied considerably (as illustrated by the maps of Michelle and Paula in Figures 2 and 3). Their borders depended on the classrooms they accessed for their child(ren), their entry point into the school, the reasons they had spent time in the school, and the subject position they identified with. For example, those involved in the PTA or school board and other activities indicated less extensive confining boundaries than those who had not. What is important here is not their involvement in overt and visible activities of parental engagement, but rather their level of comfort and confidence within the built space as a facet of ease in the school environment and the system of education. Lynch (1960) describes how our movement through an environment allows us to be a part of it and improves our knowledge of it, allowing "more power and agency" to be drawn from it (Symonds et al., 2017, p. 10). This familiarity with an element of the language of schooling may enable greater overall participation in the more critical parental engagement activities.

Paula described a socially derived border for her movements in the school that developed as her daughter had become more independent. Asked if she comes to her daughter's classroom ("Mr. K" on map in Figure 3), she responds:

> Oh, not usually, just 'cause she's like, "No, you can just leave me [here] because my friends are here."…You've got your boundary, "Okay, I'll just stop here. I know where your class is."

This border meant the classroom was a place she no longer visited as often and is an example of "a sociological fact…[expressed] in spatial form" (Evans, 1974, p. 27). Evans (1974) goes on to say, "where the line is drawn at a given moment reveals the character of the relationship" (p. 27). Boundaries for parents are representations of the relationship between the school (staff and teachers) and parents, and parents and their child. These will vary between

parents as a collective and as individuals. As a collective, common parent subjectivities will help define the boundaries; for example, the border for "parents as problems" will differ from "parents as partners" (Smith, 2020).

One significant reading of Korimako was the difficulty of access due to the proximity and relationship of the main entrance to the surrounding streets. As I read on my first visit to the school, it is in close proximity to residential streets crowded with parked cars. Restricted 15-minute parking is available in front of the school. Teachers and parents also read that the crowded streets with limited parking are barriers to parents accessing the school. Parent participants described the chaos of cars banked up on the streets at drop-off and pick-up times, which had also led to tense altercations. Samuel (a parent) stated, "it's absolutely ludicrous coming through that" to get a child to or from school. Several teachers felt that this was a barrier to their engagement with parents, as it meant parents were often not coming into the school:

> Joanne: [There is] difficulty in getting into school in the afternoons or mornings, with parking [and] traffic. As a parent, if you're in a hurry to get to work, you are going to stop and let your child out and "bye-bye." And I think that [has] stopped a lot of that engagement.

Once parents stop coming into the school, teachers (particularly those teaching Years 0–4) felt it limited their opportunities to develop the rapport necessary to build effective working relationships.

Navigating Space—Wayfinding

Wayfinding is concerned with how users read built space for navigation. Individuals find their way through spaces by processing external sensory cues (e.g., paths, color schemes, gardens) available to them (Iftikhar et al., 2020). These sensory cues are particularly related to décor and proxemics (Yanow, 2014). Considering the main school entrance, for example, signage and the spatial relationship read between the entrance and the adjacent built space are design elements that impact whether visitors are encouraged or discouraged in their approach to the school.

As noted previously, entrances are critical elements of the school environment for welcoming parents and supporting their involvement with the school (Nair et al., 2013). To signify the main entrance, for example, a visitor might expect to see architecture indicative of an entrance—a clear or large opening and path, such as a tomokanga (a Māori carved gateway entrance) or a color scheme to highlight it from the surrounding building(s), and signage in a place and style relevant for the typical users. The main entrance at Korimako School (as described earlier) was not distinctive as the main entrance. It was indicated as an entrance through elements such as a letterbox, a pathway to/from

the footpath and letterbox, and numerous small signs (e.g., office and various security-related). However, the positioning and nature of these signs and the recessed, somewhat narrow approach into the building are read as more indicative of a staff entrance than one for visitors and parents. Following Hall's (1966) concept of proxemics, the relationship between these spatial features combines with the multisensory perceptions of users (of the built space and their personal space) to discourage approach to this entrance.

Once in the school, parents generally indicated that they were confident in finding their way around for their purposes. However, out-of-sequence classroom numbering could still confuse them. Recalling how they visited the school to find her child's first classroom, Michelle said, "We spent *forever* looking for this—*and* it's labelled on the door [but the door is out of direct sight]….It was quite confusing." Paula found the out-of-order classroom numbering was sometimes still an issue, "I think that's why I always get confused, 'cause it's like, 'Where is that room again?'" Experiencing even momentary and minor uncertainty (or "geographic disorientation") can generate feelings of anxiety and frustration and may lead to delay (Montello & Sas, 2006, p. 2004). According to the teacher, Joanne, parental engagement is already hampered by time constraints and parking frustrations, so any increased anxiety experienced through navigating the school space itself presents a further barrier. Signage is an easily added element of wayfinding that is especially useful when "other design elements are inadequate" (Higgins et al., 2005, p. 33). For example, signs could help direct movement when the layout and proxemics of the built space would otherwise prohibit or confuse.

Agency

While users (in a passive–reactive role) are shaped by space, they also have agency (in an active role) to act "on built spaces, modifying them, rejecting their intended uses, and so forth" (Yanow, 2014, p. 373). Historically, teachers have had little active participation in developing physical school spaces, particularly beyond the classroom. Teacher agency is diminished where "top-down, scripted" policy implementation occurs (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018, p. 186). This top-down, scripted approach effectively describes how the built environments of many schools have historically developed. In research concerning the influence of teachers on classroom environments, Martin (2002) described awareness as a precursor to action, but that habitual ways of thinking block what teachers perceive to be possible. Making changes may require greater knowledge of the impact of the environment (e.g., environmental competence, see Steele, 1973) and reflexive practice (e.g., on the purpose of parental engagement and the role of built space in that—see the *school environment scan* suggested by Pushor & Amendt, 2018).

As has been observed elsewhere (Martin, 2002), staff at Korimako School tend not to see themselves as authors with agency to address space outside of their classrooms—viewing it as largely immutable "hard architecture" (p. 152). In talking about the built space of the school, one teacher stated, "well, there's not much we can do about it." This view does not acknowledge the design elements (see Yanow's 2014 categories under Built Space) staff—and boards of trustees—*can* act on or redefine. Despite this view, there are examples of agency being employed at Korimako. For example, the teacher Bridget actively redefined spaces to fit her needs for a quiet space to meet with a parent. There is also evidence of the use of décor (e.g., welcome signs on classroom doors, meaningful artwork in the office) and proxemics (e.g., the open space of the playground and siting of some outdoor seating) to communicate a welcome to parents. One key demonstration of teacher authorship is through classroom displays. While much of this presentation centers on displays of student work demonstrating the value and recognition of students, it is also something students and parents enjoy together. These displays can be read as welcoming to parents (Maxwell, 2000). These stories challenge and contrast those read off other design vocabularies and gestures (e.g., the unwelcoming entrance, the size and height of the linear classroom building representing authority and grandeur).

The staff and principal perceived parents as having agency and resilience when navigating the school built space and what it required of them. Perimeter fences and increased security are increasingly closing off schools from their communities to mitigate damage and reduce through traffic (Collins, 2019). However, the principal thought Korimako parents had adapted well when discussing the impact of new perimeter fencing and the need to sign in as a visitor to the school grounds.

> Peter: Parents have received it pretty well. The fact that they've got to come and sign in when they come to the school—which is pretty standard these days…it's working well. We thought we might have to have someone in the office…like the senior students, to take people over… but we didn't need it. Parents just come in and don't mind signing [in].

Collectively, the parents' interviews and mental maps demonstrated that they could navigate the school environment. Despite initial difficulties finding the office or the classroom they needed, they approached children or staff to overcome this. These participants do not capture those parents who may have stopped coming into the school due to increased security measures; it is an area for further research.

Conclusion

The built spaces we inhabit day-to-day tend to recede into the background until we cease to pay particular attention (Yanow, 2014). Our attention shifts as we become familiar with a space and experience it differently. For example, first-time users (e.g., researcher; the parent Michelle when reflecting on her initial visit) may notice signage and other wayfinding cues much more than someone who has used the space every day for many weeks, months, and years (some teachers and parents). Further, spatial elements that communicate as unwelcoming may not continue to overtly register that way as we become accustomed to them or as other experiences dilute that meaning. This means familiar users of a space have to work harder to recognize the potentially differing readings of the built space made by other users. The implications for parental engagement are that school staff and boards of trustees may need to make conscious efforts to recognize the impact of built space on parents and their interactions with teachers (e.g., see Pushor & Amedt's 2018 built environment scan).

In addition, the meaning of built space, "our comprehension of and response to" is "tacit knowledge," which is difficult to articulate (Yanow, 2014, p. 369). Both parents and teachers are subject to positions constructed by practices of power through institutions such as the school. For parents, these subjectivities inform their expectations as to their place within the school (for more on parent subject positions, see Smith, 2020). Teachers, too, are subjects "encultured into a community of practice that is entrenched and both difficult to recognize and challenge" (Woolner et al., 2012). In practice, these subject positions can reduce the agency of the user who may not perceive they can change or influence built space.

Therefore, readers wishing to examine other educational spaces should consider: the spatial elements that make up the built space and what stories they author; what the occupiers or designers intend(ed) to communicate; and what stories users read from the space. These considerations must all be grounded in the specific context of the school, its community, and the jurisdiction within which it resides.

Concluding Remarks

In the taken-for-granted spaces that form our schools, staff and some parents operate with a tacit understanding of how to make sense of or move around when applying the deceptively simple concept of parental engagement. This article has considered built space a material aspect of context whose impacts are understated in policy enactment. The case of Korimako School has

revealed how built space can enable and constrain parental engagement and the multiple stories read through embodied and person-specific meaning-making. The buildings can be read in keeping with intentions (e.g., open door, parents are welcome), but this is most likely to occur by those who already share the values and beliefs espoused (Yanow, 1995). Parents may "correctly" interpret the intended "message," may act on it, ignore it, or read it differently. For example, they may instead read a contrasting story of formality and deference to authority from the original linear block. Then, combined with the lack of space for parents to observe, participate, or be, as well as the underdeveloped wayfinding, read a story of parents as peripheral to schooling.

The article has further revealed contextual constraints that teachers have (some) agency in addressing, where time and resources allow. It offers an interpretation that steps back from the taken for granted understandings of those school-based policy actors who can get "caught in context" and become inattentive to the impact of built space and assumptions made about parents. Pushor's (2007) conceptualisation of school staff as "guest hosts" offers a way to consider the built space as an element of parental engagement:

> A repositioning of educators and staff as guests in a community is needed in order to interrupt…[the] common story of educators as owners and to create a new story in which parents are welcomed into schools…[which] means that staff members open the door to the school as hosts who recognize they are simultaneously guests…being guests means educators look inwards at their own beliefs and practices and ask themselves, "What is it we need to do to cause more parents to feel welcomed? What is it we are doing that may be keeping some parents away?" (pp. 8–10)

These insights between the built space context, policy, and action may be helpful to teachers as they engage with their parent community. The spatial focus of this study offers a novel way of thinking about parents' experiences and needs in primary education, thus extending the scholarly work on parental engagement and spatializing education.

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Appendix. Semi-Structured Guide for a School Mapping Exercise With Parents

You have in front of you a map of the school grounds. Picture yourself on typical visits to the school:

a. What people do you interact with? What buildings do you visit? Where are the paths or places of importance to you? Add these elements to your map.
b. How do you feel (safe, confident, welcome, wary…) moving about your school grounds? What feelings do different buildings and spaces evoke? Indicate these feelings on your map.
c. Add a key or legend to your map if you think it would help explain some of the features on your map.

These should be considered starting questions that lead to discussion which can be expanded on as the exercise evolves. In addition, a mapping exercise might ask participants to reflect on their (or an imagined visitor's) experience of a first visit to the school. It could also focus on specific areas of relevance to the school community (e.g., the entrance, classrooms, sports facilities, or school hall).

Reimagining School Spaces: Voices of Children with Physical Disabilities From an Informal Settlement in Mumbai

Navjit Gaurav, Beata Batorowicz, John L. Lewis, and Heather M. Aldersey

Abstract

This study applied a case study approach to explore the participation experiences of children with physical disabilities in a community school in Mumbai to understand how schools might improve their students' meaningful participation and social interaction. This study identified three categories of focus: (1) physically accessible and safe school spaces, (2) informal spaces for community and social engagement and socialization, and (3) future directions for school design. We offer specific recommendations for school designers to value children's voices and incorporate their disability-related needs in the design of school spaces. We outline key design considerations to create safe, accessible, and engaging school spaces.

Key Words: case study, built environment, inclusive design, children with physical disability, user participation, community schools, school design, safe, accessible, and engaging school spaces, Mumbai, India.

Introduction

In Mumbai, many community schools'[1] built environments remain disabling despite efforts from the local government to reduce physical barriers

by building ramps or adapting washrooms (Limaye, 2016; Praja Foundation, 2017). This is particularly true in the Dharavi informal settlement, where community school design and adaptations have failed to support the inclusive experiences of children with physical disabilities, leading to their restricted participation (Agarwal, 2020; Banik & Banik, 2021; Singh et al., 2019). In Dharavi, a lack of consideration of how children interact with their educational setting has led to poor school design (Cullis, 2010; Das, 2022). Involving children in the design process is important as it fosters a sense of ownership and belonging, contributes to children's enjoyment of the school environment, and enhances their learning (Das, 2022; Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020; Schijlen et al., 2015). A child-friendly design approach is needed to inform architectural practice to encourage meaningful participation of children with physical disabilities in schools, particularly in the community schools of Mumbai's informal settlements.

Importance of Children's Voices

School is a space that cultivates learning, social interaction, and the development of social and emotional skills (Skovdal & Campbell, 2015). Children are expected to actively participate in various school activities and interact with their friends, peers, and teachers (Kapur, 2018). School spaces are designed to foster children's participation in academic and non-academic activities. For all children, including those with disabilities, schools should provide a positive environment (Smith, 2007) where children feel a sense of belonging, pride, responsibility, and care (Malone, 2008, 2013; Smith, 2007). The goal of school design should not be to fit children into established structures, processes, and practices (Chowdhury, 2011; Gillett-Swan & Burton, 2022) but rather to design schools in a way that enables each child to participate optimally (Bhan & Rodricks, 2012; Imms et al., 2020). When designing schools, it is important to consider children's perceptions, as these perceptions can differ from those of adults (Gaurav et al., 2023a; Malone, 2013; Smith & Kotsanas, 2014). Understanding children's experiences can inform more inclusive architectural practices in Mumbai.

Problem Statement

In Dharavi, Mumbai, children with disabilities often discontinue education because of their negative experiences with accessing the school's built environment and because of disability prejudices (Banik & Banik, 2021; Bhatty et al., 2016; Cheney et al., 2005; Gaurav, 2023; Limaye, 2016; Subbaraman et al., 2014). Inclusive education seeks to counter these barriers and support positive social, academic, and economic outcomes by actively fostering a culture of value

and belonging for all children beyond simply placing children with disabilities in a regular classroom (Anderson et al., 2022; Banks & Keogh, 2016). While inclusive education's early philosophy and practice focused on children with disabilities, it now increasingly addresses a wide range of barriers faced by children and youth in education (UNESCO, 2021). Although global efforts aim to limit barriers in schools, the question remains: how can we learn from the experiences of children with physical disabilities to redesign community school environments to support meaningful participation and social interaction?

Research Questions

This study answers the following questions:

- How has a community school's built environment influenced the meaningful participation and social interaction of children with physical disabilities in Dharavi, Mumbai?
- What adjustments could be made to the school's built environment to enable children with physical disabilities to experience meaningful participation and social interaction?

Methodology

Research Setting

This study was based at a community school in the Dharavi informal settlement of Mumbai. Dharavi is one of Asia's largest informal settlements in Mumbai, with a population of 1 million sharing community facilities like water and sanitation, limited basic facilities, and poor-quality housing structures in overcrowded neighborhoods (Kaushal & Mahajan, 2021; see Figure 1). Mumbai experiences heavy rain during the monsoon (July to October), and the situation in Dharavi, in particular, becomes worse due to excess rainwater and flooding in the school spaces. Generally, the school would have two to three floors or sometimes just one floor, depending on the site area. The average size of each class is 40–50 children, and the size of the classroom is 6 meters x 5 meters (approximately 20 feet x 16 feet). The attendance is compulsory, and 75% attendance is mandatory to appear in the final examination to be promoted to the next grade. Inequality in accessing community resources in Dharavi results in poor health and educational outcomes for all, including children with disabilities. The physical and social environment of community schools in these settlements is poor compared to other urban schools (Praja Foundation, 2017). The community schools have a resource room for children with physical disabilities, but these rooms lack resources like assistive devices

that support participation (i.e., calipers, wheelchairs, walkers), a special educator, objects of daily use to enhance children's functioning, and a trained staff to support students in learning how to use these. The built environment of the school may have limited accessibility provisions such as a ramp or a washroom (Limaye, 2016); however, the built environment lacks something to hold on to (grab bars, railing) to walk, leveled/even and nonslip flooring, wide corridors, or flexible furniture arrangement inside the classroom (see the images in Figures 1, 2, and 3).

Figure 1. Community context of Dharavi. Source: Author

Figure 2. Classroom of the school with furniture, uneven flooring, and narrow space between two rows of furniture. Source: Author

Figure 3. Corridor with a metal shed, an uneven pathway to the entrance gate, and a washroom with ramped access. Source: Author

Study Design

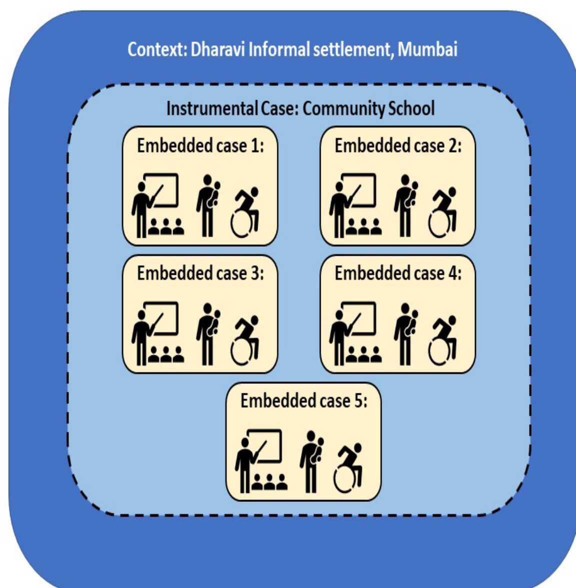
We employed an embedded instrumental case study (Stake, 2006) to gain insight into the experiences of children with physical disabilities in a community school. Stake (1995) highlights that studying an instrumental case situationally enables examining the integrated system in which the case unfolds. We selected a community school inside Dharavi because it was valuable in its community context and setting and enabled us to interpret multiple realities associated with the case (Stake, 2006). Here, "setting" refers to the community school's physical environment, whereas "context" is much more versatile, embracing not only the school setting but also the roles of different people (children, teachers, staff, parents), children's interactions with the school space, and relationships that develop in the school (Wang et al., 2019).

The Case

We chose one community school inside the Dharavi informal settlement of Mumbai, from which we purposively selected five children with physical disabilities in Grades 3 to 8. We selected based on grade level rather than age because many children with physical disabilities were not studying in age-appropriate grades. We sought children with diverse physical disabilities as described in the Gross Motor Function Classification System (GMFCS) (Palisano et al., 2007) and the Manual Ability Classification System (MACS) (Kuijper et al., 2010) to ensure broad representation and rich information (Flyvbjerg, 2006;

Stake, 2006). Stake (1995, 2006) suggests that five participants are effective for multiple case studies. Furthermore, we explored each case in greater depth via the child's educational circle comprising two persons (a teacher and a family member) per case, based on the children's recommendations. We included children studying in the community school for more than a year and those who knew the child for a year or more when the child was in school. The case was a bounded system, delimited by the participants (five) and by place (community school in Dharavi, Mumbai).

Figure 4. Conceptual map of the context, instrumental case, and embedded cases used in this research. The dashed line represents the blurred boundary between the instrumental case and its context.



Authors' Positionality

The first author (NG) is fluently bilingual (English and Hindi) and is a native Hindi speaker. He has extensive fieldwork experience with communities, particularly children with disabilities living in informal settlements of Mumbai. NG, an architect by training, also has experience with qualitative research and interviews in low-resource settings in India. He had a prior connection with the district head of inclusive education in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), who helped him connect with the community school inside the Dharavi informal settlement. NG had no prior relationship with the children, their family members, or schoolteachers. The district head and school

principal provided the contact details of these children's parents. The school principal also informed the children and their parents that NG would be contacting them. NG initially connected with parents and children via phone calls and later through the help of a research assistant who was also bilingual, a Master of Philosophy Student, and from the Dharavi community. Having a research assistant from the community helped in building rapport and trust with the children and family members. NG initially trained the research assistant in drawing mental maps and discussed with him the cultural nuances and potential barriers to children's or family members' participation. NG and the assistant both developed a strategy, and the research assistant was present in the community and connected children over Zoom to facilitate the conversation with NG. Since NG had prior experiences working with children in similar contexts and has a background in arts, it helped him to connect with children and develop rich conversations. Arts and photographs of school spaces helped NG to break the ice, and he was mindful of the cultural context while discussing school participation experiences with children. The culture is not open, and honest discussions about things like going to the washroom were difficult to navigate; however, having the research assistant who was familiar to the children and the family members present during the interviews encouraged children to share things freely. NG also applied his prior community work experiences while connecting with teachers and family members as well. The other two members of the research team were not directly involved in data collection. HA is a White Canadian native English speaker. She is a qualitative researcher with significant experience in community-based rehabilitation and inclusive education in global contexts. BB is a Canadian researcher with extensive experience in enhancing the participation of children with disabilities in different contexts, and their inclusion with peers. She has developed methods to collect data directly with children, regardless of their abilities.

Data Collection

We collected multiple data sources to reduce misinterpretation, and some data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection (Stake, 1995, 2006). Data collection consisted of mental maps and individual interviews. The first author (NG) initially visited the school and photographed the 'activity settings' to build contextual understanding (Kontak et al., 2017).

Children With Physical Disabilities

<u>Mental maps of participation</u>: NG and the research assistant set up an hour-long Zoom video call with each of the children, and NG explained to them how to draw mental maps using a predetermined mental map tool (see Table 1)

based on their memories of school participation (Lawrence, 2008). Then NG prompted each child: "Please draw me a picture of you in your school space." The children drew three mental maps each: (1) a classroom, (2) a corridor or washroom, and (3) a playground. Each child took approximately 10 minutes to draw each mental map. Immediately after each map was finished, NG asked the children to explain what they drew, exploring the personal meaning attached to the place and its use (Lawrence, 2008; Trell & Van Hoven, 2010). This process took about 45–60 minutes per child. A local transcriber transcribed the interviews verbatim in Hindi to minimize error and meaning loss (Chiumento et al., 2018).

Table 1. Example of a Mental Map Tool

In the space below, draw how you participate in the classroom.
1. What is the name of the place you have drawn?
2. Who is in this drawing?
3. Where are you participating? Indoor/outdoor (Circle one)
4. What are the objects in the drawing?
5. What do you not like in this space?
6. What do you like in this space?
7. What do you enjoy doing in this space?
8. What else could be there that can help you participate in activities in this space?

Semi-structured interviews: One week following the mental maps, NG conducted semi-structured 45–60 minute Zoom interviews in Hindi (participant's preferred language) using an interview guide. The interviews were completed over two days for each child (at their convenience), one day of 15–20 minutes explaining the photographs of their school spaces shown to them by NG, and another day of 30–40 minutes for interview questions. First, NG showed school photographs and asked the children to explain the photographs (see Table 2), as photographs helped them make personal connections to their experiences (Miles, 2019). On the next day's interview, NG focused on children's

participation experience in the school's built environments and the characteristics of these environments that could lead children to have meaningful participation experiences and social interactions (see Table 3).

Table 2. Questions for Photographs

Let us look at these photographs. Could you explain to me your experience and discuss each photo in relation to participation and social interaction?
• What do you like about this place?
• What are your favorite things here?
• What do you like to do here?
• What would you like to do more of?
• What don't you like?
• What would you like to change?

Table 3. Interview Guide for Children With Physical Disabilities

1. Tell me about the activities you typically do at school: • What do you do in the classroom during class? • What do you do at recess, outside of the classroom? • What do you like to do? What do you not like to do? • What is easy to do? What is difficult to do? • Are there things/activities you would like to do at school but have not tried yet? (Probe: why? What stops you from trying them?)
2. Can you think of a time when you felt: • You are taking part or are part of the activity. (Probe: you are included; where were you? With whom? What did you do?). • You have a choice and a say/voice in what is happening in the school. (Probe: sharing thoughts, choose to/not to participate, where were you? With whom? What did you do?).
3. Describe the spaces in the school that are most important to you.
4. Tell me what works and what does not work while: a. Studying in the classroom? (Educational) b. Playing in the playground? (Recreational) c. Talking to friends in the corridor? (Social) d. Eating lunch together in class? (Social) e. Going to drink water? (Social/Personal) f. Going to the toilets? (Personal)
5. Suppose you had the magical ability to change the design of this school environment so that you could enjoy and easily do everything you need or want to do. What would you do? a. Could you tell me why it is important to have such school spaces? (Probe: Is there anything else you want to tell me about the school spaces (classrooms, corridors, playground) that is important to you?

Table 4. Interview Guide for Family Members

School Spaces: These include classrooms, playgrounds, school corridors, washrooms, and drinking water facilities where children participate in any activity inside the community school.
1. Could you please tell me about yourself? (Probe: what is your relationship with the child?)
2. Could you please tell me about your child with a physical disability?
3. How would you describe a 'good' or 'satisfying' everyday school experience for your child? a. What would this look like when your child is happy/satisfied? b. Can you tell me about experiences in the past one year that have gone well with your child inside school spaces (classrooms, playground, cultural events)? Probe: What made it a good experience? c. Can you tell me about experiences in the past one year that have been difficult for your child inside school spaces (classrooms, playground, cultural events)? Probe: What made it difficult?
4. Tell me about your experience of being in your child's school and seeing your child taking part in the activities.
5. Has your child ever complained about the school spaces? Could you tell me about that in detail?
6. Has your child ever appreciated the school spaces? Could you tell me about that in detail?
7. How do you think school spaces influence your child to take part in activities of learning, playing, and socializing? a. What aspects of community school spaces do you think are particularly important for your child to have meaningful participation? b. What should be there in the school spaces (classrooms, playground, corridor, toilets, library) that can better support the learning and engagement of your student with a physical disability?
8. If you could have a magical ability to change the design of your child's school environment to support their participation in activities better (that they wish/need to do) and learning there, what would you do?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I have not asked yet?

Family Members and Teachers

Once the children's interviews were complete and they recommended family members and teachers, NG telephoned potential participants to explain the study. If they provided verbal consent to participate, NG shared a letter of information with them through WhatsApp and scheduled a telephone call at a time of their convenience. NG then conducted 45–60 minutes semi-structured telephone interviews in Hindi, which were audio recorded; he used member-

checking during the interviews as recommended by Morse (2015). For each case, NG completed the family interviews before the teacher interviews.

Table 5. Interview Guide for Teachers

School Spaces: These include classrooms, playgrounds, school corridors, washrooms, and drinking water facilities where children participate in any activity inside the community school.
1. Could you please tell me a bit about your experience with your student with a physical disability?
2. How would you describe a "good" or "satisfying" everyday school experience for your student with a physical disability? a. Can you tell me about times that have gone well in the last one year with your student with a physical disability inside the school spaces (classrooms, playground, cultural events)? Probe: What made it a good time? b. Can you tell me about times that have been difficult in the last one year for them inside the school spaces (classrooms, playground, cultural events)? Probe: What made it difficult?
3. Has your student with a physical disability or their parents ever complained about the school spaces? Could you tell me about that in detail?
4. Has your student with a physical disability or their parents ever appreciated the school spaces? Could you tell me about that in detail?
5. Have you ever tried talking to your student with a physical disability about the school spaces? Could you tell me about that in detail?
6. How do you think school spaces influence your students with physical disabilities to participate in activities and learning in community school spaces like classrooms, playgrounds, and corridors? a. What aspects of community school spaces do you think are particularly important for your student with a physical disability to participate in? • activities of their interest (probe) • the activities they need to do, like- going to the toilet, accessing drinking water (probe) b. What should be in the school spaces (classrooms, playground, corridor, toilets, library) that can better support your student with a physical disability?
7. If you could have a magical ability to change the design of this school environment to better support your student with physical disability's participation in activities (that they wish/need to do) and learning, what would you do?
8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I have not asked yet?

Data Analysis

The data analysis aligned with Lauckner et al.'s (2012) suggestion to analyze preliminary data concurrently with data collection through member

checking and generating categories, reflections, and discussion interpretations. Stake (2006) views involving participants as partners in co-creating meaning through similar interpretations. Then, using NVivo software, NG organized the data from interview transcripts of children, parents, and teachers, mental map transcripts, and field notes to write a thick description of each case and then supported the description with photographs and mental maps. This description followed a thematic analysis involving the categorical aggregation of the data (Stake, 2006). NG did the preliminary analysis in the original language to minimize errors and avoid meaning loss (Chiumento et al., 2018).

NG extracted categories across the individual cases for the first two cases. NG, HA, and BB reviewed the categories and activity/setting photographs to elicit the context of participation and social interaction. Then, we validated this categorical aggregation by comparing and discussing the field notes and mental maps side by side. Following this peer debriefing, NG repeated the process alone for the additional cases. Once we finished the categorical aggregation for all five cases, NG, HA, and BB finalized the categories, and we compared similarities and differences across cases to interpret the data (Stake, 1995). Furthermore, we identified the key issues by iteratively examining each case's categories to extract common issues that could be addressed differently across the embedded cases (Lauckner et al., 2012). We wrote the case reports based on the key categories and substantiated them with participants' original quotes and mental maps to offer insights into the participation experiences of children in the community school's built environment.

Ethical Consideration

We obtained ethical clearance from the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board (Canada) and the BMC (India). Before data collection, families received a letter of information with details of the children's involvement in the study. NG obtained parental consent and the child's verbal assent over Zoom. Teachers and family members were informed about the study and provided informed verbal consent over Zoom prior to the commencement of interviews. All children's names used throughout the article are pseudonyms, and we used participant numbers for family members and teachers.

Results

Characteristics of the Cases

Participants included five children with physical disabilities (three girls, two boys), five teachers (four female, one male), and five family members (two mothers, two fathers, and one sister). Table 6 offers additional demographic details.

Table 6. Participant Characteristics

Cases/ Children (Pseudonyms)	Grade	Types of Physical Disability (obtained from school documentation)	Sex	Age (in years)	People Involved in the Educational Circle
Komal	5	Polio—causing atrophy in her ankle and drop foot, thus difficulty walking	Girl	9	Class teacher and sister
Shadab	3	Cerebral palsy—deformities in the foot thus difficulty walking	Girl	8	Class teacher and mother
Zuber	5	Acquired physical disability—cannot walk properly	Boy	10	Class teacher and mother
Jyoti	7	Paralysis—difficulty walking and speaking, limited movement due to paralyzed leg	Girl	15	Class teacher and father
Salman	5	Polio—right-hand side paralyzed, difficulty walking and holding firmly	Boy	9	Class teacher and father

Description of Embedded Cases

Case 1

Komal is a nine-year-old girl in Grade 5 who loves nature. She is shy but enjoys drawing and sketching. At age four, she was diagnosed with polio, and since then, she has had difficulty walking. She can walk slowly but experiences fatigue, requires a walking stick and pediatric walking boots, and cannot run. Her friends and sister often support Komal while walking. Moving around school spaces and in the playground is challenging for her. She loves dancing; however, her teacher does not allow her to dance for safety reasons.

Case 2

Shadab is an eight-year-old girl in Grade 3 who loves singing with and for her friends at school. Shadab also loves playing with friends, talking to them, and going to the garden; however, she dislikes sitting alone in class while her friends are playing outside. Shadab loves the open environment, greenery, trees, and grass. She has cerebral palsy. Walking is difficult for her, and her left side has restricted movement. Shadab wears special shoes to support her walking and cannot lift objects with her left hand.

Case 3

Zuber is a 10-year-old boy in Grade 5 who diligently studies. He is a very active child who enjoys sports, participating, and playing with other children; however, moving around the playground is challenging. Zuber has an acquired physical disability. When he was two years old, he fell from stairs and hurt his leg. He walks with a limp, finds it difficult to run, and fatigues quickly. He participates in indoor physical activities, like putting up blocks and throwing balls.

Case 4

Jyoti is a 15-year-old girl in Grade 7 who enjoys coming to school, sitting in the classroom, and learning. She loves singing, playing, and doing house chores. Jyoti is a compassionate and caring girl who mingles well with her peers. She was paralyzed at the age of nine months and did not receive the required care due to her family's financial difficulties. Jyoti has difficulty walking, and she cannot speak clearly. She wants to play with friends and sometimes goes to the playground but fears falling. Jyoti wants to participate with others and does not like sitting alone inside the classroom.

Case 5

Salman is a nine-year-old boy studying in Grade 5. He is fun-loving and enjoys his time with friends. He is a compassionate, caring, and vocal child. Salman loves drawing but requires explanation and attention to detail to learn. Salman was diagnosed with polio at the age of two, and his body's right-hand side was paralyzed. He has difficulty using his right hand and requires support to walk safely. He has faced difficulty getting involved in classroom and leisure activities, but with encouragement from the teacher, he has improved.

Key Categories

Following the aggregation of data, we identified three key categories (see Table 7): (1) Physically accessible and safe school spaces; (2) Informal spaces for community and social engagement and social interaction; and (3) Future direction for community school design.

Physically Accessible and Safe School Spaces

All children with physical disabilities highlighted the need for accessibility. They indicated that the difficulty in accessing school spaces limited their participation opportunities. For instance, the children faced difficulties walking long distances (e.g., 90 meters) to access facilities like washrooms and playgrounds:

> The playground is a bit far from my classroom; most of my friends go there to play. Sometimes I am left alone with the teacher to play in the classroom. Sometimes some of my friends play with me. I wish I could play like them in the playground. (Shadab)

Table 7. Embedded Cases and Their Subcategories

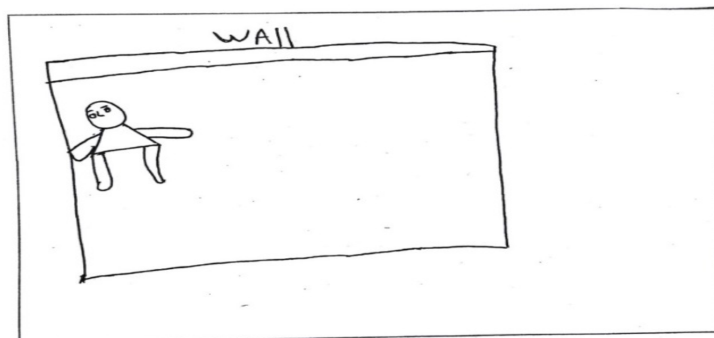
<table>
<tr><th>Case</th><th>Subcategories for Each Case</th><th>Final Categories Across Cases</th></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td>Need for physical support and care
Informal space for social interaction
Optimum use of space
Safety as a primary concern</td><td rowspan="5">1. Physically accessible and safe school spaces (Cases 1,2,3,4,5)
2. Informal spaces for community and social engagement and social interaction (Cases 1,2,5)
3. Future directions for community school design (Cases 1,2,3,4,5)
• Physical support required for participation
• Optimum use of space
• Inclusive extracurricular spaces
• Creating happy, engaging, and inspiring school spaces</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>Disabling school spaces
Safety as a primary concern
Informal spaces for social interaction
Need for physical support all around</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>Challenges in access and use of school spaces
Creating a happy and inspiring environment
Physical support for easy and safe participation
Innovative design ideas</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>Restricted opportunities to be involved
Engaging school spaces
Need for physical support, safety, and comfort</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>Challenges in access and use of school space
Informal space for social interaction
Inspiring school spaces
Physical support and safety as a primary concern</td></tr>
</table>

Another child highlighted that fatigue and fear of falling demotivated him to walk long distances; however, he wanted to participate with friends:

> I don't like sitting alone in the classroom. I also don't like it when I face difficulty while walking; I get tired, and my leg hurts when I have a heavy school bag on my back. I want to do everything by myself. I want to talk to my friends, eat lunch together, and share food and stories. (Zuber)

One child's drawing captured a lonely presence inside the classroom (Figure 5). The children indicated that facilities such as washrooms should be close to the classroom. One father said, "The toilet should be accessible, big, comfortable, have some support [grab bars], and be easy to use. There should be safety; he [child with a disability] could comfortably use it and access it freely" (FM04).

Figure 5. Mental map showing a corridor wall and a child sitting alone inside the classroom (Case 3).



Safety was a primary concern among all participants, including children, family members, and teachers. Children indicated difficulty using washrooms and highlighted the need for easy-to-navigate washrooms and physical support, like rods, grab bars, and nonslip flooring. A child stated, "The flooring should be non-slippery, particularly during the monsoon, as it is so difficult to walk over it" (Komal).

Parents highlighted that slippery and uneven floors could be dangerous and lead to accidents. A child stated, "I do not like the floor. It is broken and uneven. I often fall while walking and need to be careful. Some days when I fall, I prefer to sit on my bench" (Komal). Children indicated difficulty moving inside a narrow corridor because it became overcrowded, and there was no physical support to hold onto. Children also discussed the stairs to hang out with friends, talk, and develop bonds. A child stated, "I enjoyed spending time with friends and talking to them on the stairs in front of the classroom. We talk and share stories" (Jyoti). The children highlighted the need for interactive, open spaces for shared activities like eating lunch together during recess and playing and interacting with other children. They also indicated the need for a space in the classroom to connect with friends during leisure time.

Children talked about the need for obstacle- and hazard-free spaces. They described negative experiences, such as falling inside the corridor or on the stairs and hurting themselves due to the school's design. The children highlighted that the fear of falling led to a dependency on others. A child stated, "I have fallen quite a lot while walking. My teachers ask me not to walk alone. If somebody helps me, I can walk easily, but I want to walk on my own, freely, without somebody's help" (Jyoti). Teachers expressed similar concerns, which led them to limit children's participation. For instance, a teacher stated,

> Disabled children cannot run like other children. I get scared that he [Salman] would run and play football [soccer] with children. What if he falls? His leg gets twisted. He might hurt his other leg. That's why I try not to involve him mostly in outdoor sports. (ST05)

Family members had major concerns for their child's safety and highlighted the need for supervision or camera surveillance to ensure their child's safe participation. They discussed the lift[2] [elevator] located at the end of the corridor. One mother stated, "Children have a lot of fun with that [lift]; children might put their hands in the door. It is dangerous. What if a child falls into the lift [elevator] pit? I have heard about it and am scared" (FM05).

Informal Spaces for Community and Social Engagement and Interaction

The children and their teachers highlighted the need for informal spaces such as stairs, corridors, and gardens to enable free movement (e.g., going to the library) and to promote participation in social opportunities (i.e., meeting friends). Teachers noted that these spaces are important for children's emotional well-being. A teacher stated,

> These spaces [corridors, stairs] are very much important. Once children mingle, only then can they understand their roles and can have a choice to participate with their friends. She [Shadab] can play with her friends and chit-chat with them in these spaces. (ST02)

All children indicated that the corridor in front of the classroom was a key space for them to socialize, providing opportunities to interact and play, eat and share lunch, and sit and talk with friends (see Figure 6). They indicated the need for some seating space in the corridor to interact, as standing and talking caused fatigue. A child stated,

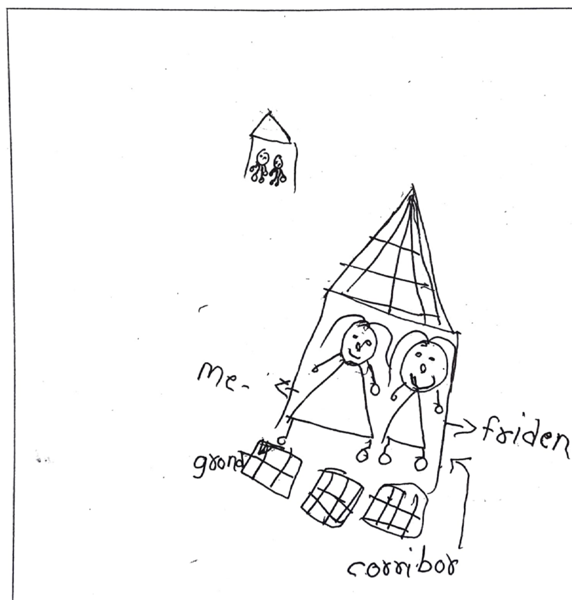
> The corridor is close to my classroom. I do not have to walk far to play and talk to my friends. I have some friends in other classes, they come to the corridor, and we talk. I enjoy being with my friends; I sometimes meet them nearby the door, and we talk and play some games in front of the classroom. (Shadab)

Children, family members, and teachers mentioned other informal spaces for social engagements. For instance, children liked to sit and chat in the playground and garden with friends. Family members indicated that open spaces inspired children and were critical for developing bonds between children with and without disabilities. A teacher stated,

> The garden inspires children to socialize—a garden with different shapes, trees, and spaces to sit and talk. I want a garden with physical support

> like a railing to hold and walk freely. Children can sit under the trees on a sunny day to relax and interact with each other. (ST04)

Figure 6. Mental map of participation experience inside the corridor (Case 2).



Future Directions for Community School Design

All participants highlighted the need for inclusive school spaces that empower children to participate safely with peers as they choose. They shared ideas for future school designs. One family member, a sister, stated, "If we are modifying these spaces, let us change for the good" (FM01).

Physical Support Required for Participation

All participants in this study discussed the need for physical support (e.g., rods, grab bars, railings) across the school spaces to enable children's participation. Additionally, teachers indicated that a safe environment instills confidence in children to participate independently. A teacher stated,

> If you do not feel comfortable and safe being in a space, you won't feel good about it. The environment is critical, and it shapes the way children behave or participate in a particular space. If we provide an encouraging environment, then that environment would attract children, and they would love to come to school. (ST05)

All students indicated the need for a safe environment to enable meaningful participation. A child stated, "I need something to hold and walk. I cannot

run like my friends, but something like a rod at my height would help me walk fast" (Zuber). Describing the aesthetics of the physical support and its design, he further added, "Support to grab and walk, like, the rods with different shapes, colors, and sizes so that it looks attractive and simultaneously supports me in movement" (Zuber).

All children had ideas on how their space could be improved. They wished the washroom spaces could be large and clean with anti-skid flooring. A child stated, "Sometimes, I hit myself while coming out of the toilet room. If it [door] can open outside, it would be easier to come out" (Salman). Another child commented on styles and physical supports needed,

> There should be a washroom with English seats [Western/commode style]. I find it difficult to use the Indian [squat] washroom seats. There should be some support like a rod to grab and use the washroom seats, as it is difficult for me to sit and stand by myself. I sometimes prefer not to use it. (Salman)

Family members indicated that ease of access and use is dependent on experiences of using the washroom. A father stated that "The toilet should be big with different cubical, hand washing facilities, and support for her to grab and use the toilets. The toilet should be clean, and children should feel happy while using the toilet" (FM03).

All children and family members highlighted the need for railings in the corridor and along the stairs. They illustrated that railings would physically assist children in staying upright and enable them to participate freely:

> It is difficult to climb up and down the stairs without anything to grab. I need that support, as I have fallen without that. My friends held my hands and helped to climb the stairs. Sometimes the teacher helps me, but I want to climb on my own. (Shadab)

Family members indicated a similar need for physical support across school spaces such as washrooms, playgrounds, corridors, and classrooms. A mother indicated that railings allow her child to feel confident and participate independently.

> There could be a rod-like thing all around for her [Shadab] to hold and walk. There should be a play area with equipment and swings, so she can hold and play, and she will feel powerful with some support like a railing to walk. (FM02)

Optimum Use of Space

All children indicated the need for the washroom, playground, and activity spaces to be at an approachable distance so they do not have to walk far. A

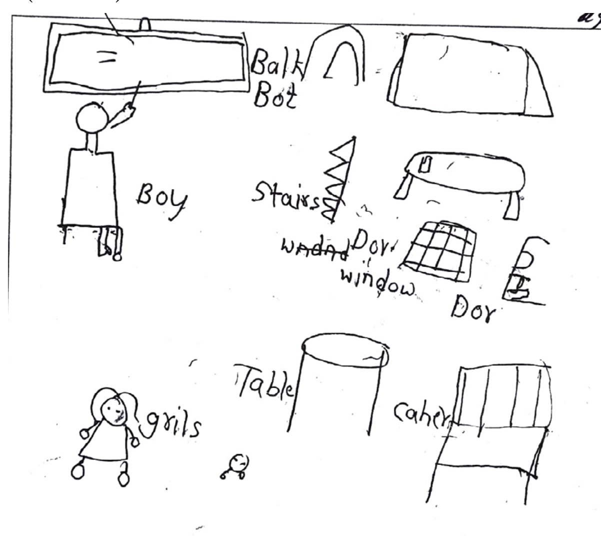
child noted, “I wish the washrooms were close by. If I walk far, I get tired, and I may fall and hurt myself if it is too far to walk” (Shadab). The children further mentioned the need to increase key school spaces’ proximity to create an interconnected, easy-to-access environment. A child stated, “I wish the playground were near to my classroom. I could play like my friends” (Salman). Teachers also highlighted that having facilities at an approachable distance would enhance children’s engagement: “Having a facility nearby the classroom is beneficial, and it allows disabled children to engage more. They can play with friends during their leisure time” (ST01). Family members and teachers reported the need to increase washroom cubicles (stalls). A sister of one child participant noted that due to the limited number of washroom cubicles, the child could miss the opportunity to spend time with peers.

> She [Komal] needs to use the washroom during recess; she gets late, and the recess is over. Sometimes, she cannot eat lunch together with other children and misses opportunities to develop a bond and share experiences with peers. (FM01)

All participants indicated the need for comfortable and flexible use of furniture. The children raised concerns about the furniture’s design, access, and use (see Figure 7). A child said:

> I do not like benches and desks. They are high, and it is difficult for me to sit on them. Benches and desks should be according to my height. Also, I would like my bench to be yellow. (Shadab)

Figure 7. The mental map of inside classroom participation shows furniture and interaction (Case 2).



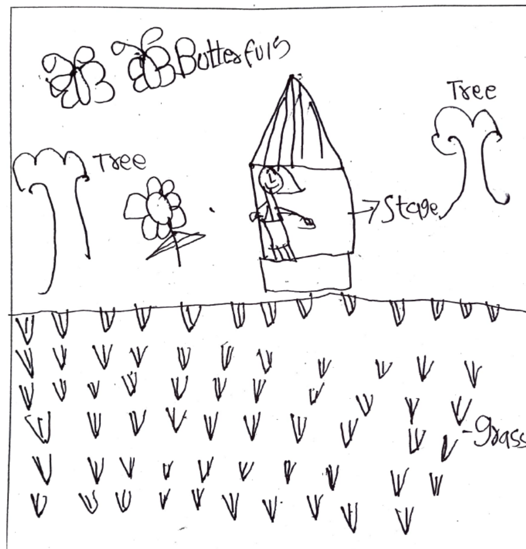
Another child noted the importance of benches for interacting with friends: "The benches should have something soft [cushion] to sit on. If two people can sit together, it would be great, as I could talk to my friend sitting with me" (Zuber). Children highlighted that the current furniture lacks usability and needs adaptation to promote participation. A child stated: "There should be something to fold and open in the desks so I can come out easily and keep my bag there. A bench [desk] should be foldable, openable, and according to children's height" (Komal). Teachers indicated that the flexible furniture design could enable variation and lead to better participation opportunities for children. They also highlighted the need to consider the intended activities when designing spaces to optimize use.

Inclusive Extracurricular Spaces

Children denoted the need for inclusive spaces for extracurricular activities. They raised significant concerns about accessing and using extracurricular spaces such as an outdoor performance stage (see Figure 8). For example, one child said: "Sometimes it is difficult to walk on the muddy path, particularly during the monsoon when there is water logging, and I cannot reach the stage easily. Also, the stage is not close to my classroom" (Shadab). Another child stated:

> Climbing up the stage is difficult, and there is nothing to hold. I get tired and do not go there. I will put something to hold on to, like a rope, so that I do not fall on stage while standing. It will help them participate in cultural activities. (Komal)

Figure 8. Mental map participation experience on stage and in the garden (Case 1).



Another child noted the need for more physical support, and she shared ideas for the design of the stage:

> The stage should be bigger than we have now; it should not be too high and must have support along the stairs for me to go up and down. I cannot participate in dance; I love dancing, but my hand and leg hurt a lot. If there could be some support like a rope or something, I can also hold and dance. I would love to dance with my friends. (Zuber)

Teachers and family members also had accessibility concerns for children participating in cultural performances and activities. A teacher stated, "For disabled children, there should be slopes [ramps] on both sides of the stage as it helps in their easy movement. There should be seating for performers so that they can also sit and enjoy the functions" (ST02). Teachers emphasized the need for experiential learning in the school spaces, for instance, learning with nature or hands-on exercises with physical support. A teacher stated:

> Usually, disabled children do not experience such facilities [gardens, physical support, swings, see-saws] in their neighborhood, so they look for facilities inside the school [grounds]. These facilities motivate children to attend school daily and increase their attendance. (ST02)

Creating Happy, Engaging, and Inspiring School Spaces

Children, family members, and teachers indicated the need to create happy and inspiring school spaces where children can engage and interact. The aesthetics and functionality of the school's built environment were viewed as critical for children's participation. Children emphasized the need for classroom interiors to be vibrant, and one child stated: "I would like to change the classroom walls. The wall needs to be colorful, with some drawings and paintings. I will paint the door colorful, which should look beautiful" (Komal). Family members and teachers indicated that an enabling classroom environment should be vibrant and foster a sense of belonging and ownership of the space. They highlighted that such an environment includes attractive classrooms, corridors, and walls that evoke positive emotions in children. A teacher stated that the boundary wall of the school at present has pictures of children without any visible disabilities (see Figure 9), but suggested it should also include pictures of children with physical disabilities participating in activities:

> The boundary wall of the school should have pictures of disabled children playing, going to school, studying, and participating in activities. Disabled children and their parents from the community could relate to it, and it should inspire them to attend school. (ST03)

Figure 9. Picture of children participating in an activity painted on the boundary wall. Source: Author

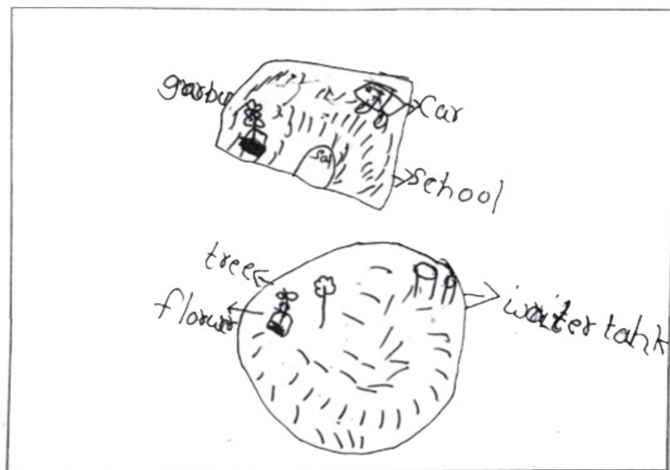
Children emphasized the importance of large doors and windows for good light and ventilation and indicated how that allows them to connect with the outside environment visually. They wanted the school gate to be colorful, bigger, and welcoming as well as having some physical support to hold. They highlighted that activity spaces close to nature—for instance, a garden with flowers and grass to sit on while interacting with other children—are important for developing friendships (see Figure 10). A child stated:

> I have drawn a garden, swings, flowers, trees, a car, a school, and a water tank. The playground should be big and open, where I could run and play with friends. There should be some seating around the garden for us. I have seen my friends go to the playground during recess. I also want to go. (Shadab's mental map description)

Family members and teachers highlighted that gardens inspire children to develop bonds, interact, and foster social opportunities. Teachers proposed that circular or semicircular seating arrangements in the classroom could also enhance interaction. A teacher stated:

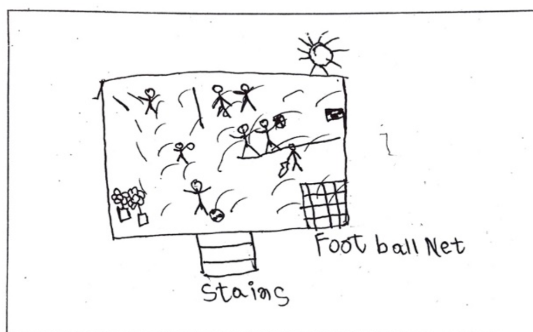
> The classroom is a space where children can play, participate, and learn safely, freely, and comfortably. Semicircular furniture arrangements can foster more engagement and free movement. Such an arrangement would enable children to experience freedom, comfort, safety, and face-to-face interactions. (ST05)

Figure 10. Mental map showing participation experience inside a garden (Case 2).



All participants highlighted that the playground should be large for children to play freely and engage actively (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Mental map of participation experience inside the playground with stairs to access (Case 4).



Discussion and Recommendations

This study is part of a larger doctoral dissertation that also examined architects' understanding of disability and its impact on their school design choices in Dharavi, Mumbai (Gaurav et al., 2023a). Moreover, this study examined the experiences of children with physical disabilities who negotiated their respective community schools' current built environments in the Dharavi informal settlement in Mumbai. Findings illustrate that children in this study

faced major challenges with access, limited support, and unsafe school spaces. The findings also indicate children's willingness to participate in academic and non-academic activities and how the school environment restricted them. This study uniquely considers the perception of children with physical disabilities of their school spaces in India, contributing to global literature on children and disability-friendly school spaces in low-resource, urban settings.

Key Recommendations

All children indicated the need for physical support to move around school spaces and for bigger washrooms with easier access. Previous studies have also indicated mobility (Das, 2022) and easy access to washrooms (Banik & Banik, 2021) are major concerns for children with disabilities. The children in this study described their fear of falling and how they depended on others to negotiate the built environment. Other researchers have reported how the environment can induce dependency among children with physical disabilities (Foley et al., 2014; Gaurav et al., 2023b; Malone, 2013). Such dependency can result in children's poor self-esteem (Mulligan et al., 2018) and low confidence (Bhatty et al., 2016). Safety was a major concern among children, their parents, and teachers, and they all indicated the need for a safe school environment to ensure meaningful participation. Foley et al. (2014) and Imms et al. (2020) also discussed how a safe school environment enhanced opportunities for participation for children with disabilities. In this study, safety-related recommendations were mainly focused on anti-skid and leveled flooring, round and soft wall and furniture edges, optimum movement space between furniture, wider corridors, spacious washrooms, and railings.

Although safety should always be a concern, the environmental design should not limit participation/inclusion out of fear for safety, and teachers and family members should be cautioned against overprotection and limiting the participation of the child in the name of "safety" (Sharma & Kohli, 2018; Sharma et al., 2009). Our findings point to the need for inclusive extracurricular spaces to participate and engage with friends and peers during leisure time and cultural events. Such engagement promotes confidence and opportunities for children to socialize (NEADS, 2019; Rizzuto & Steiner, 2022).

Many academics in the field of inclusive education in India point to the need for an accessible, safe, useable, and conducive built environment in schools as essential for the implementation of inclusive education (Agarwal, 2020; Das, 2022; Hodkinson & Devarakonda, 2009; Johansson, 2014; Kalyanpur, 2008; Limaye, 2016; Parveen & Qounsar, 2018; Singal, 2019). However, in India, the community school's built environment is often not welcoming and encouraging for children with physical disabilities (Banik & Banik, 2021; Chowdhury,

2011; Singh et al., 2019), primarily because of designers' limited awareness of disability requirements in school design (Das, 2022; Saxena et al., 2017) and teacher's understanding of disability and concern for safety (Limaye, 2016; Singh et al., 2019). This study resonates with a body of literature on inclusive education in Mumbai and India more broadly, as it highlights the benefit of inclusive education for children's social and academic outcomes (Banik & Banik, 2021; Gaurav et al., 2023b; Singh et al., 2019). Additionally, the research findings highlight that inclusion is beyond simply placing children in a regular classroom (Bailey et al., 2016; Banks & Keogh, 2016); it must also actively foster a culture of value and belonging for all children (Johansson, 2014; Kalyanpur, 2008).

The recommendations from our study can be applicable across India with similar contexts as researchers have reported similar challenges with unconducive built environments and limited accessibility in schools in Kashmir (Parveen & Qounsar, 2018; Sharma & Kohli, 2018), Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat (Praja Foundation, 2017; Singal, 2008; Kalyanpur, 2008), Kolkata, West Bengal, India (Johansson, 2014), and Delhi (Mohan, 2010). Additionally, the recommendations could be applicable to other low- and middle-income countries with similar contexts and challenges, such as East Asian countries with inaccessible schools and teachers' limited understanding of children with disabilities in Pakistan (Naz et al., 2022), Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal (Beutel et al., 2019), and inaccessible and unsafe built environments for children with disabilities in African countries, as well (Pather, 2019; Ramaahlo et al., 2018; Tudzi et al., 2017).

Challenges With Implementing Recommendations

Currently, participants' aspirations "for the future" are not a reality at the school because of systemic barriers (Das, 2022; Gaurav et al., 2023b; Limaye, 2016), such as architects being uninformed or unaware of disability design needs (Agarwal, 2020; Schijlen et al., 2015), prolonged project approvals, limited fund allocation for design innovation, and limited training of architects (Saxena et al., 2017). In addition, other school design execution personnel, like contractors and masons for inclusive school spaces, give limited consideration to children with disabilities as they are fewer in number compared to other children (Agarwal, 2020). The recommendations provided by children and their parents and teachers could be a reality with the conscious efforts of all the stakeholders, such as school administrators, designers, contractors, consultants, policymakers, authorities of the school infrastructure cell, and the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyaan (Inclusive Education for All) department. The BMC has funds; however, they need awareness about channeling those funds for actionable and optimal use of resources for inclusive school design.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Our study showed that the children were not granted access to the full range of participation opportunities in academic and non-academic activities. This participation limitation links to occupational injustices (Benjamin-Thomas et al., 2022), such as occupational apartheid that involves individualized and systematic exclusion (Kronenberg & Pollard, 2006), when some individuals are granted access to participation in meaningful occupations while others are restricted access based on characteristics such as age, gender, disability, or social status (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). This discrimination is rooted in policies that limit access to academic and non-academic activities and school spaces. BMC can integrate the occupational justice frameworks into school design and teachers' teaching practice by conducting accessibility and accommodation needs assessments to identify contextual barriers and by working collaboratively with children, architects, and school authorities to support inclusive development. There is an urgent need for policy-level change wherein BMC mandates training for—in-house, and consultants—architects and contractors to integrate and implement inclusive school design ideas (Christensen et al., 2023; Saxena et al., 2017). BMC can also mandate that no contractors can bid for construction tenders unless they attend that training. Monitoring and ensuring that design ideas promote easy access, independent use, a safe environment, and enhanced participation from the project's inception can enhance children's social interaction and participation (Das, 2022). BMC can also encourage a collaborative design process where architects and children can work together (Imrie & Hall, 2003; Saxena et al., 2017; Tsekleves et al., 2022) to develop an inclusive school design catering to children's needs. There is a need to ease the public–private partnership (PPP) policy to develop meaningful partnerships for ease of design implementation and training for different personnel (Jha & Parvati, 2010; Kalyanpur, 2008). If extra funding is required, BMC could partner with other local and corporate agencies and NGOs and create awareness about the need for a conducive learning environment for all children (Accessible India Campaign, 2015).

Implications for Design and Participation Theories

Our study corresponds to the theoretical underpinning of disability, participation, and design, highlighting how a safe and conducive environment enhances participation opportunities for children with physical disabilities. Researchers in the field of disability (Sharma & Kohli, 2018; Singh et al., 2019), participation (Foley et al., 2014; King et al., 2013), and design (Cullis, 2010; Imms et al., 2020; Imrie & Hall, 2003) have indicated that safe and conducive environments enable children to participate. Hammel et al. (2008) defined

participation as "meaningful engagement required access to a full range of opportunities, unrestricted by bodily impairments or disabling physical, social, and political environments" (p. 1455). For participation to be deemed meaningful, Hammel et al. emphasized active and meaningful engagement, having choice and control, access and opportunity, personal and societal responsibilities, having an impact and supporting others, and social connection, societal inclusion, and membership. Our findings highlight specific factors important to promoting a sense of belonging, ownership, access to academic and non-academic activities, having the choice to participate independently, and empowering the children to participate.

Honoring Children's Voice

Our study showed how children with physical disabilities could creatively express their ideas and requirements if given opportunities to communicate their concerns and needs. Researchers and professionals (e.g., architects, school administrators) should adopt creative strategies to engage children in school design processes. Previous studies highlighted that the school design processes and adaptation in India had considered adults' (e.g., principals or teachers) voices while overlooking the voices of children with physical disabilities (Agarwal, 2020; Banik & Banik, 2021; Das, 2022). Studies have highlighted that ignoring children's perspectives could result in limited participation and involvement in school settings (Banik & Banik, 2021; Das, 2022). While the government at the state (province) and local (district) levels are making efforts to ensure inclusion (Gaurav et al., 2023b), it is imperative to include children's voices in their school space design as children's perspective differs from what adults construct for them (Han & Kim, 2018).

BMC can prioritize incorporating children's voices and promote them among its architects. Including children's voices in design can foster a sense of belonging, confidence, and ownership of school spaces among children, support them in enjoying learning, and improve school attendance (Sluis-Thiescheffer et al., 2016). Such an enabling school environment can also encourage children to develop agency and participate, build relationships and friendships, and feel happy, valued, and included.

Study Limitations

This study has certain limitations, and we recognize that meaning loss may have occurred while translating quotes from Hindi to English; however, we received support from a professional bilingual translator and tried to minimize meaning loss as much as possible. In addition, thought needs to be put into design when one disability group's (e.g., physical disability) recommendations

or needs clash with another disability group's (e.g., visual impairment) needs. Therefore, it is important to note that school design recommendations in this study are only for children with physical disabilities. Further, some overlaps or common needs of diverse disability groups can be catered to and considered while designing school spaces.

Conclusion

Participation and access to education are human rights issues. Our study indicated the urgent need to honor children as primary stakeholders and include their voices in school design to ensure their effective inclusion and promote participation (Gillett-Swan & Burton, 2022; Imms et al., 2020). Our study findings can have global significance for the design of educational spaces for children with physical disabilities. What children are asking for (i.e., that schools should be safe and provide easy access to essential facilities, informal spaces for social interaction, inclusive extracurricular spaces, and spaces that are happy and inspiring) should be essential considerations in the design of schools in any school, not just within India. The Indian context is significant because systemic barriers within India will likely exist in other rapidly developing countries. Researchers and designers in those countries could learn from our Indian study and use our recommendations to begin to address the design needs of children with disabilities within their context.

Endnotes

[1]Community schools are municipal schools in Mumbai's informal settlements with limited basic facilities and local government support.

[2]An elevator designed to increase accessibility by getting some up and down who may find it difficult to use stairs. Since children may not be aware of how to operate an elevator and may play in and around it, the family members were concerned for the children's safety.

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Unveiling Community Cultural Wealth Among Latina/o Immigrant Families

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Abstract

The rising population of Latina/o students in U.S. schools warrants a deeper understanding of recent immigrant families, particularly families' engagement in their children's education. Our study highlights the importance of unveiling the community cultural wealth of Latina/o immigrant families to deepen and enrich family–school connections. Our findings describe the many strengths immigrant families possess, including their ability to maneuver social institutions, engage in various social networks, and maintain hopes for the future. Families also presented with strengths acquired through multilingual experiences and confrontations with inequality. By acknowledging these innate strengths, schools are better equipped to cultivate strong family–school partnerships and student success.

Key Words: immigrants, families, schools, capital, Latina/o, qualitative study, community cultural wealth, engagement, family–school partnerships

Introduction

When families and schools collaborate and form partnerships, students succeed (Christenson & Reschly, 2009; McWayne et al., 2013; Sheridan et al., 2019; Sibley & Brabeck, 2017). Meaningful partnerships are especially important in the early years of a child's development and are key to promoting

strong social–emotional skills, preparedness for schooling beyond early childhood, and academic achievement (Office of Early Childhood Development, 2020). Through meaningful partnerships, teachers and families can provide reciprocal support, with schools integrating the values and priorities of families into their pedagogy and families reinforcing both learning and the importance of education at home (Epstein, 2001). This results in what Epstein has called "family-like schools" and "school-like homes." Educators can begin to understand the needs and realities of students and their families by learning about the histories, experiences, and strengths that families bring into the schooling experience. This is particularly important for immigrant families, who often cite educational attainment for their children as a primary reason for immigrating to a new country and whose children are more likely to experience difficulties in school (Beauregard et al., 2014; McWayne et al., 2013).

Changing Demographics of U.S. Schools

Globally, approximately 281 million individuals reside outside of the country in which they were born (United Nations, 2021). Among all countries, the United States has the largest immigrant population at 44.9 million, amounting to 14% of the country's total population (Budiman, 2020; U.S. American Immigration Council, 2021). Over the last 20 years, the number of immigrants in U.S. schools has grown, changing racial/ethnic distributions among students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). One major shift has been in the number of Latina/o students enrolled in U.S. schools (Bauman, 2017). The Latina/o population is multidimensional and intersectional, featuring various racial, ethnic, linguistic, and immigration status backgrounds (Hernandez-Truyol, 1997). Latina/o populations, particularly those with roots in Spain, Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, have increasingly migrated to the U.S. for a variety of social, economic, and political reasons (Lopez & Moslimani, 2022), spreading out across the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Consequently, U.S. schools have experienced a surge in immigrant students from a variety of Latina/o backgrounds (Bauman, 2017). The percentage of Latina/o students enrolled in U.S. schools grew from 22% in 2009 to 28% in 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Yet this number is expected to grow, with Latina/o student enrollment projected to reach 30% by 2030 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Given the growing diversity, as well as recent immigration patterns of Central American and Caribbean families (Soutullo et al., 2016), it is important to explore and understand the experiences of these new waves of immigrant students and their families so that educators may be better prepared to support them in accessing school.

Immigrant Family Engagement

Many factors impact how immigrant families engage with schools, including English proficiency, knowledge of the American education system, financial resources, immigration status, acculturation, and beliefs about education (Calzada et al., 2015; Soutullo et al., 2016; Torres Fernandez, 2015). Despite the critical importance for these family–school partnerships, many immigrant parents report feeling disappointed with school receptiveness (He et al., 2017) and uncomfortable or unwelcome in schools (Hill & Torres, 2010). This often results from cultural differences between home and school, which manifest in teachers misinterpreting family values, norms, and behavior when compared to norms they ascribe to (McIntyre et al., 2011; Shepherd & Stephens, 2010). Subsequently, teachers may engage in teaching and behavior management styles that do not align with behavioral patterns and norms representative of their students and families (McIntyre et al., 2011). When educators can understand how families engage, they can promote and encourage this engagement and activation of Latina/o families' assets in the form of cultural wealth (López-Robertson, 2017).

Understanding Strengths of Latina/o Families

Previous research has demonstrated that Latina/o families can and will engage in their children's school experience, particularly when their strengths are leveraged in the school context (Jasis & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2004). When parents are empowered to build trusting relationships with educators, they develop the confidence to engage in school and community activities to improve their children's educational experience (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011). Additionally, previous research supports that when the cultural and linguistic resources of Latina/o parents are encouraged and built upon, they can better engage meaningfully within school systems to improve the conditions of their children's schooling (Durand, 2011; Jasis & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2004). For instance, many Latina/o families maintain values of *educación* (education), *confianza* (trust), *cariño* (caring relationships), *compromiso* (commitment), and *respeto* (respect)—all of which serve as important resources for growing civic engagement in the school community and building family–school partnerships that encourage success for their children (Durand, 2011; Jasis & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2004). Outside of schools, it has been found that Latina/o parents also engage in a variety of language and literacy practices at home which positively contribute to their children's development in school (Alston-Abel & Berninger, 2018). When educators seek to understand these cultural strengths, they can better implement an asset-based approach in supporting Latina/o students and

families while creating spaces that align with culturally and linguistically diverse pedagogical practices (Grosso Richins et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The primary theoretical framework guiding this study is Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth (CCW). Education professionals tend to presume that immigrant students are "disadvantaged," lacking knowledge, social skills, various abilities, and overall cultural capital (Valenzuela, as cited in Yosso, 2005). Yosso, on the other hand, identified six unique forms of cultural wealth immigrant communities demonstrate: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (p. 779), thereby countering deficit narratives that may exist when working with Latina/o immigrants (Jimenez, 2020). These six forms of capital are described in Table 1 (Yosso, 2005, pp. 77–80).

Table 1. Categories of Community Cultural Wealth

Form of Capital	Definition
Aspirational	Ability to maintain future hopes and dreams in midst of barriers
Linguistic	Intellectual and social skills learned through multilingual communication experiences
Navigational	Skills acquired through maneuvering through institutions
Social	Networks of people and community resources
Familial	Cultural knowledges nurtured among family that carry community, history, memory, and cultural intuition
Resistant	Knowledges and skills acquired from challenging inequality

Within the field of education, CCW has been used to expand notions of cultural capital (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986/2011), and as an alternative to deficit-oriented approaches. For instance, Jimenez (2020) explored how a teacher used CCW to incorporate family histories into curricula with immigrant students, stating that "when teachers are equipped to see, connect with, sustain, and expand on students' lived experiences as immigrant youth, it generates pedagogical spaces of possibility" (p. 780). Further studies have contributed to shifting the narrative surrounding immigrant families within education from a deficit-based one to as asset-based one, showing how the CCW framework can help preservice and in-service teachers identify community assets through activities that engage students and their families while illuminating the ways that youth can draw on these assets to encourage leadership and transformation (Grosso Richins et al., 2021; Salisbury, 2022; Zoch & He, 2020).

Erdemir (2022) applied CCW to a different cultural context and demonstrated that it can be used to counter deficit narratives in the early childhood context among Syrian refugees upon resettlement in Turkey. All the forms of capital in the CCW framework were revealed by the children as they shared aspects of their school, home, and community experiences between Syria and Turkey. For instance, children in the study activated navigational capital by successfully developing positive relationships with teachers that helped them maneuver expectations in the school context. They also activated aspirational capital in the dreams they held for jobs they wished to attain and in their plans for their future, keeping a sense of resilience and hope in the face of adversity.

Bean-Folkes and Ellison (2018) used CCW as a framework for creating culturally relevant approaches to literacy for elementary and middle school students while illustrating how teachers can use their students' capital to enhance the sense of community in their classroom. Bean-Folkes and Ellison described that when teachers rethink their teaching by considering their students' capital, they can ultimately create concrete strategies that enhance pedagogy for students of color at school. Even further, their study suggests that when teachers use the CCW framework as a lens for reflecting upon their work with diverse language communities, they can actively implement classroom practices that engage diverse students. Such practices can include teacher use of literature in the classroom that resembles students' communities, as well as motivating students with texts in which they can see the forms of capital they possess (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). These examples illustrate how the CCW framework has helped educators to acknowledge and contextualize the family histories of their students as strengths and actively work to counter deficit narratives that have been perpetuated about them (Erdemir, 2022; Jimenez, 2020).

Present Study

Various studies have identified the importance of understanding the relationship between schools and immigrant families with researchers addressing how Latina/o parents are involved in early education (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2015; Gregg et al., 2012; McWayne et al., 2013). The purpose of this qualitative study is to add to this literature by exploring educational experiences of Latina/o immigrant families and the barriers and facilitators maximizing their cultural capital in early education. Acknowledging these factors and understanding how immigrant families engage in their children's education can provide a critical step towards accountability for educational equity.

Methodology

This qualitative study assumed a constructivist epistemological lens (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), utilizing a series of interviews to gain insight into the lived experiences of mothers who had recently immigrated to the U.S. As a research team, we believe that the realities experienced by our participants are multifaceted and context-bound, and as such, the goal of this investigation was to describe and better understand the lived experiences of our participants as they sought early childhood care and education for their children (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, our study is also informed by a critical perspective (Bernal, 2002), given that we collectively acknowledge the important role that political, social, and cultural dynamics play in the lives of our participants. In addition to understanding our participants, we seek to empower them through our work. This study was approved by the University of Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB-02) prior to data collection.

Positionality

Our individual and collective positionality informs how we engaged in this research. The first author is a child of immigrant parents who subsequently sees herself not only as a cultural insider with participant families, but also as a cultural outsider due to being an American-born woman with Afro-Caribbean heritage. The second author identifies as a cultural insider and outsider; he shares a general cultural and linguistic background with participants (i.e., Latino and Spanish-speaking) yet was American-born and raised. The third author, a cultural outsider, is a White professor who became interested in this work when, after partnering with Head Start teachers and administrators, recognized the disconnect between herself and the majority of those supporting Head Start children and families. The fourth author is an American-born Black woman, single mother, and professor who brings to the project an interest in improving the educational experiences of marginalized groups and substantive experience with qualitative research. Collectively, we used our onto-epistemic knowledges to examine, analyze, and interpret what was (un)shared by our participants during their interviews and as we engaged with the transcripts. We used all our experiences with—and understandings of—educational systems in this work; additionally, two of us bring our experiences as parents navigating these systems with some measure of privilege.

Context

The participants for the present study were recruited from a Head Start center in a midsized city in the southeastern United States. The Head Start center

was one of 16 locations that the local county school district had operated for several decades. Our participants came from three of five classrooms within one specific center housed on a public elementary school campus. In addition to classroom teachers and teaching assistants, the center was supported by on-site administrators and a family liaison facilitating interactions between teachers and families. Fluent in Spanish and English, the family liaison provided unique support to the several Latin American immigrant families enrolled in the center. Given her intimate role with families, the liaison aided in the recruitment of participants.

It is essential to note that the COVID-19 pandemic altered the educational experiences of all families in the Head Start center. It is important to note that families were recruited, and the first interview completed, in early 2020. Shortly after the first interviews were completed, the school district transitioned to remote instruction for the remainder of the year. Initially, limited instruction was provided via Zoom, and instruction was primarily conducted through weekly "packets" that were available for families to pick up at the school and implement with their children at home. As distance learning progressed, packets were enhanced with educational online programs and more frequent Zoom sessions.

Participants

Study inclusion criteria included: participants being immigrants from Latin American countries, currently residing in the United States, with at least one child enrolled in the Head Start program. Families who met these criteria were referred to us by the program's family liaison, and then a member of our research team contacted the potential participants to schedule initial interviews. Two participants were from Mexico, one from Colombia, and one from Guatemala. Next, we present profiles that illuminate our participants' shared, multidimensional Latina identities (see Table 2 for basic information). Importantly, we strive to attend to participant social identities (e.g., race, class, ethnicity, immigration status) given their impact and influence on lived experience and worldview.

Table 2. Participants

Name**	Age	# of Children (Ages)	Native Country
Dora	31	1 (5*)	Colombia
Sabia	35	3 (5*, 12, 15)	Mexico
Almita	31	2 (3*, 5)	Mexico
Luz	34	3 (2, 4*,9)	Guatemala

*Child enrolled in Head Start; ** All names throughout the article are pseudonyms to protect the participants' anonymity.

Dora

Gregarious and friendly, Dora immigrated to the U.S. from Colombia with her husband (Felix) and young child a few years after completing her undergraduate studies. The young family arrived in America through a prestigious educational opportunity—a Fulbright scholarship in Mechanical Engineering—attained by her husband. Since arriving to Florida, Dora acknowledges a shift in social class, reflected in her work clothing (i.e., business button downs to janitorial attire), work hours (i.e., day and night shifts), and job count (i.e., three). Despite being the primary breadwinner for her family, Dora finds time to study English and support her husband and child in myriad ways, ranging from motivation to transportation. Dora perseveres and remains focused on a future in which her husband earns his doctoral degree and her son reaps the benefits of his educational experiences in America.

Sabia

Sabia and her husband immigrated to the U.S. at the ages of 17 and 18, respectively, in search of more fruit for their arduous working-class labor. Through connections and hustle, they found work in the fields of Georgia where they labored long hours and experienced modest economic improvement that enabled them to build a house back in Mexico. While in the U.S., they had three children—now aged 5, 12, and 15. Ever resilient, Sabia and her family endured difficult migrations back and forth between the two countries featuring travel by foot, bus, and plane. Ultimately, they settled in Florida to be close to extended family and receive better pay. Sabia now works as a cook for her husband and his coworkers at a construction company, all the while encouraging her children to work hard in school to secure a better future.

Almita

Shortly after completing her middle school-level education, Almita immigrated alone to the U.S. at the age of 17, seeking to improve economic opportunities beyond Mexico's working class. Within a few years, she met her husband with whom she had two children, now aged 3 and 5. While working with her husband for a construction company, Almita manages to consistently find ways to support the education of her children at home. Kind and optimistic, Almita described using her community relationships to ensure her children receive a good education to unlock future possibilities.

Luz

A nurse in her home country of Guatemala, Luz immigrated to the U.S. with her husband and young child in response to frustrations with economic opportunity and concerns with civil unrest. After a brief stint in the northeastern U.S., Luz moved to Florida for better weather and proximity to extended

family. Currently, she and her husband have three children—aged 2, 4, and 9. Luz maintains a future-orientation in which she completes her nursing studies (again) in the U.S. and sees her children become professionals.

Data Collection

This study involved three semi-structured interviews each with four participants. The first interviews were conducted in person, before school buildings were closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The remaining interviews were conducted over the phone. Interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes in length. All participants were given the option of being interviewed in English or Spanish, and all of them chose Spanish. The participants were interviewed by the same bilingual member (second author) of the research team who recorded interviews with the permission of the participants.

The first interview consisted of collecting background information and asking about education experiences in their home country. During this interview, participants were asked to describe their family structure, their work experiences, their educational values, and what school was like for them and their children before Head Start. The second interview investigated participants' education experiences within Head Start, as well as their family engagement practices. We asked questions relating to our participant's daily school routines, school- and home-based involvement, relationships with teachers, and expectations for education in the U.S. The third interview served as a member check to share general findings with participants and ask follow-up questions.

We found that there were some noteworthy differences in how participants related to and engaged with the interviewer. Despite sharing a Latina/o identity, the interviewer differed from the participants in meaningful ways: he was male, American-born and raised, bilingual (though most dominant in English given his place of upbringing), fair-skinned, and well-educated. We detail these characteristics to suggest that these social factors likely shaped rapport-building and interview conduct. For instance, Dora was quick to warm up to the interviewer and had interviews ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. This ease may be attributed to the fact that Dora and her husband had a connection to the local university, demystifying research and the role of the interviewer. However, other participants were more hesitant. Almita was the most reserved and brief, giving interviews ranging from 15 to 40 minutes. Sabia and Luz were more similar, speaking for 20 minutes to an hour. Notably, Luz expressed concern and inquired further about the interviewer's role and the purpose of the research before engaging in the interview. Across all participants, however, the length of interviews and rapport increased and improved, respectively, with each interview.

Data Analysis

Members of the research team transcribed and translated the interviews into English with a team of undergraduate researchers. Once transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy and cleaned, members of the research team individually engaged in an iterative coding process by reading through all the interviews multiple times and adding memos and open codes for each participant. This process consisted of inductive coding using Saldaña's categories of in vivo, emotion, and values coding (Miles et al., 2020). After multiple reads, we individually compiled our codes into broader, axial codes and identified connections at this level of analysis across participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We then reviewed our data through the lens of our theoretical frameworks, using deductive coding to thematically organize the data within Yosso's (2005) model of CCW. We arrived at the final themes collectively through full-team discussion informed by both inductive and deductive coding approaches.

Credibility of Findings

Trustworthiness was a priority for our team and was enhanced through member checking, multiple coders, and prolonged engagement (Cope, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). With all participants, our final interview served as a member check throughout which we communicated preliminary themes, and participants expanded upon previous answers and provided feedback. This process was important for improving trustworthiness, as all participants added more information to help clarify, shape, and deepen our findings. Multiple coders enabled our team to have extensive discussions about codes and themes to ensure they accurately and meaningfully reflected the raw data. Finally, we valued the practice of prolonged engagement with our participants with an understanding that trust and rapport take time to build. As relationships with participants improved, the stories they shared expanded in breadth and depth, resulting in more authentic, richly detailed findings.

Findings

Our coding process led us to four broad thematic categories that align with Yosso's (2005) framework of CCW. Three of the CCW themes represent the most salient forms of capital across all participants—navigational, social, and aspirational capital. Families described their navigational capital when recounting their experiences seeking work and educational opportunities for their children and themselves. Families displayed social capital when detailing immigration experiences and Head Start enrollment, both of which involved

leveraging friendships and family to learn about and gain access to opportunities. Families exhibited aspirational capital when discussing the shared belief that education unlocks doors to professional and economic success for their children. Finally, the fourth theme describes the other forms of capital (linguistic and resistant) that, when considering the data holistically, were present across participants as strengths, but not recognized as such by the school or named by the participants themselves.

Getting Here and Thriving Here: Navigational Capital

Participants revealed navigational capital when they recounted their immigration experiences as well as their experiences building a new life in the U.S. With respect to the former, Sabia demonstrated savviness and a keen understanding of the social institutions at play when immigrating. She described how difficult it is to qualify for a work visa as a Mexican immigrant and that her family needed to work around these barriers. She shared:

> Mexico is a country where you can't easily get a work visa. You know, they don't give it to you. You have to qualify, and it depends on things. They aren't going to give you a visa to come to work. We had to come over by foot. We walked through the desert, all of that from Mexico City. To reach the border, we had to arrive by bus or plane, and when you get to the border is when you start the walk. We walked for three nights, three days.

After a time in the United States, Sabia and her husband returned to Mexico, now with two children. Unfortunately, building a life in Mexico proved to be very difficult financially, and they decided to return to the U.S. With two children, logistical barriers abound—what was Sabia to do with her children? Again, Sabia revealed the activation of navigational when describing the immigration experiences of her children. Sabia knew what to do and what supports she needed to make it happen. To maneuver the complex legal system, she tapped into her navigational (as well as social) capital, describing it this way:

> My husband had a friend that had papers [legal documents], so when we arrived here again, his friend brought the kids over by plane because they had all been born here…when we came over alone, they only stayed in Mexico like 8–10 days alone—with their grandparents.

Throughout her journey, Sabia leveraged her understanding of the institutions governing immigration to arrive to the U.S., employing navigational and social capital simultaneously.

Dora's immigration story also revealed navigational capital, albeit under quite different circumstances. Dora and her family were able to come to the

U.S. through her husband's Fulbright Scholarship funded by their home country of Colombia. Although the opportunity typically requires scholars to return to Colombia after their studies, Dora described the possibility of staying due to Felix's field of study. She explained:

> Felix is an aeronautical engineer at the moment, so, the idea would be that he gets the migratory status and that he states that there is nothing [back home]—and truly there isn't. There is no type of work that he can do back home.

She went on to state that they truly wanted to stay in the U.S. because their child's education will be cheaper and better quality. Specifically, she said "but, if we can be here where there is public education, where we don't pay anything, where it's literally free…the United States is really second to none. I hope that we don't have to leave." In sum, navigational capital is seen through their keen understanding of their funding opportunity and how they might leverage it to continue building their life in the U.S.

Once in the U.S., participants revealed navigational capital by describing behavioral expectations that suggest a desire to "blend in." Three participants explicitly emphasized the importance of their children "following rules" and "behaving well." While explaining her reasons for Head Start enrollment, Sabia described how she wanted her daughter to be ready for kindergarten and to learn to "follow orders." She highlighted one experience regarding the latter:

> One day we went to visit some people…and she asked permission to play with the toys. Then the lady said, "you can play" and started taking out the toys, and when we were leaving, she picked up all the toys and set them up where they were. The lady said, "Wow, I'm impressed because not even my grandchildren pick up their toys," and she left everything tidy. And I like that she has learned that here with the teachers.

Another participant, Luz, added that the expectation to behave well—which she described as "discipline"— is as important among their children as it is amongst themselves as parents. Luz reflected,

> I think that it is also part of the education, the student's, as well as the teacher, and the parents, too. Like, when one needs to talk, be it with the teacher or the parents, for example, it is always required to speak with respect— not raise your voice, both of you, right? Have that discipline.

Though participants did suggest an intrinsic appreciation for manners and good behavior, the behavioral expectation to "follow rules" and "be respectful" expressed among families may be seen as navigational capital, as it suggests an adaptive impulse to "fit in" within their new environment.

Similarly, participants revealed navigational capital in the U.S. through their interest in learning English as well as their use of English in meetings. All participants described the importance of learning English to be successful in the U.S. In fact, two participants directly expressed that the reason they chose Head Start was to provide their child with exposure to the English language at an early age. Dora mentioned the importance of her son learning English at great length, as she knew how critical English was to her husband and his professional advancement. Dora also implied the importance of her son speaking English when describing her own experience. Dora accepted a janitorial position in the U.S. due to her limited English language knowledge. Another participant, Sabia, shared a similar reason for wanting her youngest child to learn English in Head Start. She explained,

> It was important to me because I did not want her to suffer like her brothers. I didn't want it to go the same way as with my other kids, they had to fight. I couldn't really help them at that time, they had to be in ESOL. They just didn't know anything. They had to be very dependent on the ESOL program for help.

In short, Sabia aimed to provide her youngest with early English language exposure to ensure that her educational experience was not as difficult as that of her older siblings. Both parents revealed navigational capital by underscoring the importance of learning English to experience a better life in the U.S.

Aside from encouraging English learning, participants activated navigational capital by creatively finding ways to communicate successfully with Head Start staff when translation was not provided. Participants relied on their own emergent English language knowledge or that of their spouse to communicate effectively with Head Start staff.

It Helps to Know People: Social Capital

Social capital played an important role for participants when immigrating to the U.S., migrating within the U.S. for new economic opportunity, and enrolling their child in Head Start. As mentioned prior, participant immigration stories often featured family members or friends who were instrumental to their move. Once stateside, Sabia and her husband called upon friends to assist her children in flying over to the U.S. safely. Similarly, Luz immigrated from Guatemala to the northeastern U.S. because she had family there. When moving within the U.S., both Sabia and Luz continued to leverage social capital. Sabia in particular capitalized on a familial connection to make her move from Georgia to Florida. Her family member wanted to ensure that Sabia and her family could have better employment. She shared:

> He invited us—he came to get us so we could move down with him. There was better opportunity for us to work here…there was better work here that wasn't in the fields, and you could start making a living faster here than there.

All participants revealed that social capital was the primary means through which they learned about Head Start. When asked about how she heard about Head Start, Almita responded: "Through a friend, other moms. They told me about it and told me to take him there." Luz expressed a similar experience: "Family and friends. So pretty much everyone has told me, 'Yeah, there it's the best! I like how they do education.'" In addition to hearing about it through the parents of children enrolled in it, Sabia learned about Head Start through her daughter's early interventionist. The interventionist provided in-home care and offered information about when and how to apply for Head Start. Finally, Dora heard about the program through Mexican graduate students that also lived in their international graduate student complex. Whether for moving or learning about Head Start, participants revealed the activation of social capital.

Education as Opportunity: Aspirational Capital

All participants described aspirational capital when discussing the education of their children and the future possibilities it may unlock. When asked about what factored into her decision to move to the U.S. from Guatemala, Luz described her hopes and dreams for her children, made possible through education:

> And here, well, there are more opportunities for them to be successful. Why? Because if they work, they can go to a university, and there are just more opportunities to succeed. So, basically, we are here for them, so that they study, so that they prepare themselves, so that they become someone in the world. First things first, my dream is that they become professionals, all three of them.

Importantly, Luz views education as the primary means through which her children can become professionals in the U.S., and her unwavering dedication to that dream reveals aspirational capital. Sabia expressed a similar sentiment in her final interview when responding to a question regarding the importance of "individual effort" in being successful in school. In her response, she makes an impassioned plea to her eldest daughter as well as her other children:

> I have told her, "We are in a country where you, your priority should be the opportunity you have to study. You should really go for it and study the most you can, so that one day you can have a career, so that you can have a good job, and not suffer like us at the start.…You all are in

> a country where you all have an opportunity to study the most you can and really go for it. Your future here is in your hands if you want to have a better life, if you want to be educated, if you want to beat the odds.

Though Sabia sees the endless opportunities at the fingertips of her children, she worries that they might not seize this critical opportunity. In the end, her message remains clear—she wants them to have a career.

In many cases, participants revealed aspirational capital through hopes and dreams rooted in economic opportunity. For instance, Almita stated, "Well, one of the reasons why I moved here was because—because in Mexico we don't have all of the same economic opportunities. So, I came here to find a future, to work more than anything." Despite this, however, Almita made a personal discovery over time: "But, well, being here, well, you end up dedicating yourself to working, raising your kids, and the future becomes, well, it becomes about your kids…and well, on their education and being able to give them a future." In part, the desire for personal economic opportunity began to give way to a different obligation: ensuring your child a better future, largely through education. Dora echoed a similar thought when speaking about her son:

> So, the idea is to look for a job here so that we can stay and so that [our son] can…we think about it for our child's future. So that he, too—that he doesn't have the same opportunity as his mom and dad, but rather that he learn in a bilingual school, that he learn English already.

In this explanation, Dora talks about her and her husband's economic opportunities mainly as a means to secure a good education for her child. Through his education, she hopes that he can acquire English seamlessly and, as such, thrive in the U.S. with more ease.

Importantly, the participants viewed education as important not only for their children, but to their own path to a better future. Dora took English classes to obtain a new job, Luz took classes at a local community college to practice nursing in the U.S., and Almita expressed an interest in returning to school to study psychology. In their own ways, participants uniformly believed in a better life for their children and themselves through education, a belief that underscores their aspirational capital.

Capital Unconsidered or Unspoken

This theme highlights the perspectives we hold as researchers and our understanding of various forms of capital revealed through conversations with participants. That is, for all four participants, there were sources of capital that we found as very present but that were left unconsidered—not only by the Head Start program, but also unspoken by the participants themselves. We

saw this as a failure on the part of their school and community to help these families position themselves to recognize their capital and explicitly assert these assets. Furthermore, we developed this theme through reflexivity, engaging in a continual process of repeated review through dialogue and consultation with members of our research team (Berger, 2013).

Linguistic Capital

Linguistic capital was revealed to us in numerous ways, but it is important to note that our participants did not speak to the strengths that come with their multilingualism. Luz and Sabia explicitly described how both of their children's native language is Spanish and how Spanish is their home language, but neither participant spoke of this as a benefit to their child. When describing the experience of one of her other children being able to learn English in school, Luz stated, "So yeah, honestly, I liked it a lot because he—his native language is Spanish, so he obviously has difficulty because the language here is English. And if they try to help him, there are programs and all that."

Instead, there was an emphasis among participants to elevate the importance placed on learning English. This was strongly expressed the most by Dora across all interviews. Regarding her expectations for her son's experience with Head Start, Dora said, "For me, what I want is that he's listening to English because his Spanish is perfect." Here, Dora shows the desire she has for her child to develop multilingual communication experiences that can build linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005), but she consistently emphasizes across interviews how important it is for her child to learn English while simultaneously underemphasizing the value of her child being able to speak Spanish as well. When describing the desire she has for her son to receive a bilingual education, her emphasis was on what this would do for his English abilities and not on what this would do to further cultivate his Spanish abilities. Regarding her hopes for school, she stated, "So that he too—that he doesn't have the same opportunity as his mom and dad, but rather that he learn in a bilingual school, that he learn English already." This hope is also met with pride in her son's growing ability to interact with other children in social settings in English and to practice English with his father. Additionally, this importance of learning English was placed not only on her son, but also upon herself, as she described "Yes, because here if you don't speak English, we have to clean for work." Also related to her aspirational capital, Dora's eagerness to learn English is evidenced by the initiative she has taken to enroll in English classes.

Importantly, none of the participants described any ways in which the school had leveraged their ability to speak multiple languages or helped to cultivate a sense of pride in their ability to speak Spanish as well. Parents described the utility of speaking Spanish for working, interacting with the bilingual liaison,

and communicating generally. Nonetheless, whether through parent–teacher communication or through their child's experiences with others, we saw their Spanish-speaking ability described as more of a burden than a strength here in the U.S. Thus, linguistic capital was present but not actively being cultivated in their school context.

Resistant Capital

Some participants also revealed aspects of resistant capital in their school and community contexts. We viewed this capital as closely related to their navigational experiences. For instance, Almita described her job of cleaning houses as "more or less good," but that they are prone to rising tensions within that job among coworkers due to job insecurity. She stated, "Well, at work everything has been good, but sometimes when the people there see someone new, they think that you are going to take their job, and well, they start to become bad people."

Luz also described several instances that alluded to her resistant capital, especially in advocating for her children, although she did not explicitly express resistance. She discussed an instance in which one of her daughter's classmates told her a bad word and how Luz ultimately went to the teacher about this. As a result of their conversation, the teacher spoke with the other child's parents about the situation, and Luz was grateful that her personally held value of respect was emphasized by the teacher in this instance. She further said, "Yes, yes, because it is one of the most important values—what respect is, that racism doesn't exist, more than anything." Here, Luz connects her value of respect as a force against potential racism that may be encountered, highlighting her resistant capital. Luz also implies resistant capital when describing what she shares with her children regarding how they position themselves in their school context when she states, "What I also always think and say to my children is they always need to trust a person, but also there should be some distance. You know, you have to look after yourself." We believe this to be a position taken not only related to her values of safety and security, but also as a stance taken in resistance to forces which may have impacted her sense of trust in the systems in which she lives and navigates.

Discussion

For families who had recently immigrated to the U.S. and whose primary language is Spanish, Yosso's (2005) framework proved highly valuable for understanding their values and priorities and how they promoted their children's early learning during a pandemic. All four participants described aspects of aspirational capital as the motivating factor for relocating. All four described

dreams for their families' and their children's economic success, and all four expressed that their children were getting a better education in the U.S. than they could have in their home country. They also described education as the key to success. These aspirations pushed the families not only to immigrate, but also to take extraordinary measures after arriving in the U.S. to obtain jobs and find educational opportunities for their children. Consistent with other work, Latina/o immigrant parents tend to have high education aspirations for their children due to their own lived experiences and educational and occupational struggles (Langenkamp, 2019). That the mothers in our study held strong aspirations for their children's education is not surprising given survey findings of extremely high educational aspirations among Latina/o families (Krogstad, 2016) as well as qualitative evidence supporting the Latina/o value of *educación*—a set of beliefs, attitudes, and behavior cultivated at home that, when recognized at school, orient a child towards education and success (Reese et al., 1995).

Navigational and social capital were intertwined in the mothers' descriptions of how they were attempting to reach their goals and in how they viewed their priorities for their children. Glimpses into the families' immigration stories revealed tremendously complex processes and systems. Similarly, finding work, housing, and childcare required overcoming significant language barriers. Although we very intentionally did not ask about our participants' legal status, they described prejudice related to their status as immigrants. Despite these barriers, all four families were experiencing some level of success in terms of reaching their long-term goals.

The mothers attributed a large part of their success to information from family, friends, and trusted others. Thus, social capital, including the ability to get along with others, was key to all aspects of survival. Such application of social capital to navigating challenges may be related to the "emotional intelligence capital" described by Guzmán and colleagues (2018). Their study, like ours, sought to amplify the voices of immigrant families, and, consistent with our findings, they report that immigrant families were very adept at using social and familial capital to identify and access resources. Perhaps because of the need to rely on others, together with cultural and familial capital associated with a collectivist perspective and helping behaviors (Trumbull et al., 2020), all four mothers prioritized their children's ability to get along with teachers and other children and expressed the most pride in their children's participation and good behavior at school along with their progress in learning English. Learning English and conforming to classroom behavioral expectations might also be conceptualized as navigational capital in that it is a key to success. That is, learning English and not drawing attention to oneself facilitates "blending in."

Families' perspectives on linguistic capital, however, raised questions in that their experiences suggested that the system failed to recognize and support the inherent value of bilingualism, a reality not uncommon in U.S. schools (Good et al., 2010; Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2016). Perhaps because the mothers in our study were so motivated to improve their proficiency in English, they all described speaking Spanish as a barrier only, both for themselves and their children. This suggests that, although the Head Start program provided translations and occasionally translators, the school and community failed to create a context in which linguistic diversity could be maximized as an asset. Our findings support the need for schools to honor the native languages and cultures of immigrant families and to hire bilingual staff in order to facilitate connections between these families and monolingual school staff (Ansari et al., 2020). Further, schools should assume the responsibility of building partnerships with immigrant families that "uncover their family stories and immigration histories as assets, strengths, and knowledge" so as to promote the "internalization of their individual and collective realities as community cultural wealth" (Jimenez, 2020, p. 800).

Our findings also revealed that for many parents, there are particular strengths supported by the literature that were not openly described as strengths by the families in our study. Although one's native language serves as a key factor in staying connected to one's home country (Mucherah, 2008), acculturation levels and dynamics may play a large role in the use of a family's native language when moving to a new country. In one study with English Learner adolescents, English was viewed as a means of "survival" in American society (Cohen & Wickens, 2015). As such, this mirrors the notion of navigational capital as a means of maneuvering through social institutions, suggesting that even when linguistic capital is present, "surviving" by way of navigating American systems may be more important for immigrant families.

Consistent with much of the literature describing cultural values of Latina/o families, several prominent cultural norms—including *respeto* (i.e., respect towards professionals and among interpersonal relationships), *familismo* (i.e., family-centeredness which can highlight the role of parents as supporters of their children's education), and *personalismo* (i.e., desire for personal relationships; Calzada, 2010; Ceballo et al., 2014; Grace & Gerdes, 2019)—can be applied to our participants' views of the educational experience. Mothers placed tremendous value on respectful relationships at school and home, as well as on their children learning English. Further, our participants were eloquent in describing their dreams for their children, which, in turn, fueled a strong commitment to their children's educational success. The complication of COVID-19, while disruptive and frustrating, did not seem to impact

their commitment or optimism at the time of our interviews. Other studies among Latina/o families with preschool children demonstrate similar resilience in the face of pandemic-induced adversity (Soltero-González & Gillanders, 2021). Despite disruptions to the educational context, families continued to report gratitude for the services provided by Head Start, particularly with efforts made regarding communication and facilitation of home-based instruction. Nonetheless, parents reported increased difficulties with communication, scheduling, and child restlessness. These concerns are expected given literature on adverse effects of school closure on children, including psychosocial concerns such as distress and annoyance that result from disruption of children's typical lifestyle (e.g., less outdoor activity and change in eating/sleeping habits; Ghosh et al., 2020).

Consistent with a large body of literature (e.g., Ceballo et al., 2014; Grace & Gerdes, 2019; Tang, 2015), our participants described their involvement in their children's education as supporting the teacher, with significant "behind the scenes" activities and relatively little in-school volunteering. Even amid multiple factors such as low income, low educational attainment, and low English fluency, Latina/o caregivers have nonetheless been found to engage their children in various home-based learning activities, allowing for a reconceptualization of what it means to be "involved" as caregivers engage in this "unseen" work (Coba-Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Directions

The COVID-19 pandemic caused school shutdowns in the middle of our data collection. Nonetheless, our findings support that need to recognize the capital of immigrant students and families to better facilitate and cultivate family–school partnerships. Amid the pandemic, some parent–teacher partnerships with Latina/o families were found to grow, along with at-home practices which support children's learning and engagement in school-related activities (Soltero-González & Gillanders, 2021). As previously suggested, families and schools must work together for students to be successful, and our study helped to illuminate not only the capital that teachers can realize, but also the values that underlie these strengths.

As school shutdowns pushed all learning to "Learning at Home," participants found themselves in new and sometimes uncomfortable roles as their children's academic instructors. Despite the challenges and disruptions, the families continued to express gratitude for resources provided by the program and optimism for their children's continued growth. It is important to note, however, that our interviews were completed within the first four months of the COVID-19 crisis and, therefore, may not reflect families' functioning at this

point. More recent studies (e.g., Barnett et al., 2021; Ramos-Pla et al., 2021; Soltero-González & Gillanders, 2021) document not only the implications of lost instructional time and the safety net of schools for our most vulnerable children, but also the tremendous efforts from families as well. Continuing to track the progress of families impacted by the double crisis of COVID-19 and economic downturns is critical, as history suggests that the impact of crises tends to be disproportionate for children of recent immigrants. Future research should also aim to further link the activation of capital to the cultivation of family–school partnerships which help to create "imagined communities" of education through which families and schools share a vision for the education of their children and students (He et al., 2017). Our findings can be used to strengthen school communities by encouraging early childhood education centers and schools to function as a community in and of themselves. Future research projects can focus on activation of capital, both considered and unconsidered, in families to further bridge and strengthen not only the curriculum of the school, but also the curriculum of the home.

Conclusion

Schools play a primary role in helping students succeed by working to understand their needs and the needs of their families. To better facilitate this understanding, school professionals must learn about who is in the school community, the histories they embody, and the strengths they bring with them into the school setting. Our study highlights the importance of understanding families' CCW, particularly those with immigrant backgrounds and diverse cultural experiences.

Our study reveals an array of strengths immigrant families possess, including their ability to maneuver social institutions (navigational capital), engage in various networks of people (social capital), and maintain hopes for the future (aspirational capital). Even when families did not recognize this in themselves, we highlighted their strengths of acquiring skills through engaging in multilingual experiences (linguistic capital) and challenging inequality (resistant capital). By recognizing all the strengths of families within our school communities, we begin to build the relational foundations required for stronger family–school partnerships.

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Teaching Without a License: Uncertified Universal PreK Teachers' Policy Perspectives

Maria Mavrides Calderon

Abstract

Uncertified teachers are the foundation of early childhood systems across the nation. As states and districts move into professionalizing early childhood education, experienced but uncertified teachers are facing the need to enroll in teacher preparation programs to receive certification and retain their jobs. This article investigates the effects of teaching mandates and compensation policies in New York City (NYC) in the light of its universal prekindergarten (UPK) expansion. Over 50% of nonpublic school UPK teachers in NYC are uncertified teachers. While certification is a requirement to teach in NYC's UPK, due to the lack of certified teachers willing to teach in nonpublic settings, uncertified teachers often act as lead teachers while they complete their certification requirements. This article focused on understanding how uncertified teachers perceive their role in the larger school community, and how certification, compensation, and work condition policies support (or hinder) their licensing and course-of-study completion. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Schneider and Ingram's (1997) social construction and policy design theory, a qualitative case study approach was the primary form of analysis. Document discourse analysis, focus groups, and interviews (n = 20) were utilized. This study found that early childhood uncertified teachers are hungry for structural changes that acknowledge their role in the community by supporting the completion of their degrees. Findings support research literature signaling equity challenges of scaling up UPK implementations. Implications are discussed and policy recommendations are provided.

Key Words: UPK, universal prekindergarten, early childhood education compensation, early childhood policy, unlicensed teachers, uncertified teachers, early childhood professionalization, salary parity, certification

Background and Purpose

In 2014, New York City (NYC) deployed universal prekindergarten (UPK) or *PreK for All*, opening access to early education for all four-year-olds. To achieve the targeted scale in a short time, Mayor de Blasio's administration utilized a mixed delivery system, coordinating the use of private, public, and community-based/nonprofit early childhood centers already providing services. Sixty percent of NYC UPK's deployment has been implemented through what the NYC Department of Education (DOE) refers to as New York City Early Education Centers, "NYCEECs," including community-based organizations that, in some cases, comprise Head Start centers and independent childcare centers that host both UPK classrooms and private tuition classrooms. For over six years of data collection (2014–21), the UPK and 3K for All (for 3-year-olds) funding system offered different salaries and work conditions among nonpublic schoolteachers and their unionized public-school counterparts, with those working in nonpublic school settings earning up to $30,000 less than their similarly qualified public-school counterparts. This resulted in nonpublic school centers' inability to hire and retain certified teachers.

Consequently, over 50% of nonpublic school NYC UPK classrooms are staffed by uncertified teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs working to achieve certification (Hurley, 2019). These teachers, also called "study plan teachers," are mandated to complete their degrees and obtain certification in a specified time frame (3 to 7 years) in order to retain their jobs as lead teachers. Lead teachers, also known as head or group teachers, are responsible for planning, instructing, and assessing children in their classrooms. Initial certification is obtained by earning a Master's or Bachelor's degree in early childhood education from an accredited institution and completing certification exams and requirements. Programs providing tuition reimbursement and career ladder initiatives sponsored by advocacy organizations and unions exist to support this emergent workforce financially. However, these opportunities are limited, require a significant minimum course workload per semester, and often expect teachers to commit to their current workplace for several years after obtaining certification.

Substantial compensation improvements to attempt parity among all NYC UPK teachers have only included certified teachers (Alexander, 2019; City of New York, 2019; Elsen-Rooney, 2019; NYC Department of Education,

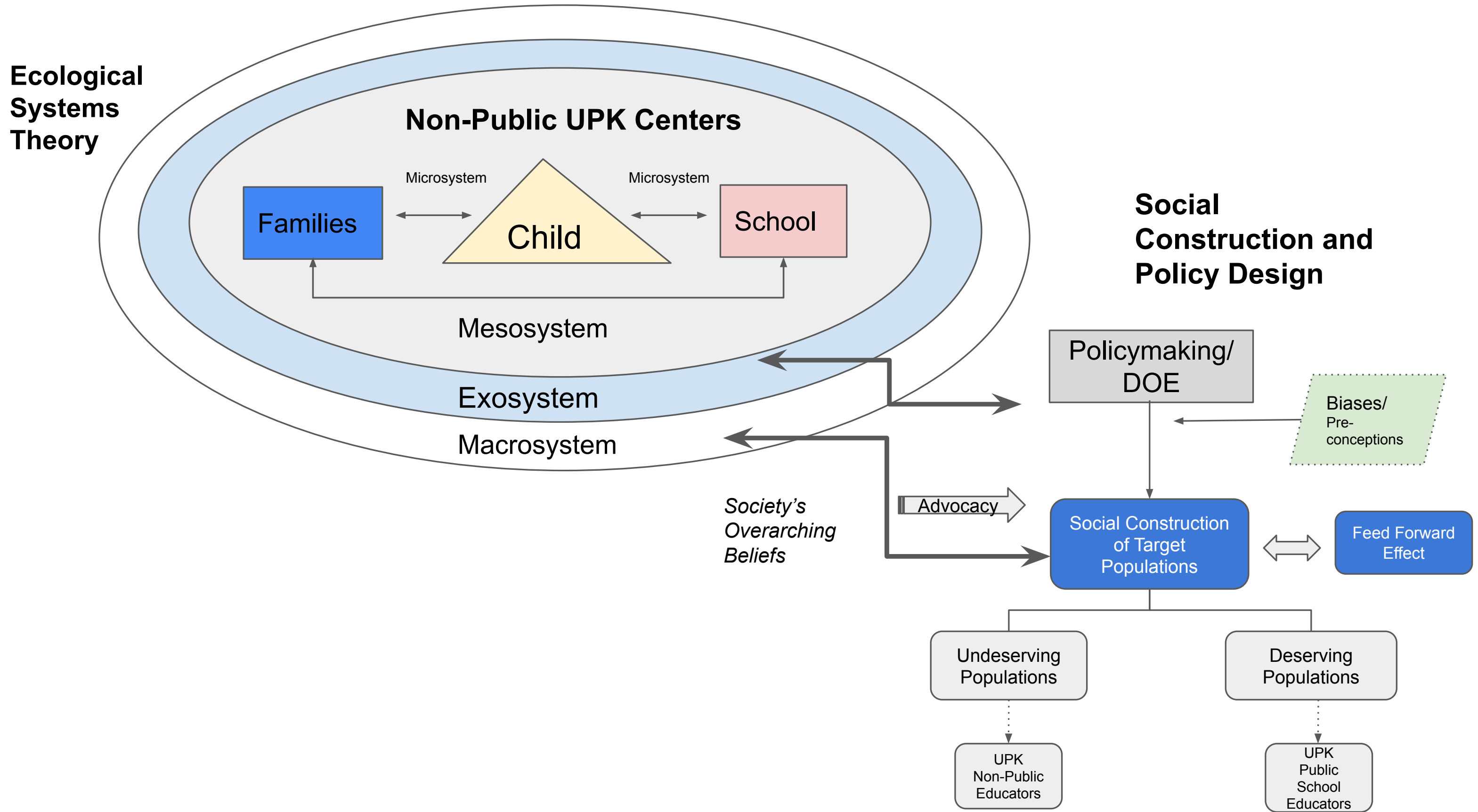
2019; Veiga, 2019), excluding uncertified teachers (Hurley, 2019). There are no guidelines for uncertified teachers' compensation, making them vulnerable to exploitative conditions. This has created a massive differential between uncertified and certified teachers' pay even when doing the same job, with some working up to 10 hours a day at minimum wage. Considering that a school community operates "on the basis of shared values, trust, expectations, and obligations rather than tasks, rules, and hierarchies" (Redding, 2001, p. 1), this disparity threatens to erode the sense of community among teachers and administrators working at these centers.

Given these significant differentials in compensation and work conditions, this article captured the perspectives and experiences of uncertified teachers in NYC's early childhood ecological system. In particular, this study focused on (1) how these teachers perceive how certification, compensation, and work condition policies support or disincentivize the successful completion of their course-of-study certification, and (2) how they perceive their role in the early childhood education community. This article unearths the truths hidden in many early childhood systems by bringing the voices of uncertified teachers to the forefront of the policymaking table. The goal of this study is to motivate those in charge of policymaking to include uncertified teachers in their future decisions when considering implementing policy on a larger scale.

Theoretical Framing

Through Critical Policy Analysis, this study utilized Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Schneider and Ingram's (1997) social construction and policy design theory to understand how policies privilege some groups over others. This multitheoretical approach recognizes the complexities of how policy is designed (Young & Diem, 2017) and its impact on different aspects of uncertified teachers' experiences. (Please see Figure 1 for a graphic depiction of the connections between both frameworks.) This conceptual framework acknowledged the important relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) within the teacher's microsystem and the interactions among the teacher's macrosystems (mesosystem), while also using the social construction and policy design propositions to inform the ecological system of early education in NYC. In this conceptual model, which served as the basis for the study's analysis, policymaking is based on the social construction of target populations as "deserving" or "undeserving" (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Schneider and Ingram proposed that the way groups are treated by the government during implementation differs significantly depending upon that group's power and social construction. The conceptualization of uncertified teachers as "undeserving" may have

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



implications for what Schneider and Ingram labeled as the "feed-forward effect," meaning policies that reinforce negative or positive social constructions.

The salary disparities among different actors in the NYC UPK space are symptomatic of a larger issue: policymakers' perceptions of uncertified teachers as "undeserving" of appropriate compensation. This is also evident by the fact that, legally, uncertified teachers have no recourse to demand equal compensation for equal work. In turn, these policies have resulted in teacher turnover, teacher burnout, lack of community building, and safety violations, further reinforcing the negative social construction of these teachers as "less than" their licensed counterparts.

Furthermore, the interviews and focus groups enabled the author to investigate the effects of the policy from the perspectives of the teachers and explored whether the participants perceived that the policy created a conception of them as "undeserving." Changes in how certain populations are constructed could have ripple effects, resulting in policy changes. This particular aspect of the conceptual model helped us understand how the advocacy efforts by unions and other stakeholders have contributed to short-term or long-lasting changes in policy for certified teachers and, in turn, whether advocacy efforts must be taken to change how policymakers conceptualize uncertified teachers.

Methods

This study is part of a larger study analyzing the effects of policies on all stakeholders in the NYC early childhood ecological system, including policymakers, directors, teachers, and parents. As the researcher examined the participant's lived experience and perspective, a qualitative approach was the primary form of analysis. To better understand the relationship between policy design, implementation, and the interrelated nature of stakeholders' lived experience in the UPK expansion, this study used an exploratory case study methodology (Yin, 2014). The case study methodology was chosen because it enables researchers to create "an extensive and in-depth description of some complex social phenomenon" (Yin, 2014, p. 5).

In addition, Critical Policy Analysis was used. Critical Policy Analysis is particularly well-suited for a case study methodology as it recognizes the complexities of how policy is designed (Weaver-Hightower, 2008; Young & Diem, 2017). It enables those affected by programs and procedures to have a voice, as defined by Rizvi and Lingard (2010). One of the exciting characteristics of the Critical Policy Analysis approach is that the methodology and theoretical perspectives are intertwined and work together (Diem et al., 2019). In this study's case, Critical Policy Analysis was utilized in conjunction with both the

social construction and policy design theory (Schneider & Ingram, 1997) and the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This multitheoretical approach "results in policy analysis that has more depth and breadth" (Diem et al., 2019, p. 4).

Data Collection and Analysis

Document discourse analysis, focus groups (*n* = 11), and interviews (*n* = 9) were selected as data collection tools. Documents (*n* = 36) were collected to reflect policymakers', advocates', and the public's perspectives on policy and its effect on uncertified teachers. Thirty-six documents and six years of Twitter (currently known as X) posts were collected. Documents included NYC Council hearings from 2014 to 2021, advocacy documents, and media releases dealing with compensation issues in early childhood. Social media posts (2014–21) were collected from accounts belonging to advocates, teachers, parents, the City of NYC, the Office of the Mayor, the NYC Department of Education, and its Chancellor. The collection timeframe spans from the implementation of the UPK expansion in 2014 to the end of the data collection period in 2021.

Twenty uncertified teachers were recruited across NYC to provide an ecological perspective on the effect of professionalization, work, and compensation policies on their personal and professional lives. Recruitment occurred through (a) emails to early childhood center directors (*n* = 8), and (b) a large urban public university's student research participation system (*n* = 12). Through this latter system, students in two foundational courses have the option to participate in a research study for credit. This study was one of several options offered to students. All participants have been approved by NYC's Department of Health as fit to lead a classroom while they complete their coursework towards certification. In addition, to be eligible, all uncertified teachers were required to be at least 18 years old and had to have worked at a nonpublic school center for at least the prior two school years. Uncertified teachers selected reflected New York City's demographic and setting diversity. Eighty percent of all participating teachers self-reported as belonging to a minoritized group. (Please see Table 1 for participants' demographic information.)

Participants who met the inclusion criteria had the option to select either a focus group (*n* = 11) from a set of proposed dates or to request an individual interview (*n* = 9). Focus groups were grouped by date, resulting in two groups of four participants and one of three participants. Interviews and focus group interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol. (Please see Appendix for the interview script; the script was not informed by the document analysis as it was created prior to the start of any analysis.) Interviews and focus

groups were conducted and recorded via Zoom by the principal investigator. Field notes were created after each interview to contextualize the information but were not used for data analysis. The average length of focus groups was 72 minutes, while the average length of individual interviews was 63 minutes. All focus groups and interviews were transcribed manually and verified by two other researchers.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Data (all names are pseudonyms)

Partici-pant	Ethnicity	Works at	Borough	Years of Experi-ence*	Years at Current Center	Modality
Ana	Black	Head Start	Manhattan	5	4	Interview**
Bethany	Latine	Independent Center	Brooklyn	12	10	Interview
Cece	White	Independent Center	Brooklyn	5	4	Focus group
Doris	Latine	CBO	Manhattan	15	15	Focus group
Ernie	Black	Head Start	Manhattan	25	15	Focus group
Frida	Latine	Head Start	Brooklyn	14	14	Interview
Gina	Black	CBO	Bronx	15	15	Focus group
Hillary	Latine	CBO	Queens	20	20	Interview
Iris	Black	Head Start	Brooklyn	5	2	Interview
Julia	Latine	CBO	Bronx	2	1	Focus group
Karyn	White	Independent Center	Queens	13	6	Interview
Kim	Latine	CBO	Queens	10	3	Focus group
Laura	White	Independent Center	Brooklyn	2	2	Focus group
Martin	Latine	CBO	Bronx	12	3	Focus group
Olga	Black	Head Start	Brooklyn	10	8	Interview
Rita	Latine	Independent Center	Bronx	3	2	Focus group
Sam	White	Independent Center	Manhattan	3	2	Focus group
Tina	Black	Independent Center	Manhattan	15	15	Focus group
Verna	Middle Eastern	Independent Center	Brooklyn	2	1	Interview
Zaira	Latine	Independent Center	Queens	3	2	Interview

*in Early Childhood Education; **"Interview" refers to individual interviews.

Data Analysis

Interactive value and in-vivo coding were used employing coding software (Dedoose). Data analysis occurred in three stages: (a) content analysis of documents, (b) thematic analysis of interviews and focus group data, and (c) compilation of findings from these analyses to draw comprehensive conclusions. These different stages of analysis informed one another.

The researcher used themes collected in the document analysis phase to inform the focus group/interview analysis, as Creswell (2008) and Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) suggested. Bowen (2009) stated that document analysis is an "invaluable part of most schemes of triangulation, the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (p. 29), and therefore, it was the starting point of the study.

Document Analysis

Coding of documents occurred by document type (that is, all hearings were coded, then all advocacy documents, and then all social media posts). The purpose of organizing coding by the type of document was to enable comparing and contrasting among the discourse of policymakers (hearings and social media), advocates (advocacy documents/hearings/social media), and the educators on the ground (hearings/social media). Initial codes included the five concerns of Critical Policy Analysis, with concerns regarding:

- the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality;
- the policy, its roots, and its development (e.g., how it emerged, what problems it was intended to solve, how it changed and developed over time, and its role in reinforcing the dominant culture);
- distribution of power, resources, and knowledge, as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers";
- social stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege; and
- the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of nondominant groups (Diem et al., 2019).

In subsequent rounds of coding, in-vivo coding was carried out to allow for the "highlighting [of] the voices of participants and for its reliance on the participants themselves for giving meaning to the data" (Manning, 2017, p. 1).

Twenty-four in-vivo codes were initially found and later collapsed into themes, and patterns were determined following the pattern definitions outlined by Saldaña and Miles (2013): similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, or causation. This resulted in six in-vivo themes and four Critical Policy Analysis themes: *distribution of power and resources, dissonance between rhetoric and reality, resistance and advocacy, how policy emerged, crisis/urgency, equity, effect on children/families, sustainability, City's response,* and *lack of transparency.*

Interview and Focus Group Analysis

Interview and focus group analysis was conducted after the document analysis. Each participants' transcripts were analyzed separately. Transcripts were broken down into individual sentences to prepare for coding. As it occurred in

the document analysis, initial codes included the five concerns of Critical Policy Analysis, as described above. In subsequent rounds of coding, in-vivo coding was carried out using the codes found in the document analysis. These codes were modified for the interview/focus group analysis to reflect the discourse collected from the participants. Codes were collapsed due to co-occurrence/overlapping or conceptualizations that could be covered by one theme. Some modifications were made after the third coding round to reflect the specific nature of the interviews. A total of 18 in-vivo codes were found in the interview analysis. Finally, codes arising from the interviews were collapsed and patterns were found, resulting in two themes from the Critical Policy Analysis codes and seven themes from in-vivo codes. These resulted in nine themes: *distribution of power and resources, resistance and advocacy, crisis/urgency, equity, effects on classrooms, effect on personal life, effect on children/families, sustainability,* and *lack of transparency.*

Once the documents, interviews, and focus groups were analyzed separately, they were compared and contrasted to provide an in-depth look at this study's inquiry. Furthermore, given that the data was subcategorized by setting and geographical location, the analysis also looked at data patterns across these subcategories.

Given the sample of 20 uncertified teachers, data saturation was reached. In addition, the author added credibility by extensive triangulation, relevancy, and trustworthiness measures (Patton, 2015). Trustworthiness was considered using the following strategies, as suggested by Creswell (2008): (a) Triangulation of data using different methods of corroborating evidence and analysis (interview/focus groups versus document content analysis) and by using two different theoretical frameworks that flow into a model/conceptual framework; (b) having a second coder for all documents and interviews; (c) member checks; and (d) enhanced reliability measures, including dual transcription mechanisms, codebooks, and field notes.

Findings and Discussion

While previous studies (Mavrides Calderon, 2022; Reid et al., 2019) found that there are evident disparities in compensation and work conditions between nonpublic school UPK teachers and their public counterparts, the current study found that the impact of these inequities has a broad and significant effect on NYC's early childhood ecological system. Findings point to the negative impacts of uncertified teacher compensation policy on community building, work satisfaction, the ability of teachers to obtain certification while working, and the equity implications of disparities in the larger educational context. (Please note that all names used are pseudonyms.)

Community Building

This study found that there are hierarchies that further divided nonpublic schoolteachers as a group. Schneider and Ingram (1997) explained: “Target populations are often subdivided in policy design so as to direct benefits to the most powerful and positively constructed of the subgroups, further dividing the group” (p. 105). Uncertified teachers’ experiences and responses to policies challenged their roles in the school communities to which they belong. Zaira articulated what many other participants reported: “I’m a teacher, but a second-class teacher. It goes one way. I have to be the lead teacher for the parents, but I’m not ‘the teacher’ when you pay me.” While uncertified teachers’ impact in their communities is undeniable, their roles are ill-defined, highlighting the need to recognize their value beyond certification. The deficit perception of these teachers permeates many aspects of school life; Martin, a teacher with over 15 years of experience and currently in his third year of a master’s program, described how his school often gives certified teachers the first choice of materials and resources, signaling the value they place in one group of teachers over others.

In fact, this study found that uncertified teachers felt they were the most vulnerable, underpaid, and overworked among all educators in the early childhood community. It is evident that while these teachers comprise 50% of all teachers in the system, they are rarely part of this community, often being isolated from professional development opportunities and other privileges and benefits. Participants have reported that certification mandates for centers do not come with the needed compensation and supports to carry out the mandates effectively. This failure to provide supports was perceived by teachers as being indicative of policymakers’ disregard for uncertified teachers, viewing the group as “undeserving” of better work conditions (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Moreover, uncertified teachers’ experiences differed depending on each center’s setting and location—which in a segregated city like NYC, could be considered a proxy for socioeconomic resource level. In particular, uncertified teachers working in centers located in low-income neighborhoods, who experienced longer hours, expressed an inability to complete their coursework on time and described more burnout characteristics than their counterparts working in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. One may propose that policies that affect specific populations disproportionately create the systemic and institutional problems described above. These policies reinforce policymakers’ perceptions of these centers as “low-quality” or “less effective,” giving rise to what Schneider and Ingram (1997) describe as the “feed-forward” effect: “when policies are enacted, they create a *feed-forward* effect, constructing

perceptions that, while they may not have been initially accurate, become a reality due to the enactment of policy" (Mavrides Calderon, 2022, p. 282).

Work Conditions and Experience

Half of the interviewees mentioned work days of between 9 and 11 hours. However, some participants worked 7 to 8 hours a day; these educators tended to work at community-based organizations or Head Starts that are part of large organizations, with a union to limit the hours they were asked to work. Ernie, an uncertified teacher working in Manhattan, provided context about the challenges of working long days:

> I'm drained; I'm physically tired; I just want to go home, lay on the couch, and that is it. We are open from 8:00 to 6:00. It really, you just, you just can't do anything. You just want to sleep, but you have to go to school.

This significant variability of experiences reflects the inconsistent work conditions across early childhood centers in NYC (and across the nation) and points out the value of organized labor in regulating conditions for uncertified teachers. The study demonstrated that educators working at centers with a union had more regulated and manageable work hours. Yet, most unions also viewed uncertified teachers through a deficit lens, negotiating lower wages and radically fewer benefits than their certified counterparts, regardless of their experience at their centers. Martin's experience is representative of other uncertified teachers, as he stated how he viewed this differential:

> I know so much more than the people [the centers] hire, but I'm still not part of anything good. And the union, they are like, "no, you don't get a raise because of certification." They lump us with the assistants and the janitors, but I'm a head [lead] teacher. They are like 'no, you get your 3% increase, and that is just what it is.' We don't count much for the union.

Furthermore, this study found that regardless of union affiliation, there was no widespread plan to support uncertified teachers to complete their degrees on time. While regulators require these teachers to complete their degrees in a specific time frame, there are no guidelines for what supports would be provided to make this a reality. This dissonance could be understood through the analysis of documents (hearings, media, advocacy documents) and social media posts, as they barely mentioned uncertified teachers, their needs, or presented any advocacy for their cause. This finding highlighted the invisibility that uncertified teachers faced, and continue to face, in the policymaking process.

Most participants agreed that their compensation was not enough for the amount of work they performed. Ninety percent of the participants felt uneasy

about the fact that as uncertified teachers, they were asked to perform the duties of a lead teacher without the payment of a lead teacher. Karyn confirmed this perspective: "Like, I know I don't have my degree yet, but I'm doing the same work. For teachers like me in the study plan, we are so dependent on the school's wishes to pay us."

In fact, the veteran teachers interviewed in the group believed they deserved more recognition for the years of experience they brought to the field. Olga, a teacher in Head Start, explained the value of her experience as compared with a new teacher with certification:

> I've seen it, you have teachers who have a degree but have no experience at all. I mean, with a master's degree and no experience when it comes to teaching, you put her in the classroom, and she's like freaking out…and sometimes it's like, you who have the experience may not be as qualified as the teacher. And they give that teacher who has the high-end degree more emphasis to do this, to do that. And they look down on you who have hands-on experience, that know what you can do, know what it is you're supposed to do.

The reality is that without certification, uncertified teachers in NYC earn, on average, 40% to 35% less than their certified counterparts working at non-public centers (Miksic, 2019). Several participants confirmed this experience as they described that they find themselves with no other option than to continue in their job despite the working conditions because of the lack of appropriate licenses. The perceived lack of support experienced by participants was consistent with the feeling of being "trapped"; not being able to leave a job with suboptimal conditions because of the long hours, financial costs, and lack of support to complete their degree. This viewpoint seems to be shared across all participants. Rita, an independent center teacher from the Bronx, further elaborated:

> They know you're qualified; but they just give you something because they might think that you desperately need a job. So they just throw something at you, and you say, 'okay, I'll take this' because I don't have any other option.

Studying While Teaching

Certification is one of the main goals for uncertified teachers—a goal that is often challenged by a multitude of obstacles. Participants reported that while working long hours and the summer, they were also required to be enrolled in a higher education program to earn their certification. Some participants found it extremely difficult to juggle both work and school. Frida, a PreK teacher from Brooklyn, shared:

> I think one of the things that's really hard is managing your time and priorities. Like throughout the day, you'll be working, and then you'll have classes and stuff and assignments. I think that's a struggle because school is usually like half of the day, too. And then schools like [to have] classes at the end of the night. So you really don't have enough time for studying and stuff. I think that's a challenge.

From the interview data, observable metrics that promoted their ability to complete the participants' degree included leadership consistency, informal and formal time release supports, and tuition reimbursements or waivers. These will be discussed in the section below.

Leadership Supports and Challenges

The ability of participants to complete the degree was highly correlated with the supports they received at work, which reinforces the need to understand these teachers' conditions as part of a larger ecological system. The availability of leadership coaching was inconsistent across participants. These supports included mentorship, training, and professional development, informal time release supports (i.e., leaving early for class), as well as leadership willingness to secure formal tuition reimbursement benefits that allowed uncertified teachers to attend school. Participants working at Head Starts reported more support to complete their degrees than those working in independent centers. Many Head Start uncertified teachers mentioned the willingness of their supervisors to allow them to miss days to complete field experiences outside of their own classroom. This is in contrast with all independent center participants, who reported experiencing pushback by their directors when requesting time to complete degree requirements, like alternative field experiences, taking exams, or attending class. Large community-based organizations and Head Starts also provided or guided participants to some form of tuition assistance or reimbursement, albeit minimal. Independent centers did not provide guidance on how to apply for tuition reimbursement programs or lacked this benefit, except for corporate childcare chains, which offered tuition assistance in exchange for a teaching commitment that, for many, was too onerous. Sam explained:

> Yes, they will pay like 10% of my school bill, but I need to sign a contract with them for three years after my degree. That is too much for me with such a low pay and working the hours we work. I'd rather get loans and get out of here as soon as I can.

One could explain this differential as the perceived leadership's assumption that uncertified teachers would stay at Head Start after completing their degrees (Mavrides Calderon, 2022). At the same time, in private independent

centers, there was an implied assumption that uncertified teachers will leave after obtaining certification, and therefore a minimum effort to provide time or financial assistance was reported.

While school leadership is crucial for uncertified teachers' ability to complete their degrees, director turnover threatens those supports. Over 50% of all participants mentioned that during the last year, their center had experienced the departure of at least one director or leader, and all participants reported the departure of at least one leader over the past five years. This is a rampant phenomenon in the early childhood field and in NYC, in particular, where many directors earn less money than the teachers they supervise (Mavrides Calderon, 2022). Lack of leadership availability and consistency affects teachers' ability to receive appropriate coaching and supervision, ultimately affecting teachers' practices and professional growth. Uncertified teachers, this study revealed, are particularly affected by leadership turnover.

Structural Issues

While participants felt a sense of urgency in completing their degrees to avoid a cycle of dissatisfaction, many uncertified teachers do not progress in their degree for many years, and some never complete their degrees. Doris, an uncertified teacher with over 15 years of experience, explained:

> It's taking me a while. There are semesters that I just can't take class, because I'm too tired or I don't have who takes care of my kid. I also can't pass the [certification exam]. Like I study, but I can't pass it. I haven't been in school in so long, I just don't do well in exams and studying. I'm too old. I don't know how I'm going to pass and finish.

The financial, emotional, psychological, and cognitive burden of completing certification exams and requirements is a significant obstacle for students like Doris, who may have been out of school for many years or who struggle to juggle family, work, and school life. This is particularly challenging for participants who, given the cultural norms in their families, are often in charge of extended family, children, and aging parents. Hillary explained:

> It's about priorities. Do I study for the exam, or spend the 70 dollars in registration? Or do I spend time with my kids and take care of my mom's diapers? I can't justify not doing it, you know. Es mi mama. It is my choice, but I have no choice. No one else is there for them, so I'm the one.

For uncertified teachers, there is a sense of urgency to achieve their degrees as a vehicle to improve their lives and seek out more lucrative jobs. All participants considered the study plan program "a ticking time bomb." As Sam

explained: "I have a few more years [to finish]. It's a lot of pressure." All participants indicated that they planned to leave their current positions to seek a job at a public school as soon as they graduated and obtained certification. Policies aiming at supporting retention will be explored in the implications section.

Equity Considerations

All participants were keenly aware of work condition differentials between public school teachers, certified teachers, and themselves. These differences included insufficient prep time, longer hours, summer instruction, and lack of appropriate coaching. Confirming what Schneider and Ingram (1997) proposed as the social construction of policy, most believed that there are historical reasons for this differential rooted in beliefs that privilege some groups over others. For example, Kim argued that the disparities in work conditions stem from preschool teachers' work being labeled as low-skilled rather than as a caregiver–educator job:

> Because they think we are just disposable, like babysitters, but I don't get it because, in meetings, they always say, "You are part of what makes *PreK for All* great," and they ask us to do the same things, but then they pay us so little. Like, I know I don't have my degree yet, but I'm doing the same work. If you think I shouldn't be doing this, then you shouldn't allow me to do this. But then pay me the same. Like for teachers like me, in the study plan, we are so dependent on the school's wishes to pay us. There is no DOE [to] tell us what to get, and there is so much abuse. I have seen it. So I think the DOE allows this to happen because they need people like me. Maybe they don't care because we are not part of the union, you know? In their eyes, we are not the real teachers? But they say we are—it's a lot of contradictions.

Others like Gina, a teacher from the Bronx, believed that there is a gender component involved in this differential: "I also think because women are part of the workforce, they're always being paid less and treated poorly." Furthermore, most participants mentioned that there is a relationship between race and equity related to work and salary conditions in their centers. Cece, a teacher from Brooklyn, confirmed that access to certification is itself an obstacle for teachers who are affected by those systemic inequities:

> I think that this is directly linked to systemic racism for the simple fact that the percentage of people who go to get a higher education to be qualified and certified, to work in PreK and higher up, the percentage that are Black and Hispanic is still so low. So I think that would only make sense as to why White women are more dominant in PreK and

> higher, because they're more likely to get that Master's and that higher education to become certified.

This perspective is confirmed by NAEYC and Ed Trust's (2020) research, which found that minoritized early childhood educators feel bullied and disrespected by policies "implemented in ways that disregarded them and the reality of their work" (p. 5). Fuller and Leibovitz (2021) and Latham et al. (2021) corroborated significant quality and work condition differences that existed between *PreK for All* classrooms based on location and race. The implications of these differences are profoundly troubling and need to be reexamined when implementing compensation policies, particularly in the context of the impact of white supremacy culture, which has permeated education for decades. This is highly problematic, as centers have been relying increasingly on uncertified teachers to keep their doors open; losing them would destabilize an already fragile system.

Implications and Recommendations

Findings support previous research signaling structural and equity challenges of scaling up UPK implementations. This is particularly important when implementations use mixed delivery systems (relying on nonpublic and public settings) with built-in, historically negative/biased conceptions of childcare that consider early childhood workers as low-skilled service workers. Nonetheless, mixed delivery systems have tremendous potential. Research has demonstrated that is the case in Georgia, Washington, DC, and other localities (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021). The key is implementation that emerges from thoughtful, equitable, and inclusive policymaking, and takes into account the whole ecological system of the early childhood school community. Following that guidance, three main recommendations arose from this study:

Leadership Support

The study made evident the interconnectedness of different stakeholders in the early childhood system, particularly the impact of directors in the lives of uncertified teachers. Without a doubt, to support uncertified teachers, we must also support the leadership that mentors and acknowledges their value as members of the school community. Therefore, director retention must be addressed by providing parity in compensation with public school leaders, and at the very least, with the teachers they supervise. It is also recommended that leadership receives training to understand the complexities of the requirements for certification and the academic and logistical demands of being a teacher and a student simultaneously.

Total Compensation Policies

At the core of UPK expansions are school communities that require compensation policies that need to be crafted as total compensation policies, not only salary policies, but also with transparency, clear expectations, and equality in work conditions. Simply put, PreK teachers, regardless of their credentials or where they work, should be fully part of the educational community in each state. This means that while education requirements should be increased, there should also be support in completing their degrees for those on the ground teaching young children.

Career ladder models and scholarships for supporting teachers exploring higher education should also be considered at a national level. These models should acknowledge the variety of life circumstances that uncertified teachers face and, therefore, should consider flexible coursework requirements. Moreover, minoritized women, who comprise 80% of the current childcare workforce in cities like NYC, should not be left behind due to their inability to enroll and complete a higher education degree. We must recognize the experience and knowledge that these teachers bring to the system by paying them accordingly and grandfathering them into co-teaching positions. Most importantly, any implementation should be done at a sustainable pace and without political motivation in support of the systems already in place, avoiding preserving bias in policymaking. This is consistent with the Power to the Profession Task Force (2020) and NAEYC and Ed Trust's (2020) findings, urging policymakers to focus on the financial, workplace, higher education, and personal supports "to maintain and eventually increase the workforce's diversity" (p. 11). These efforts should be consolidated to provide broader access to all uncertified teachers in the system.

Redefining Social Constructions

Furthermore, it is suggested that as a policy is crafted, policymakers construct their conceptions of those who will implement their policy with the input of those on the ground. This would go a long way to prevent what Schneider and Ingram (1997) coined as "negative constructions of these stakeholders [held by those implementing the policy] that could perpetuate inequities in the future." As the document analysis found, uncertified teachers are overlooked both by policymakers and unions alike. It is imperative that these teachers get a seat at the table, get organized, and get heard. Advocacy, according to Schneider and Ingram, leads the way in disrupting the cycle of policymakers' negative conceptualizations. Uncertified teachers must reclaim their role in the early childhood community by demanding more agency in the policies affecting them.

Future Research

Future research should explore avenues for sustainable and effective supports for uncertified teachers across the country. The role of higher education programs is vital in professionalizing the early childhood field and thus should be investigated as UPK expands across the country. Time release and tuition reimbursement mechanisms that recognize the importance and value of uncertified teachers in the early childhood educational community are also subject of controversy and should be evaluated as possible solutions. The richness of the data captured in this study points to the need for policymakers and leaders to understand better the diversity of the early childhood workforce and the effects of disparities in all aspects of school communities across early childhood settings. Furthermore, a deeper and national examination of how compensation policies disrupt or repair those school communities is long overdue.

Conclusion

"Common experiences define the meaning, the distinct character, and the central purpose of the school communities" (Redding, 2001, p. 23). This study revealed how unequal policies can disrupt those common experiences, creating dual realities for some groups over others and threatening healthy school communities. While the case of NYC is particular to its context, disparities in compensation and policy implementation abound across the country, particularly in early childhood settings that are often unregulated. Therefore, as systems expand and UPK is introduced in more states, it is imperative that policymakers consider crafting policies with special care to avoid bias, including the voices of those most affected by these policies: the early education workforce, children, and their families.

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Appendix. Interview/Focus Group Questions

Demographic Information

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been teaching in your current school?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. Are you on a study plan? How many years do you have in your study plan?
6. What kind of center do you teach at (private, child care, community-based organization, Head Start, Early learn)?
7. What age group do you teach?
8. What borough is your center located at? What district?

Understanding your program and recent history.

9. Briefly, can you tell me what is the mission behind your center?

10. What were your expectations about your teaching experience before you joined this center?

Probes:

- Job description
- Resources

- Classroom dynamics
- Organizational support
- Mentorship opportunities
- Socialization
- Community -building
- Access to other areas of our organization

11. (If applicable) Tell me about your experience before the lockdown. How would you describe that experience?
    You could talk about:
    - Curriculum
    - Resources
    - Classroom dynamics
    - Organizational support
    - Administration
    - Other teachers
    - Socialization
    - Community building
    - Access to other areas of our organization
12. (If applicable) Tell me about your experience in the last year-and-a-half. How would you describe that experience?
13. Have teachers left your center to take a different job since you started working here? Do you know why they left?
14. To your knowledge, has your center experienced difficulty recruiting new teachers?
15. If yes to "14", Why do you think your school had difficulty hiring new teachers?
16. If "yes" to 14, has the lack of teacher coverage impacted any of the following, and if so, how?
    Probes:
    - Your classroom practice
    - The children you teach
    - Quality of life
    - Administration
    - Teacher morale
    - Resources
    - Families in your centers
    - The mission behind your center
17. Are there structural issues in your center that have an effect on your practice? (For example: leadership focus, teacher turnover, resources, children's recruitment, lack of parental involvement, lack of resources, emergency resources)
18. Why do you think these structural issues exist in the first place?
19. What should we do about it?
20. Whom do you think should be addressing it?

Policy and Salary Parity

21. How much do you know about *Pre-K for All*?
22. How much do you know about the birth to 5-year-old DOE consolidation?
23. How has the *Pre-K for All* expansion affected your center?
    - Please think about the effect of this on children's recruitment
    - Programmatic changes (have you seen a change in hours, curriculum, etc.)
    - Teacher retention and turnover
24. Tell me about similarities and differences between your center and a DOE school *Pre-K for All*? Think about environment, salaries, work hours, leadership.
25. Are you aware of any compensation disparities that occur or occurred in different early childhood settings?
26. If "yes" to 25, What would you consider to be the reasons for any disparity?
27. Are you aware of the announcement that pay parity has been mandated across settings (all *Pre-K for All* classrooms)?
28. Did you participate in the advocacy efforts to gain parity?
29. Do you know if your salary changed as a result of the parity?
30. If "yes" to 29: How do you think this will impact your practice? What about your personal life?
31. What have you heard from your administration about the impact of the salary parity on the day-to-day operations of your center?
32. What has changed in your center, if anything, since NYC announced parity?
33. Have certified teachers discussed with you if the salary parity has changed anything for them?
34. What has changed in your school, if anything, since NYC announced that will take over the administration of all early childhood public programs?
35. Tell me more about how your role is different from certified teachers.
    a. What are your challenges?
    b. Have you received any support in completing your degree?
36. Tell me your experience in your university.
    a. What have been some challenges of studying while working? Could you provide me with some examples?
    b. What could be done to support you to complete your degree?
37. Are you planning to stay in your center after you receive your certification? Why or why not?

Pandemic

38. Tell me how your center dealt with the pandemic closures?
39. Did you get any support from the DOE in terms of PD as your center had to move to online learning?
40. Did your families receive electronic devices to continue remote learning?
41. How would you describe what has been happening to your center during the pandemic?
42. What is your opinion about the DOE response and supports during the pandemic?

Building Bonds Family Literacy Program: A Pilot Program for Middle School Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners

Amanda Smith and Leslie Grant

Abstract

This report from the field shares information describing a pilot program that addressed the literacy needs of middle school culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. One of the authors played a key role in designing and implementing the Building Bonds family literacy program. This program was made to engage these students and their families in culturally relevant, literacy-based activities, bringing the students, their families, and their teachers together on a monthly basis. Steps for creating the program are discussed, including forming an action team, inviting participants and their families, and setting up successful meetings and interactions. Elements of a successful meeting included access to multilingual and culturally appropriate texts, thought-provoking discussion questions offered in the home language and in English, and total family involvement. To determine impact, feedback was gathered, including responses to surveys and comments in informal conversations. In addition, participants' requests for continued programming are shared.

Key Words: family literacy program, middle school, English learners, multilingual learner, literacy, family engagement, Building Bonds

Introduction

Research shows that partnerships between families and schools can improve student outcomes in many areas, including attendance, behavior, and academic

success. This is true for students from many backgrounds, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families (Barger et al., 2019; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Further, CLD students at the middle and high school levels can especially benefit from these family partnerships because these are the academic years in which many start to disengage from school. This disengagement is often exhibited as behavioral issues or lack of attendance, which can affect school funding and dropout rates and reduce opportunities for students to learn new material (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon, 2007). Other research has shown that partnerships between families and schools have been linked to a *decrease* in both behavioral problems and absenteeism. For example, results of a study conducted by Epstein and Sheldon (2002) showed that schools that contacted families and made home visits reported a decrease in the number of students who were chronically absent at school. They found that communicating with families, providing a school contact, giving awards to students, and offering afterschool programs positively impacted attendance. Furthermore, family involvement activities have been associated with improved behavior for secondary students (Bachman et al., 2021; Lee, 1995; Simon, 2001). In the same study by Epstein and Sheldon (2002), results showed that improvement in their school partnership programs resulted in a decline in the percentage of students receiving three to four misconducts over time. Their analyses suggest that regardless of a school's discipline rate, when schools offer more engagement activities, fewer disciplinary actions are needed.

Finally, researchers have documented that family partnerships have an impact on student academic achievement (Araque et al., 2017; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Soule & Curtis, 2021). In particular, a type of family involvement called *academic socialization* has been connected to high academic achievement among middle school students. This type of involvement includes families communicating the value of education with their child. It requires families to have conversations about aspirations, expectations, and learning strategies, while also discussing how school material aligns with their child's current interest and future goals (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Furthermore, families participating in school functions is a type of involvement that can have an impact on students' grades. One explanation for this is that family participation strengthens family/teacher partnerships; therefore, it is more likely to result in positive student academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2007). Knowing this, schools should consider family engagements where teachers can be involved and families can learn about and practice academic socialization.

This article reports on a family literacy program built around impactful engagements (described in more detail below), teacher involvement, and the

practice of academic socialization. The program directly impacts middle school CLD students and their families and seeks to find a successful engagement for this specific and often overlooked group of students. The purpose of this field report is to describe the pilot program as a blueprint so that others can develop their own family literacy program or encourage other impactful literacy engagements for middle school multilingual learners and their families.

Types of Home–School Partnerships

Partnerships are not one size fits all. They may range from mostly school based—that is, communication and information directed *toward* the families *from* the school—to partnerships that engage parents in a more interactive, two-way communication system, with parents providing important information about their children to the teachers and vice versa (Epstein, 2019; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) described these partnerships in terms of who has agency. When schools hold events that parents attend such as potlucks or fundraisers, the schools have the most agency. In contrast, when schools partner with parents through activities such as modeling and reinforcing parent-and-child-led reading, the parents have more agency. Protacio et al. (2020) helped to further develop these notions of agency described by Goodall and Montgomery (2014) and have distilled them down to a three-part continuum (see Figure 1). The first point on their adapted continuum is parental involvement with the school. This section focuses on disseminating information from the school to the parents. Examples are touring the school, participating in short meetings where parents move from teacher to teacher, and parents coming to the classroom to listen to their child read. Mid-continuum describes families' involvement with schooling. This section characterizes partnerships as interactions between teachers and schools during which both parties benefit from learning more about the student. The parents share what they feel is beneficial for the teacher to know regarding their child, while the teacher shares information related to school interactions and learning. Finally, at the high end of the continuum is family engagement with learning. This section describes parents providing opportunities for their child to learn outside of a traditional classroom. Parents' attitudes toward learning play a large role in this part of the continuum. They seek out opportunities that help provide their children with a wider means of thinking about learning and interacting socially in various environments. Examples of these types of involvement include sports, scouting, and other opportunities for learning such as participation in family literacy programs.

Figure 1. Continuum of Family Engagement (Protacio et al., 2020, p. 213)

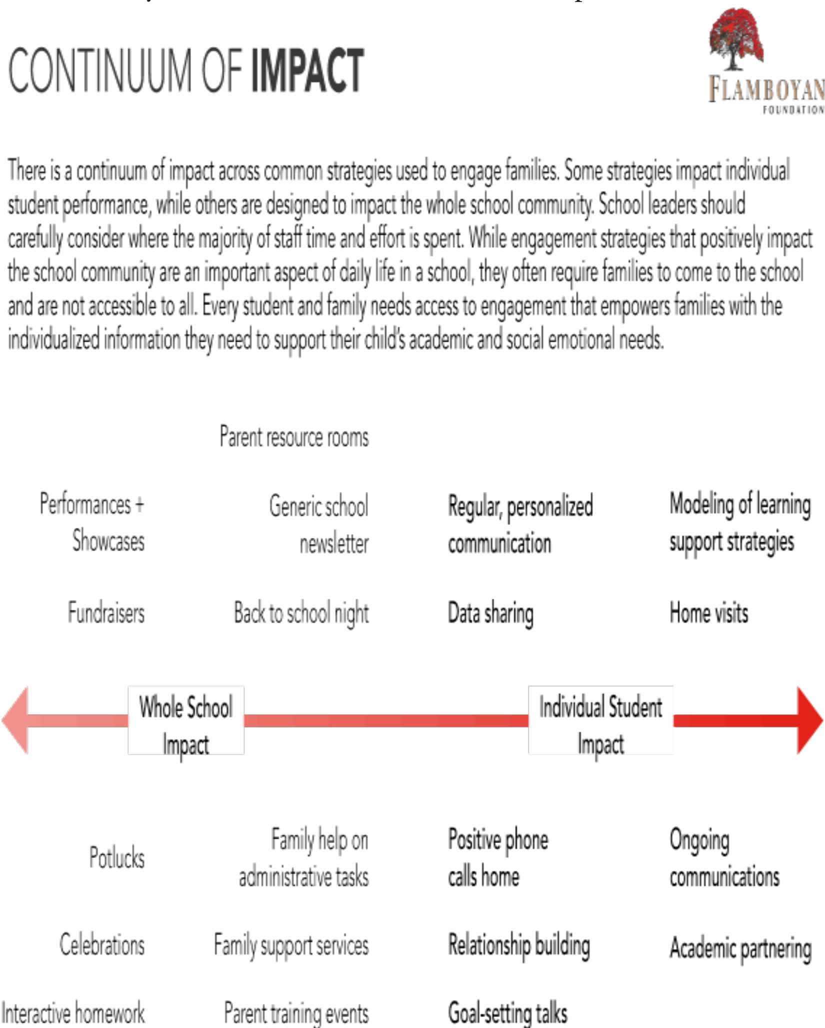
Like Goodall and Montgomery, researchers at the Flamboyan Foundation (2021) described different types of engagements using a whole school impact to individual student impact visual (see Figure 2). As shown in the model, whole school engagement strategies include activities such as school or class celebrations, fundraisers, potlucks, performances and showcases, as well as other forms of communication. In the middle, there are engagement strategies such as parent training events, data sharing, family support services and back to school night. Although these engagements are important, they do not have the most individual student impact. The most individual student impact is seen in engagements such as academic partnering, home visits, and modeling of learning support strategies (Flamboyan Foundation, 2021).

Partnerships With Middle School CLD Students and Their Families

Parent partnerships are most influential when engagements impact individual students and parents are involved with students' learning (Flamboyan Foundation, 2021; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). For middle school CLD students, these strong partnerships are particularly important but often more complex than they were in elementary school (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hill et al., 2018). Elementary schools encourage school-based involvement in the classroom (e.g., Avvisati, et al., 2010). This type of involvement provides the parents with information about academic content, while also helping them build a relationship with the teacher. For example, parents may work with students in small groups on their math by playing math games or assist the teacher as the students work on spelling. Conversely, middle school teachers push for higher attendance at afterschool activities than for participation in the classroom (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Seginer, 2006). This change in expectation can often lead to weakened parent partnerships and less academic success as the student navigates middle school (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Additionally, middle school parent partnerships are more complex because of the development of the student themselves. As the middle school student navigates a larger, more intricate school, they start to build their own identity and pull away from their parents (Laursen & Collins, 2009). While development of student identity is encouraged, it can cause parents to become less engaged overall. Despite these common hurdles, it is important for middle schools to find ways to effectively

create and sustain parent partnerships that will support all students academically and socially. Teachers can gather information from students, their families, and communities, to learn about their cultures, languages, interests, and experiences. With a better understanding of their students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), teachers can incorporate these assets into their lessons, discussions, and interactions. For example, when studying geography, teachers can explore where students and their families are from and ask them to lead discussions on climate in those particular regions.

Figure 2. Flamboyan Foundation Continuum of Impact (2021)



Note. Used with the permission of the Flamboyan Foundation.

For some parents of CLD students, the complexity of middle school parent partnerships is magnified by the element of language due to their emerging English levels; this can result in barriers such as parents feeling intimidated to participate in engagements (Baker et al., 2016). Consequently, CLD families regularly take a passive role in communicating with their student's teacher about their academic performance, creating one-way communication (Rivera & Li, 2019).

Apart from their families, CLD students themselves are faced with a double challenge in school: they are not only expected to perform on grade-level in English, but they are also *learning* English (Shelton et al., 2022). Unfortunately, CLD students consistently lag behind their native-speaking counterparts in terms of test performance. According to Cook et al. (2011), CLD students often test below proficiency on state reading achievement tests. Low literacy skills can impact other classes such as math (Grimm, 2008), science (Reed et al., 2017), and social studies (Taboada Barber et al., 2015). All of these content areas require language and literacy skills to be successful. In fact, the pervasive need to be competent in English to fully participate in all subjects places language and literacy front and center in terms of needs.

To address these needs, literacy became the main target for the engagement reported in this article. Engaging with literacy is beneficial for the students and their families not only because of the exposure to academic and social language, but also for the opportunities to interact and engage in practice with reading comprehension and discourse.

Family Literacy Programs as Engagement

This pilot program was based on research from other successful literacy programs and family engagements. Certain elements were noted, such as means of transportation, childcare, meeting times, and access to multilingual materials (Morrow et al., 1993; Morrow & Young, 1997; Saldaña, 2009; Van Steensel et al., 2011; Vazquez Dominguez et al., 2018). When researching other characteristics of well-designed family literacy programs, the importance of communication was also recognized. Furthermore, it was important that the program meet the requirements of an individualized student engagement. As seen in Figures 1 and 2, the practices that target learning are those that reflect sustained interactions that are positive in nature. They involve frequent, personalized communication; opportunities for modeling support strategies; and learning outside of school. The intention of one of the authors and the action team was to create a sustainable program around these practices that families would enjoy and want to continue with after the completion of the pilot.

The Building Bonds Program

Assembling the Action Team

Before speaking with families, an action team was assembled. Members included one of the authors (a general education teacher), a CLD specialist, and a Spanish-speaking family and community liaison. The action team played an essential role in the success of the program. Their job was to communicate clear expectations, create a safe learning environment for all participants, and to act as facilitators at each meeting. Once the team was created, a meeting was conducted to divide the workload and assign each member a role. The CLD specialist and the general education teacher then talked to the CLD students at the school about their interest in the program. They also met with the principal and the building facilitator about possible meeting locations, times, and protocols for an afterschool event. The liaison met with the CLD district coordinator about funding for food, books, and incentives. Additionally, she was responsible for communicating with the families and translating when needed. Although a liaison does not have to be bi/multilingual, it does increase overall parent involvement (Clark & Dorris, 2007). A bi/multilingual liaison can make a family feel easily understood; therefore, they are more likely to participate in school-led engagements.

Inviting Participants

To gather participants for Building Bonds, the CLD specialist at the middle school comprised a list of Grade 6, 7, and 8 CLD students. From there, the specialist and the general education teacher approached each of these students at school and talked to them individually about their interest in Building Bonds. If the student was interested, the liaison called their family to give them more information about the program. During these conversations with the families, the liaison used a script (see Appendix A) to brief them on the Building Bonds program and the reasons behind it. The families were informed there would be a total of three one-hour meetings during the fall semester, that food would be provided, and that the whole family was welcome. It was also communicated that they would receive a $50 credit to the Scholastic Book Fair if they committed to finishing the book along with attending each meeting. If they indicated interest, families were asked what days of the week they would be able to meet and to choose a time frame. The action team used these dates and times to set future meetings. While the target for this new program was 10 families, only four signed up. This was mainly due to the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and families not feeling comfortable attending an in-person literacy program during that time. The action team questioned

whether to engage in the pilot; however, because literacy was sure to decline during those unprecedented times, the team decided to continue with the four families. Once a family committed, the liaison asked if they would prefer to receive the book selected for the program in Spanish, English, or in both languages. These books were distributed to the families' homes by the action team. The action team reported these home visits to be essential for some of the families' participation in the program because they created personal connections, for which the families expressed gratitude.

Meetings

Each meeting was held in the school cafeteria. This allowed for plenty of space to have food set up and for larger families to sit together. During the first meeting, the families were briefed again on what to expect over the next few months. The families then received the same book and were assigned chapters to read together before the next meeting. In addition, each family was given discussion questions in both Spanish and English (see Appendix B for sample questions). These questions were selected by the CLD specialist and the general education teacher. They pertained to chapter details while also asking families to relate characters' experiences to their own. Families were asked to use these questions to generate opportunities to practice academic socialization with their students. These questions were also used to initiate discourse during the Building Bonds meetings. Although these questions were available, families were also able to organically start their own conversations if they so desired.

During the first meeting, the action team introduced the book *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan. This book was chosen because of its cultural connections and possible relatable experiences with the CLD community (Vazquez Dominguez et al., 2018). After introducing the book, the action team demonstrated what was expected at home by each reading a paragraph and discussing their overall reactions or questions. This demonstration gave the families insight into what reading together might look like. It is important to note that each member of the action team made a point to speak during the meetings. By facilitating the meetings as a team, families did not look to one member for answers. If a translation was needed during the meeting, the liaison assisted with this. For future programs, talking points can be assigned before each meeting or organically happen depending on the synergy of the action team.

Following modeling the expectations, parents were given time to ask questions. Modeling of learning support strategies is an individual student impact strategy according to the Flamboyan Foundation model (2021). It allows for families to see what is expected and note the strategies educators use at school to make the greatest impact with their student at home. The families then

practiced together using the first chapter of the book. During subsequent meetings, families used the hour-long sessions to discuss their opinions about the book, their answers to the discussion questions, and their projections about what might happen next. If parents did not want to volunteer to read the questions aloud, members of the action team took turns doing so.

Because of the preparation done during the planning stages of the program, there was not a lot of work to be completed before each meeting. Prepackaged food was bought beforehand and stored at the education service center. The liaison worked at this building and was able to bring it with her to each meeting. The rest of the team helped assemble the tables and set up the food once it arrived. To keep attendance high and to continue building relationships with the families, the liaison called each family the day before the meetings to see if they would be able to attend. These personal phone calls home were an impactful engagement that helped with attendance. They served as a reminder for upcoming meetings and showed parents that the action team cared about their participation. Reaching the parents was important when trying to keep the attention of the middle school students. Afterschool literacy activities can often be uninteresting to students as they enter the higher grades. A few details the action team noticed that kept the middle school students interested were having their parents excited about the program, picking a story of interest, providing food they would enjoy, reminding them the day of the meeting that their friends would be there, and providing a reward if they completed the program.

Feedback on the Program

At the end of the first meeting, each family was given a survey adapted from the work of Palombo (2015). The survey was given in their preferred language (Appendix C) and was asked to be returned at the families' earliest convenience. Survey questions were modified to capture the impact of the family literacy program and to help the program leaders gain a better understanding of the parents' overall participation in their child's education. At the final meeting, another survey was distributed, similar to the first survey but with two additional questions (Appendix D). This provided the action team with feedback over the successes of the pilot program and what could be improved for next time.

After collecting the survey responses, results were carefully examined. The action team was interested in comparing how frequently parents engaged in literacy activities with their children, the number of books in the home pre- and post-program, the family comments related to Building Bonds, and the overall participation in literacy engagements following the conclusion of the program.

Increased Literacy Interactions

The concluding survey showed that by the end of the semester, all families were reading with their student more frequently—either daily or almost daily. This is important because frequent literacy interactions have been found to help families learn how to become literate together. They are proven to enhance language, literacy, and life skills within a family (Zygouris-Coe, 2007), while also sustaining a student's transnational identity through familial interactions (Noguerón-Liu & Driscoll, 2021). For example, during one of the meetings, a parent shared about a discussion she had with her daughter while reading at home. She told the group how the main character's experiences prompted them to talk about events from her own childhood. This led to a discussion about how fortunate the student is today. This experience was impactful for the student and the parent because it ignited a family storytelling opportunity. Through a funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) lens, it also helped the reader make connections about their family's home country and the written text. Telling stories created a visible shift in the families' comfort levels as more people began to share their life connections to the book.

Increased Number of Books at Home

In addition to an increase in overall family literacy engagement, three of the four families reported an increase in the number of books in their home. Getting printed books near students is often a focus when increasing literacy (Neuman, 1999). This increase of books in the home helps create a literacy-rich environment for students which has been linked to students having a higher motivation to read (Kirsch et al., 2002) along with literacy success (Neuman, 1999). Benefits of having a book-rich home environment also include an increase in vocabulary, comprehension skills, and an understanding that providing evidence for an argument is important (Evans et al., 2010). In addition, access to books in the home has an influence on reading attitudes (Merga, 2015). Although the physical placement of books in a student's environment is important, it is imperative that students and their families know how to interact with the literature (Neuman, 1999). Building Bonds advocated for this by guiding the families on how to read together while also encouraging conversation around the book. These conversations provided opportunities for families to engage in academic socialization by prompting text-to-self connections.

Literacy Program Benefits

When asked what families liked about Building Bonds, the following responses were noted: interaction with their child, and access to multilingual resources. All families chose to have the text in English and Spanish.

Researchers have found that access to multilingual resources has an impact on families interacting with literacy at home because they can divide the workload and expertise while reading together (Noguerón-Liu & Driscoll, 2021). It also allowed the entire family to come prepared to share at the Building Bonds meetings. In a similar study conducted by Vazquez Dominguez et al. (2018), findings concluded that immigrant families preferred having access to books in both Spanish and English. The participants were able to help their children practice their Spanish, while also learning how to read and discuss the text with them. Building Bonds had a comparable outcome, as more than one parent verbalized that having access to the book in both languages taught them and their children words they did not know.

Literacy Program Improvements

Families were also asked how they would improve the Building Bonds program. Two families left the question blank, while the other two responded with the desire for more meetings. This feedback echoed the teacher and the liaison's informal discussion on ways to improve the program. It was discussed that meeting at least twice a month could have a positive impact on the families' recall about events in the story. Meeting only once a month, some family members verbally requested a short recap because they had either read ahead or had finished the required reading earlier in the month.

Interest in Continuing Literacy Engagements

Finally, there was an increase in literacy engagement *after* the program concluded. Before implementing Building Bonds, none of the participating families were involved in any afterschool literacy engagements. After the program ended, two of the families were eager to continue another book study. Through word-of-mouth, the liaison and two of the families who participated in Building Bonds were able to recruit four more families to join for a second book. The second book, *Becoming Naomi León* by Pam Muñoz Ryan, was also chosen by the liaison for its relevance and possible cultural connections to the CLD community. Following the completion of the second book, the mothers involved in the program continued with a *Love and Logic* book study offered by the district liaison. Ten mothers of CLD students signed up to be involved in these sessions. Nine months after concluding the Building Bonds program, the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education Coordinator for the district reported that they are continuing with yet another *Love and Logic* session for families in the summer. It was also mentioned that families have expressed the desire for a literacy program similar to Building Bonds for the fall. The district's ability to proceed will depend on adequate funding (G. Geis, personal

communication, February 26, 2022), but clearly the desire to continue these activities is present.

Conclusion

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic which caused many families to decline participation, four families of middle school CLD students were able to engage in a family literacy program that increased their literacy interactions at home and encouraged school partnerships that might not have otherwise formed. This small number of participants does not enable us to generalize any of our findings, but the successful completion of this program makes this report from the field timely and relevant.

Based on program feedback discussed above, the Building Bonds program was noted as impactful for the participants and led to a continuation of other literacy engagements following its conclusion. The results of the program showed an increase in family literacy interactions, an increase of books in the homes of the participants, and an awareness that multilingual resources are accessible through the school.

There were several elements that contributed to the success of the program. For one, using culturally relevant and multilingual books was crucial to engaging both parents and their children. Families could read together and create more opportunities for storytelling and transnational connections. Forming an action team also played a substantial role in the success of the program. The team's knowledge on how to build relationships with students and their families while also being able to communicate clearly and effectively with parents made an impact. While the members were equally important, they each had their own strengths. The family and community liaison made the families of the CLD students feel welcome, safe, and heard. She sustained clear communication and helped maintain attendance. The CLD specialist provided knowledge on CLD education and how the students and their families would best benefit from a literacy program. Additionally, the specialist provided the families with a resource and a contact at the middle school. The general education teacher also served as a resource at the middle school. She answered parent questions regarding literacy expectations and was able to add to the conversation about the importance of literacy in all classes. Without these members of the action team, the program might not have been as successful as it was following the pilot.

In the future, it would be beneficial for more classroom teachers to be involved in the program. In order for educators to provide a rich learning environment where students can fully participate and use the skills they al-

ready have, they need to know their students' home cultures (Gaitan, 2012; Zygouris-Coe, 2007). This knowledge will help educators connect what is happening in their students' lives with their literacy classroom environment (Bisplinghoff et al., 1995; Moll et al., 1992). As observed through Building Bonds, a family literacy program can facilitate these connections and ultimately increase the likelihood of future impactful literacy engagements at home and at school.

Limitations

The Building Bonds literacy program consisted of a very small number of families, in large part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the design of the program and the responses of the families and students cannot be generalized to other school contexts. Future efforts to create programs like this would benefit from including a survey or interviews of parents involved. Using the modified survey from Palombo (2015), other pre- and post-survey questions, or interview questions (available in the home language as well as in English) could give insight toward the families' literacy practices to determine if the pilot program benefits noted here are present with other family literacy partnerships.

It is also important to note possible bias due to one of the authors playing a key role in designing and implementing the family literacy program. The authors acknowledge this as a limitation and suggest that future studies separate the two.

Finally, the short duration of the program is recognized as a limitation. After the conclusion of the program, solutions were discussed. Meeting every two weeks instead of once a month could increase the amount of time the families spend with literacy. This would be beneficial and possibly strengthen the relationships built between staff and families during the initial book study.

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Appendix A. Building Bonds Family Literacy Program—Family Phone Conversation: Key Points

Liaison Script:

- Building Bonds is a family literacy program that our middle school is piloting this year.
- Reason: We wanted to create a family literacy program for you and your child because there is research behind the positive impact family literacy engagements can have for families and students. Literacy is also a part of all your child's classes. Even in math class, they will need to know how to read!
- This semester, we will be reading Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz Ryan. You will be provided with a copy in either Spanish, English, or both, depending on your preference. Each month, you will be assigned chapters to read together. There will also be discussion questions in addition to the assigned reading.
- There will be a total of 3 one-hour meetings from October through December. The first Building Bonds meeting will include an introduction to the book and a model of what will be expected at home. During the next two meetings, we will talk about the chapters you read and share responses to the discussion questions. The discussion questions will not always be about chapter details. Some questions will ask you to relate a character's experience to your own.
- If you participate in Building Bonds, you will commit to finishing the book and attending the three meetings. If your family completes the commitment, your child will receive a $50 voucher to the Scholastic Book Fair!
- The entire family is welcome, and we will provide snacks.

If interested:

- What days are they available? Monday-Friday
- Pick a time: 4:00 pm–5:00 pm, 5:00 pm–6:00 pm, 6:00 pm–7:00 pm, 7:00 pm–8:00 pm
- Book options: Spanish, English, or both

Appendix B. Esperanza Rising: Chapters and Questions Example

Chapters to read:
Chapter 1- Aguascalientes, México
Chapter 2- Las Uvas
Chapter 3- Las Papayas
Chapter 4- Los Higos
Chapter 5- Las Guayabas
Chapter 6- Los Melones
Chapter 7- Las Cebollas

English:

1. In the chapter called Las Uvas, Esperanza's grandma says, "There is no rose without thorns." What did she mean by that?
2. What did Abuelita save from the fire and why?
3. Have you ever had to move? If so, did you have some of the same feelings Esperanza had? If you have not moved, how do you think you might feel?
4. Why was Marta rude towards Esperanza when she first met her? If you were in Marta's position, do you think you would have acted the same way?
5. What did Miguel teach Esperanza at the end of chapter 7?

Spanish:

1. En el capítulo titulado Las Uvas, la abuela de Esperanza dice: "No hay rosa sin espinas." ¿Qué quiso decir ella con eso?
2. ¿Qué salvó la abuela del fuego y por qué?
3. ¿Alguna vez has tenido que mudarte? Si es así, ¿sentiste algunos de los mismos sentimientos que tuvo Esperanza? Si no te has movido, ¿cómo crees que podrías sentirte?
4. ¿Por qué Marta fue grosera con Esperanza cuando la conoció? Si estuvieras en la posición de Marta, ¿crees que habrías actuado de la misma manera?
5. ¿Qué le enseñó Miguel a Esperanza al final del capítulo 7?

Appendix C. Family Questionnaire (first meeting; based on work by Palombo, 2015)

Parent's Name: ____
Child's Name: ____
Background Information:
1. What is your relationship to this child? (Please check one)
___ mother
___ father
___ grandparent
___ older sibling
___ other (explain: ____________)

2. Is English your first language?
___ Yes ___ No
You, Your Child, & Home:
3. How often do you talk with your child about any aspect of their school day? (Please check one)
____ hardly ever
____ once or twice a month
____ once or twice a week
____ almost daily/daily
4. How many times per week does your child read on their own, or to themselves, at home? (Please check one)
____ 0 times
____ 1–2 times per week
____ 3–5 times per week
____ 6 or more times per week
5. About how long each time does your child read on their own, or to themselves, at home? (Please check one)
____ less than one hour
____ about an hour
____ more than one hour
6. How many times per week does your child do math activities on their own, or by themselves, at home? (Please check one)
____ 0 times
____ 1–2 times per week
____ 3–5 times per week
____ 6 or more times per week
7. About how long each time does your child do math activities on their own, or by themselves, at home? (Please check one)
____ less than one hour
____ about an hour
____ more than one hour
8. How often do you do reading activities with your child, including homework? (Please check one)
____ hardly ever
____ once or twice a month
____ once or twice a week
____ almost daily/daily
9. What kinds of reading activities do you do with your child? (Please check all that apply)
____ read books together
____ talk in general about the books we read together
____ ask my child specific questions about books we read together
____ talk in general about the books my child reads on his/her own
____ ask my child specific questions about books my child reads on his/her own
____ other (please explain: ____)
10. How often do you do math activities with your child, including homework? (Please check one)
____ hardly ever
____ once or twice a month

____ once or twice a week
____ almost daily/daily
11. What kinds of math activities do you do with your child? (Please check all that apply)
____ talk about practical math problems, (for example, adding items while grocery shopping)
____ ask my child specific math questions
____ do math-related tasks together, including measuring or cooking
____ other (please explain: ____)
12. Approximately how many books do you have in your home? (Please check one)
____ 0–2
____ 3–10
____ 11–20
____ 21–40
____ more than 40

Appendix D. Family Questionnaire (last meeting; based on work by Palombo, 2015)

Parent's Name: ________________________________
Child's Name: ____
Background Information:
1. What is your relationship to this child? (Please check one)
___ mother
___ father
___ grandparent
___ older sibling
___ other (explain: __________)
2. Is English your first language?
___ Yes ___ No
You, Your Child, & Home:
3. How often do you talk with your child about any aspect of their school day? (Please check one)
____ hardly ever
____ once or twice a month
____ once or twice a week
____ almost daily/daily
4. How many times per week does your child read on their own, or to themselves, at home? (Please check one)
____ 0 times
____ 1–2 times per week
____ 3–5 times per week
____ 6 or more times per week
5. About how long each time does your child read on their own, or to themselves, at home? (Please check one)
____ less than one hour
____ about an hour
____ more than one hour
6. How many times per week does your child do math activities on their own, or by themselves, at home? (Please check one)
____ 0 times

____ 1–2 times per week
____ 3–5 times per week
____ 6 or more times per week
7. About how long each time does your child do math activities on their own, or by themselves, at home? (Please check one)
____ less than one hour
____ about an hour
____ more than one hour
8. How often do you do reading activities with your child, including homework? (Please check one)
____ hardly ever
____ once or twice a month
____ once or twice a week
____ almost daily/daily
9. What kinds of reading activities do you do with your child? (Please check all that apply)
____ read books together
____ talk in general about the books we read together
____ ask my child specific questions about books we read together
____ talk in general about the books my child reads on his/her own
____ ask my child specific questions about books my child reads on his/her own
____ other (please explain: ____)
10. How often do you do math activities with your child, including homework? (Please check one)
____ hardly ever
____ once or twice a month
____ once or twice a week
____ almost daily/daily
11. What kinds of math activities do you do with your child? (Please check all that apply)
____ talk about practical math problems, (for example, adding items while grocery shopping)
____ ask my child specific math questions
____ do math-related tasks together, including measuring or cooking
____ other (please explain: ____)
12. Approximately how many books do you have in your home? (Please check one)
____ 0–2
____ 3–10
____ 11–20
____ 21–40
____ more than 40
13. What did you like about the Building Bonds project where we read Esperanza Rising?
14. What suggestions do you have to improve the project for next semester?

School Collaboration in a Rural Setting: Improving Student Reading Outcomes by Implementing a Tiered Model of Instruction

Sunaina Shenoy, Christopher Johnson, and Allison Nannemann

Abstract

This study highlighted the school collaboration and process involved in implementing Tier 1 reading instruction in a rural school in New Mexico and measured the efficacy of this model on student outcomes. Our participants included seven elementary grade teachers, two special educators, one principal, and 106 students in Grades K–6. Our process involved adding more reading time to the schedule, providing teachers with pacing guides and fidelity checklists to maintain teacher accountability with reading instruction, leading biweekly professional learning communities for teachers, and using individually administered curriculum-based measures to track student outcomes in reading. Our results depicted student growth in reading outcomes across elementary grades and a reduction in risk for reading difficulties from the beginning to the end of the school year, which in part could be attributed to our model of Tier 1 reading instruction.

Key Words: School collaboration, professional learning communities, response-to-intervention, tiered model, rural school

Introduction

This research project was undertaken as a multiyear university–school collaboration with researchers at the University of New Mexico and a principal

at a rural school site in New Mexico. The principal reached out to the research team to implement a tiered response to intervention (RTI) model in reading at her school site to improve student outcomes. The RTI model was conceptualized in the early 2000s to replace the historical intervention model that waited for students to fail academically before qualifying them for special education needs (Berkeley et al., 2020). RTI promotes the use of evidence-based pedagogy beginning with general education and increasing in intensity depending on a student's response to specific interventions (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2009). In essence, RTI is a preventive rather than reactive approach to support children identified as being academically at-risk as a range of interventions are provided systematically to help all students succeed (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016; Kauffman et al., 2018; Marsh & Mathur, 2020; Sugai & Horner, 2009).

According to Fuchs and Fuchs (2006), the responsiveness to intervention is seen at three different tiers, in which all students receive evidence-based core curriculum in academic areas in Tier 1, a small subset of students who do not respond well to this instruction receive intensive small group instruction in Tier 2, and finally, a smaller subset of students who do not respond well to small group instruction receive intensive individualized special education and remedial services in Tier 3. Instead of waiting for students to fail and then providing them with intensive special education supports, the goal is to prevent school failure by providing all students with better instructional programs, monitoring their progress, and reevaluating program goals to reduce the number of students who are identified as having learning disabilities. Thus, at every level, a child gets instructional supports and early intervention practices to avoid falling behind the other students in class, and when the child clearly does not respond to intervention even at Tier 3, the teacher is more convinced of their decision to refer the student for special education services. Existing literature shows that positive academic outcomes have been associated with RTI (Burns et al., 2006; Gage et al., 2017; Poon-McBrayer, 2018; Vaughn et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2012). The need for early and intensive multitiered intervention programs is proven by the scientific literature showing that the reading difficulties of a large majority of pupils can be prevented if early and intensive interventions are provided (e.g., Vellutino, 2003). Early identification of reading difficulties and providing appropriate support can result in significant academic improvement (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; National Reading Panel, 2000; Torgesen, 2002). O'Connor and Klinger (2010) argued that though early intervention helps many students improve their academic skills, we know little about whether it identifies students with learning disabilities more accurately than earlier practices.

Klinger and Edwards (2006) found the RTI model to not only help with early identification, but also with identifying learning disabilities among students from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds by providing students with language supports and comprehensible input in classrooms at every tier to tease apart language differences from learning disabilities. However, Gutiérrez et al. (2010) found that bilingual students are understudied, excluded from early learning studies, and the least understood in terms of policy changes when it comes to RTI models. Moreover, the heterogeneity of this population in terms of social class differences, literacy levels in both languages, uses of L1 and L2, and citizenship are not reflected in RTI models (Cavendish et al., 2016; Gomez-Najarro, 2023; Gutiérrez et al., 2010).

The outcomes of tiered RTI models, however, depend on the fidelity with which the RTI process is operationalized. Studies show that RTI approaches have a number of core implementation components in common, including: (a) progress monitoring, (b) evidence-based instruction and intervention at all the tiers, (c) professional development, (d) collaborative problem-solving, and (e) evaluation of the fidelity of implementation. Students' progress on academic content areas must be monitored on a regular basis, and instructional changes should be tailored to address the needs of the students. Moreover, instruction that is provided at Tiers 1, 2, and 3 needs to follow evidence-based practices that have been proven to work with the given population of students. Teachers need to be provided with in-service training to meet the wide array of academic needs of all students in their classroom, including students who are at-risk for disabilities and who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Finally, the efficacy of the program needs to be evaluated and changes in implementation need to be addressed as needed.

The RTI model is shown to have many benefits as a theoretical framework, but the limitation of the model lies in it not being a practical solution for many teachers and school districts because of the time commitment and investment at different levels of implementation. This is particularly true in low-income school districts that do not have the resources to support this long-term endeavor. One way to alleviate this is through professional learning communities (PLCs). Mundschenk and Fuchs (2016) suggested that PLCs are well-suited for RTI program development. PLCs are groups "in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit" (Hord, 1997, p. 6). Stoll and colleagues (2006) highlighted three essential aspects of PLCs based on this definition: (1) learning is focused on improving instructional practices, not maintaining the status quo; (2) practices need to be implemented with students; and (3) the

primary function of PLCs is to enhance student learning. Although outside experts may be involved in PLCs to build teachers' capacity for new practices, teachers retain the primary responsibility for establishing the group's goals and determining the utility of new practices for their teaching context (Stoll et al., 2006). Research documents that PLCs contribute to the successful implementation of new instructional practices such that the implementation is sustainable and results in greater student learning (Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Cordingly et al., 2003; Little, 2002; Louis & Marks, 1998; Owen, 2016). Cordingly and colleagues (2003) related PLCs and student learning by reporting that PLCs increase teacher confidence, strengthen the belief that teachers can impact student learning, generate enthusiasm for collaboration, elicit commitment to educational change, and foster teachers' willingness to try new practices.

The unique contribution of this research project is to: (a) provide a low-income rural school district with a sustainable RTI model that is a product of teacher knowledge, training, and following evidence-based practices; and (b) evaluate the efficacy of this model for use in other low-income schools in New Mexico.

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) Framework

The MTSS model for intervention was first introduced in 2009, as a RTI framework. Tiered instructional groups have been a part of the educational system since the 1980s with Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS); academics were added in the 1990s as part of such systems (Choi et al., 2020). With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act in 2004, studies were implemented to measure the feasibility of merging the two systems into one integrated system for schools to deliver the MTSS (Choi et al., 2020).

The Tiers in the system are:

- Tier 1 is the high-quality, evidence-based classroom education that all students receive. This includes high-quality core instruction, differentiation of instruction, and enrichment opportunities in the regular education environment. In order to gather the best data possible, teachers will use all forms of assessment and observation in this tier, provide frequent feedback to all students, and consistently check for understanding.
- Tier 2: Students who struggle after receiving instruction from Tier 1 will begin to receive targeted interventions in academic areas they are struggling in and not making the expected progress. Examples include small-group and focused one-on-one instruction with intervention specialists in the target academic areas. Students who require Tier 2 intervention in dealing with behaviors that are disrupting their learning and the learning of others

will receive targeted behavior supports. Like Tier 1, teachers will provide consistent feedback and check for understanding. Behavior interventions in Tier 2 may include referrals to the school counselor or social worker for interventions dealing with coping skills, behavior contracts, and so on.

- Tier 3: These students are provided with an array of intensive academic and behavioral supports that include focused, small group, and one-on-one instruction with a certified education specialist and other service providers. Progress towards targeted goals is monitored on a regular basis, and the supports and services are adjusted based on need and available data. If the student progresses in the Tier 3 intervention, then the intensity and nature of the supports could be scaled back, and the student could be placed back into Tier 2. Behavior interventions at Tier 3 will consist of Functional Behavioral Assessments, Behavior Intervention Plans, and nonpunitive disciplinary methods. If these methods are not effective, adjustments can be made accordingly based on data gathered by stakeholders.

Recent research into the effectiveness of implementing MTSS shows that although the implementation of this system is complex, many districts have shown improvements in academic and behavioral areas once the complementary systems of PBIS and RTI are combined (Eagle et al., 2015). A recent study conducted in Orange County, California, showed that over a three-year period, scores in English language arts (ELA) and math increased in schools that implemented an MTSS model for their students (Choi et al., 2020). Coyne et al., in their study published in 2018, showed that within a MTSS environment, targeted Tier 2 small-group reading interventions showed great efficacy for at-risk students. The authors of the study found that Tier 2 intensive interventions can produce meaningful growth in student reading achievements in schools with persistently low reading scores among students in Grades 1–3 (Coyne et al., 2018).

Multi-Layered System of Support (MLSS) in New Mexico

In New Mexico, MTSS is represented as MLSS, a layered system instead of a tiered one. Apart from the change in language, the premise of RTI and MTSS models are still maintained. According to the New Mexico Public Education Department's (NM-PED) manual on implementation of MLSS (NM-PED, 2021), it is a comprehensive framework for students that encompasses intensive, evidence-based practices to support academic achievement, social–emotional needs, and positive behavioral support. These facets of the system are needs based and informed by data gathered by teachers and school staff. Students' movement through the layers of support is determined by the Student Assistance Team working collaboratively with teachers and parents.

During the 2021–22 academic year, New Mexico rolled out the MLSS model in response to the ruling in *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018). In the case, the plaintiffs argued that the state of New Mexico violated Article II, Section 18, by not fulfilling its constitutional obligation to provide adequate funds and services for at-risk students and failing to help students be college and career ready. Citing New Mexico's lowest-in-the-nation graduation rate of 70%, as well as the fact that over 50% of students who attend college after graduating from New Mexico High Schools need remedial classes, the plaintiffs were able to successfully argue in favor of needed reform for at-risk students (*Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico*, 2018). The implementation of the MLSS program is intended to bring about a more equitable education system for all students (NM-PED, 2021).

Context of Present Study and Research Questions

According to Semke and Sheridan (2012), there are many definitions of rurality, and researchers need to make their parameters explicit to the reader. We have tried to provide as many details of the rural school district we worked with as possible without providing identifying information. The school district is located in a rural part of the state; the closest medium-sized city is over 170 miles away. New Mexico is one of the poorest states in the U.S., and rural parts of the state are even poorer. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2022), at the end of 2021, the total population of this rural area was very close to 1,000, with a median age of 55 years. White collar workers make up just over 80% of the population, while blue collar employees account for almost 18% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The median annual household income is just over $35,000, and 22% of the population was below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Approximately 55% of the population holds a high school degree, and almost 25% have a college certificate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). In the 2018–19 school year, the participating school district served approximately 220 public elementary school students (NCES, 2021). The district's overall average reading proficiency score was 25%, compared to 29% statewide. Moreover, the adults in this community are twice as likely to lack a high school diploma and slightly more likely to be unemployed compared to statewide prevalence (NCES, 2021). Finally, 75% of the population speaks a language other than English. The students in these schools come from various ethnic backgrounds, with 75% identifying as Hispanic, 22% identifying as Caucasian, and 3% identifying as Native American (NCES, 2021).

Practical affordances and constraints were taken into consideration, acknowledging the fact that "RTI systems should reflect a balance between what is effective and what is doable, and the balancing of the two should occur at

the local level" (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 266). A RTI model that is implemented with fidelity will streamline the assessment and intervention processes at this school district and will improve the decision-making process in identifying students who have learning disabilities. We are specifically interested in addressing two larger goals within our state: (a) to complement the MLSS that was piloted by the NM-PED during the 2021–22 academic year (NM-PED, 2021), and (b) to provide students from low-income families, English learners, and students with disabilities better educational outcomes, in response to the consolidated lawsuit *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018).

Based on the background information and the need for a tiered system of reading instruction in this rural low-income school in New Mexico, our research questions for this study were the following:

1. What resources and procedures were developed in collaboration with teachers to implement Tier 1 reading instruction in the school?
2. What effect did the Tier 1 reading instruction framework have on reading outcomes for: (a) all students in Grades K–6; (b) students identified as being at-risk for reading difficulties, from the beginning to the end of the school year?

Methods

Participants

Our participants included: (a) seven grade-level teachers representing each grade in our sample; (b) the principal of the school; (c) two special educators/interventionists; and (d) 106 students in total from Grades K–6 (*n* = 17 in K; *n* = 7 in Grade 1; *n* = 16 in Grade 2; *n* = 12 in Grade 3; *n* = 16 in Grade 4; *n* = 25 in Grade 5; *n* = 13 in Grade 6). Out of a total of 106 students in the school, 63 students (59.43%) were females, six students (5.66%) were diagnosed with a disability and received special education services, and nine students (8.49%) were English Learners.

School Setting

Our school site was in a school district located in a rural part of northern New Mexico. Students were just returning to school for in-person instruction after a year and a half of online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During our first PLC meeting with teachers, they mentioned that many students in the school did not have access to laptops, computers, and internet in this remote part of the state and were starting the school year with a significant learning loss. The teachers were previously trained in the Wonders®, Wilson Fundations®, and Heggerty® reading curricula, but had not yet received all the

grade-level materials. They were currently being trained in the LETRS® reading curriculum (Moats & Sedita, 2004) and were planning to transition to that in the next academic year.

Procedures

Collaboration With Teachers

Pacing Guides. We developed pacing guides in reading per grade level that teachers could use as a guide to cover all the New Mexico ELA state standards. Firstly, we divided the academic year into four quarters and allocated the standards almost equally across them. Secondly, we further divided them into fewer standards to be covered per week. Thirdly, we assigned time spent on each standard per week to reflect a developmentally appropriate trajectory of reading subskills. When we presented the first set of pacing guides to teachers, they mentioned that they were covering reading for 4 hours in a week and would not be able to cover all the standards in that time. We worked with the principal on scheduling and extending the time spent on reading. We were able to increase time spent on reading from 4 to 6 hours in order to cover all the standards per grade level.

Fidelity Checklists. We developed a fidelity checklist (see Appendix A) to record the following: (a) focus area for each reading lesson (i.e., oral language, background knowledge, literacy knowledge, phonemic awareness, phonics and spelling, sight word recognition, fluency, syntax, vocabulary, comprehension); (b) time spent on focus area; (c) program/resource used (i.e., Fundations®[1],Wonders®[2], LETRS®[3], Heggerty®[4], Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR)[5]. The last resource, FCRR, was provided to the teachers by the researchers during a PLC meeting. In addition to this, teachers had to record how they evaluated student progress (e.g., oral, written, etc.), their goal for mastery, how many students mastered the task, and their reflection on next steps. Fidelity checklists were implemented in the Spring 2022 semester, and teachers filled them out on a weekly basis.

Professional Learning Communities. The researchers led biweekly online PLCs for teachers. The purpose was to provide them with a platform to discuss reading assessment and instruction in their classrooms and to help them with any additional support they requested to improve these practices. The topics covered during these meetings involved: (a) presenting student data on easyCBM and forming groups for tiered reading instruction; (b) instructional planning to differentiate instruction in Tier 1; and (c) providing teachers with resources (i.e., website links, books, materials) to work with specific students in their classrooms or specific focus areas in reading.

easyCBM Progress-Monitoring Tool. An alternative to standardized testing that has rich empirical support is curriculum-based measurement (CBM; Greenwood & Kim, 2012; Jin et al., 2015; Kendeou & Papadopoulous, 2012; Kim et al., 2012). CBMs are brief measures of an academic construct, reading, writing, or mathematics, that can be repeatedly administered by the classroom teacher (Deno, 2003; Reschly et al., 2009; Tindal, 2013). Unlike other formative assessments, CBMs have robust validity and reliability data and can be used to guide educational decisions by comparing student performance over time, as well as to performance benchmarks (Miura Wayman et al., 2007). Measuring students' reading skills is an important component that educators consider while making intervention decisions for their students. Researchers at the University of Oregon developed and revised a curriculum-based measure called easyCBM which measured students' grade-level progress in reading and math (Anderson et al., 2014). The focus has been to facilitate "data-driven instructional decision making through enhanced reporting options" (Anderson et al., 2014, p.4) to promote progress-monitoring and universal screening in schools (Deno, 2003; Keller-Margulis et al., 2008). Our participating teachers were instructed in the administration of the easyCBM subtests, and they individually administered this test to all students in their classroom to measure grade level skills in reading. It was administered three times during the 2021–22 academic year, in Fall (August), Winter (December), and Spring (May). It measured reading subskills per grade level, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. It is important to note that this measure was administered in addition to the district-mandated IStation measure (a computer-based CBM), for two reasons: (a) teachers indicated in the PLCs that the online format of IStation was difficult to navigate for younger students, Els, and students with disabilities, and the teachers preferred a paper/pencil test; and (b) teachers mentioned that some students began the 2021 school year with a significant learning loss and were performing one to two grades below their assigned grade level. They wanted to have access to progress-monitoring tools to check their progress in lower grade levels as well as their assigned grade, which was not possible with IStation.

Collaboration With Principal to Implement Procedures

It is important to highlight that this project was possible because of our collaboration with the principal, and we were invited by her to work with teachers at the school site. She was a liaison between the researchers and teachers and was instrumental in sharing student data, revising the school schedule, setting up assessment schedules, organizing the PLC meetings, and implementing the pacing guides and fidelity checklists. Table 1 presents our timeline and procedures for implementing Tier 1 reading instruction at the school.

Table 1. Timeline and Procedures for Implementing Tier 1 Reading Instruction

Dates	Procedures
June–July 2021	Principal meetings: to make note of the problem areas she recognized in the school and devise a plan to focus on Tier 1 reading instruction for the first year of the project
Aug. 2021–May 2022	PLCs with teachers: we spent the first few meetings getting a sense of what reading in their classrooms looked like, what resources they had at their disposal, and identifying the areas of need; we then worked closely with teachers to develop resources and provide support for Tier 1 reading instruction and differentiating instruction for students in their classrooms
Aug. 2021	Teachers administered the beginning of the year paper/pencil easyCBM assessment
Sept. 2021	In consultation with the principal and teachers, we increased the time spent on reading from 4 to 6 hours per week across the schedule for Grades K–6
Oct.–Dec. 2021	Developed and implemented pacing guides
Dec. 2021	Teachers administered the middle of the year paper/pencil easyCBM assessment
Jan.–Feb. 2022	Developed and implemented fidelity checklists
May 2022	Teachers administered the end of the year paper/pencil easyCBM assessment

Results

Student Outcomes: All Students

Table 2 presents the composite reading scores on the easyCBM across three assessment periods for Grades K–6. The composite scores were calculated based on the same subtests that were administered during all three time points. In Grades 4–6, the beginning of the year subtests differed from the middle of the year and end of the year subtests, so we could not get an equivalent mean score for the beginning of the year. In general, we observed that for Grades K–2, there was an increase in mean scores and percentiles from the beginning of the school year to the middle of the school year, but scores plateaued from the middle of the school year to the end of the school year. For Grades 3 and 4, scores increased from the beginning to the middle of the school year, but regressed from the middle to the end of the school year. Finally, for Grades 5 and 6, mean scores and percentiles increased from the middle to the end of the school year. In particular we observed the following increases in average percentiles from the beginning/middle to the end of the school year: (a) Kindergarten: 48th to

59th percentile; (b) Grade 1: 32nd to 48th percentile; (c) Grade 2: 59th to 70th percentile; (d) Grade 3: 37th to 44th percentile; (e) Grade 5: 40th to 45th percentile; and (f) Grade 6: 53rd to 66th percentile; showing a trend of 5–16 percentile point difference, with Grade 1 showing the most growth and Grade 5 showing the least growth. Grade 4, on the other hand, depicted a regression in percentiles from 57th to 48th from the middle to the end of the school year. In Grades K, 2, and 6, students reached a mastery level of above average at the end of the year (above the 50th percentile). In Grades 1, 3, and 5, they remained in the below average range (below 50th percentile). Students in Grade 4 regressed from above average to slightly below average at the end of the school year.

Table 2. Mean Reading Scores on EasyCBM

	Beginning of the Year (BoY)			Middle of the Year (MoY)			End of the Year (EoY)		
	Mean	SD	%tile	Mean	SD	%tile	Mean	SD	%tile
K	11.06	7.31	48.31	18.07	8.02	60.56	35.83	11.31	58.76
1	21.16	16.01	32.20	41.52	17.37	46.60	49.08	18.65	47.84
2	52.33	33.75	59.28	62.42	19.92	71.00	56.67	20.65	70.14
3	22.18	9.18	36.68	30.12	10.27	54.43	27.35	8.65	44.16
4	-	-	-	18.23	3.34	56.83	15.31	4.46	47.88
5	-	-	-	16.63	3.45	40.63	17.09	3.41	44.47
6	-	-	-	17.31	4.74	52.53	19.28	5.84	66.07

Student Outcomes: At-Risk for Reading Difficulties

Tables 3 and 4 present the classification of students on the easyCBM. In Kindergarten, three students (17.64%) achieved what would be considered clinically significant (at or below the 10th percentile) scores at the beginning of the school year, and this reduced to one student (5.88%) at the end of the school year. However, one student (5.88%) who was at-risk (at or below the 25th percentile) for reading difficulties at the beginning of the school year continued to be at-risk by the end of the school year. In Grade 1, three students (42.85%) achieved what would be considered clinically significant scores at the beginning of the year, and this number reduced to one student (14.28%) by the end of the year. Moreover, three students (42.85%) were identified as being at-risk at the beginning of the year, and this reduced to two students (28.57%) by the end of the year. In Grade 2, five students (31.25%) were classified as being clinically significant, and three students (18.75%) were classified as being at-risk at the beginning of the school year; while the former number

reduced to three students (18.75%), the latter remained the same at the end of the year. In Grade 3, we observed two students (16.66%) to be clinically significant and three students (25%) to be at-risk at the beginning of the school year, and these numbers reduced to one (8.33%) and one (8.33%), respectively, by the end of the school year. In Grade 4, we found one student (6.25%) achieved what would be considered clinically significant scores and three students (18.75%) achieved scores that classified them as being at-risk at the beginning of the school year, and this number increased to two students (12.5%) and four students (25%) by the end of the school year, respectively. In Grade 5, five students (20%) were classified as achieving clinically significant scores and seven students (28%) were classified as being at-risk at the beginning of the year, and these numbers reduced to four students (16%) for the clinically significant group but increased to eight students (32%) for the group at-risk by the end of the year. In Grade 6, one student (7.69%) was classified in the clinically significant group at the beginning of the year, which reduced to zero students at the end of the year, and two students (15.38%) classified in the at-risk group at the beginning of the year reduced to one student (7.69%) at the end of the year.

In general, we noticed a trend of fewer students classified as being clinically significant and at-risk at the end of the school year when compared to the beginning of the school year. As the grades progressed, this change represented a 66.66%, 66.67%, 40%, 50%, 20%, and 100% reduction in the number of students identified as being clinically significant from the beginning to the end of the school year for Kindergarten and Grades 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6, respectively. Conversely, for students in Grade 4, we observed a 50% increase in the number of students identified as being clinically significant from the beginning to the end of the school year. Moreover, for the at-risk group, this change represented a 33.32%, 66.68%, and 50% reduction in the number of students identified as being at-risk from the beginning to the end of the school year for Grades 1, 3, and 6, respectively. No change was recorded for students in Kindergarten and Grade 2; a 33.33% and 12.5% increase was recorded for students in Grades 4 and 5, respectively. For most grades (Grades 1–3 and 5–6) as a whole, we recorded an average of 68.86% reduction in the number of students identified as being clinically significant (at or below the 10th percentile) from the beginning to the end of the school year. Though some of these students moved to the at-risk category (at or below 25th percentile), a few of them moved to the below average category. For three grades (Grades 1, 3, and 6), we recorded an average of 50% reduction in the number of students identified as being at risk from the beginning to the end of the school year.

Table 3. Classification on the EasyCBM for Grades K–3

Percentile Cut-Off Scores	Kindergarten (n = 17)			Grade 1 (n = 7)			Grade 2 (n = 16)			Grade 3 (n = 12)		
	BoY	MoY	EoY	BoY	MoY	EoY	BoY	MoY	EoY	BoY	MoY	EoY
Clinically Significant	3 17.64%	1 5.88%	1 5.88%	3 42.85%	2 28.57%	1 14.28%	5 31.25%	4 25%	3 18.75%	2 16.66%	1 8.33%	1 8.33%
At-risk	1 5.88%	2 11.76%	1 5.88%	3 42.85%	1 14.28%	2 28.57%	3 18.75%	3 18.75%	3 18.75%	3 25%	2 16.66%	1 8.33%
Below Average	3 17.64%	4 23.52%	3 17.64%	0	1 14.28%	2 28.57%	3 18.75%	3 18.75%	4 25%	2 16.66%	5 41.66%	3 25%
Above Average	7 41.17%	5 29.41%	7 41.17%	0	2 28.57%	1 14.28%	2 12.5%	2 12.5%	3 18.75%	4 33.33%	1 8.33%	5 41.66%
Well Above Average	3 17.64%	5 29.41%	5 29.41%	1 14.28%	1 14.28%	1 14.28%	3 18.75%	4 25%	3 18.75%	1 8.33%	3 25%	2 16.66%

Notes. BoY = beginning of year; MoY = middle of year; EoY = end of year. Clinically significant = at/below 10th percentile; at-risk = between 11th to 25th percentile; below average = 26th to 50th percentile; above average = 51st to 80th percentile; well above average = 81st to 100th percentile

Table 4. Classification on the EasyCBM for Grades 4–6

Percentile Cut-Off Scores	Grade 4 (n = 16)			Grade 5 (n = 25)			Grade 6 (n = 13)		
	BoY	MoY	EoY	BoY	MoY	EoY	BoY	MoY	EoY
Clinically Significant	1 6.25%	1 6.25%	2 12.5%	5 20%	3 12%	4 16%	1 7.69%	1 7.69%	0
At-risk	3 18.75%	3 18.75%	4 25%	7 28%	4 16%	8 32%	2 15.38%	2 15.38%	1 7.69%
Below Average	5 31.25%	4 25%	4 25%	7 28%	7 28%	6 24%	4 30.77%	3 23.07%	5 38.46%
Above Average	5 31.25%	5 31.25%	2 12.5%	2 8%	5 20%	4 16%	4 30.77%	4 30.77%	3 23.07%
Well Above Average	2 12.5%	2 12.5%	3 18.75%	4 16%	6 24%	3 12%	2 15.38%	3 23.07%	4 30.77%

Notes. BoY = beginning of year; MoY = middle of year; EoY = end of year. Clinically significant = at/below 10th percentile; at-risk = between 11th to 25th percentile; below average = 26th to 50th percentile; above average = 51st to 80th percentile; well above average = 81st to 100th percentile

Discussion

At the outset, we would like to highlight that this study was undertaken as a multiyear university–school collaboration with researchers at the University of New Mexico and a principal at a rural school site in New Mexico. The principal reached out to the research team to implement a tiered RTI model in reading at her school site to improve student outcomes. The school was getting back to in-person instruction after a hiatus of one and a half years because of the COVID pandemic response. The principal mentioned that online instruction was especially hard to deliver to students from these remote, rural parts of the state because of lack of access to computers and internet service. While a few students were able to access instruction, a large majority were not. She was concerned that the learning loss that students experienced was far greater in these parts of the state in comparison to the urban areas. The growth trends in reading that we recorded must be viewed within this context. Moreover, some recommendations made by our research team, for example, grouping students by reading level instead of grade level, were not implemented because students were confined to their own classrooms to protect them from contracting the virus. Being a community-based research project, teacher voice formed the backbone of our investigation; everything we put into place was a result of requests made by teachers at the PLC meetings. We developed pacing guides and fidelity checklists to support teachers and conducted biweekly PLCs to get their feedback and modify documents as needed.

We documented our work with teachers in how it impacted student outcomes. In general, for all the grades, we recorded an average trend of percentile increases from the beginning to the end of the school year for all students, as well as an overall reduction in the number of students who were identified as being clinically significant for reading difficulties. In particular, for Grades K–2, a larger growth was recorded from the beginning to the middle of the year, and scores seemed to plateau from the middle to the end of the year. For Grades 3–4, scores increased from the beginning to the middle of the year but regressed from the middle to the end of the year. For Grades 5–6, there was a steady increase in scores from beginning to the middle of the year and again from the middle to the end of the year. Some reasons for this could be the following: (a) students in Grades K–2 were learning foundational reading skills and needed more time to acquire these skills, given that many of them had not had any schooling for a long period of time and had to adjust to being in school; (b) the Grade 4 teacher was a long-term substitute teacher who was not a licensed teacher and did not attend the PLC meetings, which could explain the regression that was noted in the Grade 4 scores; (c) students in Grades 5–6

were learning more advanced reading skills, and their trajectory reflects what would be typical in terms of consistent growth patterns from the beginning to the end of the school year. At the beginning of the school year, students across grades were performing just below the national norm at the 44th percentile, and by the end of the school year, most students were reading at the 54th percentile, which is considered above average. This finding is similar to existing literature which shows that positive academic outcomes have been associated with RTI (Burns et al., 2006; Gage et al., 2017; Poon-McBrayer, 2018; Vaughn et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2012).

Moreover, Tier 1 reading instruction implemented with fidelity was instrumental in reducing the number of students identified as being clinically significant for reading difficulties. These numbers indicated a positive trend with an average reduction of 57.22% of students across all grade levels, except Grade 4 where the number increased by 50%. The former finding is similar to Vellutino's (2003) finding that the reading difficulties of a large majority of pupils can be prevented if early and intensive interventions are provided. Again, the latter finding could be attributed to Grade 4 not having a permanent teacher, but rather a long-term substitute teacher for the entire school year.

Implications for Research

Firstly, New Mexico had rolled out the implementation of a MLSS model in school districts during the 2021–22 academic year but had not provided teachers with adequate guidance and support to be able to implement this model with fidelity. Our project was a first step in this direction. Secondly, it is unfortunate that state-mandated requirements do not always align with what teachers need, but this is an opportunity for researchers to take on community-based projects to build bridges between research and practice. It is paramount that we listen to teacher voice and make a genuine effort to respond to their needs as educators. For example, in our study, the state required teachers to cover grade-level standards, but did not offer any guidance about a timeline, number of minutes to be spent on each standard, and so on, which is critical information for them to be able to implement these standards in practice. Providing teachers with pacing guides and fidelity checklists helped them with a blueprint for what standards to cover, how much time to spend on each standard, and how to measure mastery. Thirdly, this project only targeted reading goals, but future projects will target math and behavior goals as well. Through this research project, it was our goal to address two important research gaps in education within our state: (a) to provide structure to the MLSS model that is being piloted by the NM-PED (NM-PED, 2021), and (b) to provide students from low-income families, English learners, and students

with disabilities better educational outcomes, in response to the consolidated lawsuit *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018).

Implications for Practice

This paper highlighted the importance of context in implementing a program and measuring student growth and progress. In this context, we worked with a school site in a rural district right after the pandemic, with limited access to resources, including internet access during a long period of distance education. Though our study was conducted right when students were transitioning from online instruction to in-person instruction, which led to its own set of obstacles, we found that even small changes to Tier 1 reading instruction helped students make significant gains in their reading outcomes. Secondly, the district is expected to implement a RTI/MLSS system and follow state mandates without appropriate professional development. This is heightened in a rural setting where limited resources prohibit collaboration with other districts. Program implementation, thus, goes beyond technical issues and is influenced by contextual complexities that are not easily addressed, including a long-term substitute teacher who may not be as prepared as other colleagues. Thirdly, we received positive feedback from teachers and principals regarding the usefulness of programmatic support through the PLC model. It was an easy model to implement even through an online platform. Teachers responded well to it, brought a lot of experience to the table, and felt comfortable sharing their areas of need from the classroom. We would like to emphasize that it is difficult for teachers and principals to implement RTI/MLSS at their schools without appropriate professional development, and one of our future goals is to develop similar tools for other school sites that can aid in their practice of state mandates.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusions

More studies are needed in rural areas to corroborate our findings. Our study targeted a sample size of over 100 students, but we need larger sample sizes to generalize findings to other rural areas in New Mexico and to other states. Moreover, we had only a small sample of English Learners (ELs) and students with disabilities, and these populations need to be studied more in these contexts to extend the extant literature in the field. Secondly, the remote area in which the school was located and the distance from the city allowed us an opportunity to connect with teachers online but not in-person. We believe we would have seen better reading outcomes if we were on the school site more often to observe students and provide timely feedback to teachers on reading assessment and instruction. Thirdly, access to resources is a problem that needs

to be addressed in the rural areas. For example, our teachers were trained in the Wilson Fundations® Reading Program[1], but it took them almost six months to receive all the materials for elementary grades to put their training into practice. Despite the limitations listed above, this article makes an important contribution to the literature by highlighting the efficacy of a tiered model of instruction for reading. When implemented with fidelity, it can improve reading outcomes for all students and reduce the number of students who are misidentified as being at-risk for learning disabilities.

Endnotes

[1]Fundations® is a structured literacy approach grounded in the science of reading that uses multisensory techniques for engaging students in reading, spelling and handwriting curricula.
[2]Wonders® is an evidence-based K-5 ELA program that allows students opportunities to assess and express themselves through reading, writing and speaking.
[3]Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) ® is a comprehensive professional learning suite designed to provide early childhood and elementary educators with deep knowledge to be literacy and language experts in the science of reading.
[4]Heggerty® Phonemic Awareness curriculum provides a fast-paced and engaging way for you to teach daily phonemic awareness lessons in 12 minutes or less.
[5]FCRR is a free resource (www.fcrr.org) for educators to access the latest research in reading and a resource database that provides quick lessons in every area of reading by grade level.

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Appendix. Fidelity Checklist

Quarter: ☐ First ☐ Second ☐ Third ☐ Fourth

Grade: ☐ Kindergarten ☐ First ☐ Second ☐ Third ☐ Fourth ☐ Fifth ☐ Sixth

Dates of Instruction		Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Total # of minutes
Week 1:	Time (in mins): Focus: Program/Re-source:					
Week 2:	Time (in mins): Focus: Program/Re-source:					
Week 3:	Time (in mins): Focus: Program/Re-source:					
Week 4:	Time (in mins): Focus: Program/Re-source:					
Week 5:	Time (in mins): Focus: Program/Re-source:					
Week 6:	Time (in mins): Focus: Program/Re-source:					

Week 7:	Time (in mins): Focus: Program/Re- source:					
Week 8:	Time (in mins): Focus: Program/Re- source:					

Legend:

Focus			Program/Resource
OL = Oral Language	BK = Background Knowledge	LK = Literacy Knowledge	D = Fundations
P = Phonemic Awareness	P&S = Phonics & Spelling	SW = Sight Words	L=LETTRS
F = Fluency	S = Syntax	V = Vocabulary	W=Wonders
C = Comprehension			H=Haggerty
Other: ___________			F=FCRR
			Other: ____________

Weeks	Standards Covered (by notation)	Student Evaluation/ Assessment (e.g., Oral, Written, CBM)	What is your goal for mastery of the task? (It should be 80% or more: e.g., 4/5 correct answers)	How many students in class/What percentage reached mastery? (e.g., 8/10 = 80% of students)	Next Steps for students who did not reach mastery (e.g., small group review, whole group review, one-on-one explicit instruction)
Week 1					
Week 2					
Week 3					
Week 4					
Week 5					
Week 6					
Week 7					
Week 8					

Students At-Risk: After 8 weeks of instruction: covering ____ standards (number of standards), students ______________________(student initials) seem to be at risk for reading difficulties in __________________________________(list focus areas).

The Influences of Overparenting on Teachers: Perspectives from Middle and High School Teachers in an Independent School

Christie Lee Rains and Courtney Gann

Abstract

This case study focused on middle school and high school teachers in an independent school to explore their perceptions of how overparenting influenced them in the classroom. A qualitative case study was conducted within an independent school in the southeast United States. Eleven middle school and high school teachers, which represented 52% of the full-time faculty at the school, participated in an online questionnaire and follow-up interviews regarding their experiences with overparenting. Findings revealed three themes: (a) teachers overwhelmingly associated parent–teacher interactions with conflict and confrontation, (b) teachers perceived overparenting influences teacher autonomy by forcing teachers to set boundaries, and (c) teachers experienced increased workloads. This study provides insight into how overparenting influences teachers, which may help teachers, administrators, and future educators prepare for this type of parent–teacher interaction.

Key Words: overparenting, teachers, middle schools, high schools, independent, private secondary school, boundaries, autonomy, workload, helicopter, lawnmower, overprotective parenting, educator perspective, parent involvement

Introduction

Overparenting, while occurring between parents and their children, has the potential to influence the school environment and, specifically, teachers.

Overparenting may be intrusive, overcontrolling, overly assertive, and developmentally inappropriate parental involvement or behavior to advocate for a child's success, remove obstacles or difficulties, and ensure happiness, success, and well-being (Jiao & Segrin, 2023; Segrin et al., 2012; Segrin et al. 2020; Yaffe et al., 2024). Overparenting includes overprotective, overcontrolling, or overpressuring parental behaviors. Researchers have found variations in overparenting, as well as a variety of modern terms, including helicopter parenting (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Segrin et al., 2020), intrusive parenting (Taylor et al., 2013), overprotective parenting (Spokas & Heimberg, 2009; Ungar, 2009), lawnmower parenting (Locke et al., 2012; Segrin et al., 2012), and overparenting (Jiao & Segrin, 2023; Locke et al., 2012; Segrin et al., 2012; Yaffe et al., 2024). This case study seeks to explore the concept of overparenting from a teacher perspective.

Overparenting is linked to exceedingly high and unrealistic parental academic expectations, criticism of children and teachers, and feelings of entitlement on the part of the parent and the child (Fletcher et al., 2020). Feelings of entitlement are related to decreased student engagement inside and outside of class, decreased academic compliance, and increased perceptions of inappropriate or offensive faculty behavior (Fletcher et al., 2020; Knepp, 2016; Kopp & Finney, 2013). This sense of entitlement from overparenting can cause parents to challenge and criticize teachers (Dor & Mentzer, 2019; Fletcher et al., 2020). Interactions between teachers and parents can be sources of conflict, causing teachers to be reluctant to initiate communication and leading teachers to alter behaviors and minimize contact with parents (Dor & Mentzer, 2019; Frolova et al., 2019). Overparenting may leave teachers feeling helpless and insecure due to decreased authority and loss of autonomy (Dor & Mentzer, 2019). Effective communication between parents and teachers helps establish a healthy and positive partnership between school and home and requires equity, consideration, and trust (Holmes et al., 2020; Palts & Harro-Loit, 2015).

Overparenting in Schools

The complex concept of overparenting varies depending on the parent's behaviors and the child's age (Leung & Busiol, 2016). Some behaviors are appropriate for young children, and the same behaviors are inappropriate as the child enters adolescence and young adulthood (Leung & Busiol, 2016; Padilla-Walker et al., 2019; Yaffe et al., 2024). Studies on overparenting have focused on developmental outcomes of mainly undergraduate students, with little research on the impacts of overparenting on adolescents (Leung & Busiol, 2016; Moilanen & Manuel, 2019; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020; Steele & McKinney, 2019). Researchers have examined college student perceptions

of parental involvement when assessing overparenting rather than adolescent or teacher experiences (Padilla-Walker et al., 2019; Rote et al., 2020). Studies have also examined how overparenting impacts the relationship between college students and instructors and the expectation of parent and instructor communication (Frey & Tatum, 2016). However, research into the perceptions of teachers and the expectations of parent and teacher communication with overparenting is lacking.

Overparenting represents a shift in parenting trends; as educators encounter more aggressive forms of parent involvement and communication, these encounters result in teachers feeling uncomfortable, undervalued, and unappreciated (Herman & Reinke, 2017). Researchers acknowledge the importance of parent involvement in schools, resulting in better grades, higher test scores, less substance abuse, and better education outcomes (Jensen & Minke, 2017; Wong et al., 2018). Researchers assert that elementary and middle school teachers appreciate parent involvement when it is balanced, includes polite communication, and works toward the student's common good (Padilla-Walker et al., 2019; Schiffrin et al., 2015). Parental involvement in schools also facilitates learning and engagement and makes children aware of parental expectations (Wong et al., 2018), although parent engagement is sometimes underutilized in secondary school settings (Jensen & Minke, 2017). Such parent–teacher interactions may result in a beneficial parent–teacher relationship (Padilla-Walker et al., 2019).

However, parenting trends have shifted, and today's parents are more influential in students' lives than ever before, academically, socially, and emotionally (Kriegbaum et al., 2016). Parents who overparent tend to aggressively insert themselves into various areas of the child's life, including education, social situations, sports, and careers (Davenport & Lloyd, 2017; Schiffrin et al., 2015). Overparenting is associated with extreme anxiety separation in parents (Brenning et al., 2017). Overparenting and separation anxiety lead parents to micromanage. Parents begin appearing on school and college campuses, becoming overinvolved in academics and athletics (Leung & Busiol, 2016; Padilla-Walker et al., 2019). Parents become intrusive in their children's lives, especially in education and future competitiveness (Leung & Busiol, 2016).

Researchers suggest overparenting occurs within a spectrum, with behaviors differing among parents. Some parents take care of their child's daily life regardless of age; some parents seek to provide a protective environment free from harm and risk; others closely track and monitor the whereabouts of their children. Aggressive overparenting in education environments results in parents attempting to solve any problems or difficulties the child might encounter. Parents often plan for their child's future regardless of the child's interests and

readiness. Parents complain to schools and organizations for the benefit of their child or request others offer special care and privileges to their child (Leung & Busiol, 2016). Overinvolved parents dictate what specific sports to play, clubs to join, or what friends to make (Davenport & Lloyd, 2017). Overparenting often results in intrusive and aggressive behavior on the part of the parents as they advocate for their child's success. Controlling parental behaviors interfere with the development of autonomy and the formation of a child's identity; this is most damaging to adolescents and young adults (Fletcher et al., 2020, Jiao & Segrin, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

Overparenting behaviors also differ in the area of focus, with parents placing more emphasis on specific areas. Some parents emphasize math, science, and classical music, while others emphasize sports (Chua, 2011). Overparenting leads parents to be demanding, uncompromising, and excessively aggressive (McCullough & McCullough, 2015). Researchers categorize overparenting behaviors that impact education environments as complainers, life planners, and privilege seekers. Complainers engage with teachers and administrators to gain benefits for the child; life planners closely monitor and control the child; privilege seekers request or demand special treatment for the child (Leung & Busiol, 2016). The desire to create a safe environment free from obstacles leads overinvolved parents to demand such things as grade changes, immediate conferences with teachers, or an unearned position on a sports team or in a play (Frey & Tatum, 2016; Gartmeier et al., 2016; Gerard & Booth, 2015).

Overparenting and Parent–Teacher Communication

Researchers have examined parent–teacher interactions and communication, but not specifically in relation to overparenting (Conus & Fahrni, 2019; Dor & Mentzer, 2019; Gates, 2020; Kirmaci, 2019). Studies of parent–teacher interactions examine its influence on students, possible causes of conflict, and best practices for parent–teacher communication; however, research does not explicitly examine the impact overparenting has on the parent–teacher relationship and the experiences of teachers (Padilla-Walker et al., 2019; Pillet-Shore, 2015; Schiffrin et al., 2015). When researchers do examine parent–teacher communication and interactions in conjunction with overparenting, it is from the parent's point of view, and research on the teacher's point of view is scarce (Cui et al., 2019; Patton, 2019).

Parent–teacher communication is a vital component of family–school collaboration and student academic performance (Dor & Menzer, 2019; Laho, 2019; Thompson et al., 2015). Parental involvement in schools and parent–teacher communication leads to an increase in parental understanding of child performance, lower learning stress, and provides more supportive family

interactions at home. Regular parent–teacher communication provides teachers with an increased understanding of children's backgrounds and academic needs (Wong et al., 2018). Fostering positive parent–teacher communication lowers learning distress and enables cognitive and vocabulary development predicting early reading success. Parent involvement in education reduces the risk of substance abuse, suspension, or dropout and contributes to increased social–emotional competencies and academic achievement (Reinke et al., 2019).

Positive parent–teacher interactions and parent–teacher collaboration help establish a healthy partnership between the school and home (Bang, 2018; Palts & Harro-Loit, 2015). Children learn how to manage emotions and develop positive social relationships by watching their parents' interactions and expressions of feelings (Wong et al., 2018). Establishing positive interactions requires trust, reciprocal communication, and formal and informal forms of communication to develop a parent–teacher partnership (Conus & Fahrni, 2019). Teachers must communicate a sense of shared responsibility for student success (Deslandes et al., 2015). Positive parent–teacher interactions benefit parents and teachers. Positive interactions improve school environments, teacher satisfaction, and parents' attitudes towards school. Productive parent–teacher relationships encourage parents to cooperate with schools and teachers while motivating teachers to find innovative ways to instruct students (Almughamisi, 2020; Conus & Fahrni, 2020).

Dissatisfied parents have various ways to communicate with teachers, including coming into the classroom without notice, phone messages, emails, text messages, or going around the chain of command to the principal or district superintendent (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Herman & Reinke, 2017; Vincent, 2017). A lack of understanding of teacher and parent roles occurs when parents question teachers' instructional capabilities and professionalism. Difficulties also arise when parents become overinvolved in a student's academic growth or when parents and teachers have different opinions of a student's capabilities (Deslandes et al., 2015; Kriegbaum et al., 2016). Researchers suggest the commercialization of education contributes to a blurring of parent and teacher roles. Viewing education as a product transforms the sociocultural attitudes of the school. Parents are considered the buyer and begin to view teachers as having little authority (Frolova et al., 2019). Differing opinions of teacher and parent roles and what constitutes proper, clear, and beneficial communication leads to miscommunication and misunderstandings (Hindin & Mueller, 2016; Nelson, 2018). A clear definition of roles facilitates positive, productive, and effective communication and proper communication expectations (Natale & Lubniewski, 2017).

Overparenting and Teacher Satisfaction

The aggressive and antagonistic parenting behaviors associated with overparenting contribute to teacher job dissatisfaction. They may also be why some educators leave the profession early in search of alternate careers (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Sartin et al., 2018; Vagi et al., 2019; Yorulmaz et al., 2017). Research shows new teachers are leaving the profession voluntarily at a rate between 20% and 50% over the first five years of teaching (Glazer, 2018; Sutcher et al., 2016). Research on current teachers even demonstrates that approximately 60% to 75% consider leaving the profession regularly (Marshall et al., 2022; Tompkins, 2023). Those that consider leaving cite issues with policies, student conduct, job demands, and a lack of support and resources (Oxley et al., 2024; Tompkins, 2023).

Negative parent–teacher relationships contribute to job dissatisfaction among teachers (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). When examining the causes of teacher dissatisfaction, researchers have identified themes such as a lack of administrative and parental support, lack of autonomy in the classroom, and interference by overprotective parents (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019; Gray & Taie, 2015). Feelings of frustration with parental interference, excessive face-to-face conferences, demanding emails, and phone calls and messages complaining about curriculum and teaching styles are causing teachers to leave the profession (Oakes et al., 2017). Principals report feeling frustrated and overwhelmed for similar reasons and leave the profession due to the aggressive behavior of helicopter parents, interference and unreasonable parent expectations, and time demands of parents (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Teachers often feel they lack the appropriate tools to effectively engage with parents (Hindin & Mueller, 2016; Westergård, 2013). Teachers feel attacked and harassed by overparenting. Aggressive interactions with parents cause teachers to feel uncomfortable, undervalued, and unappreciated (Herman & Reinke, 2017). Parent–teacher interactions, especially conflicts, are marked by emotional perception. Conflicts are often a result of low levels of trust between parents and teachers in the area of education and underestimating the contributions of each other (Frolova et al., 2019). Although veteran teachers often feel confident communicating with overinvolved parents, new teachers may have difficulty forming positive relationships with helicopter parents (Santoro, 2015; Vagi et al., 2019; Yorulmaz et al., 2017). Further research is needed to explore overparenting in secondary schools from the teachers' perspective to assist teachers in preparing to handle potentially challenging situations and to improve teacher retention.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of middle and high school teachers in relation to overparenting and its influence on their classrooms. Studies exploring parent–teacher interactions regarding overparenting tend to focus on parent perceptions (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017; Houri et al., 2019; Locke et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2018). Although these studies examine important aspects and outcomes of overparenting, they do not consider the perceptions of teachers who often must interact with overparenting within their classrooms. This research study sought to provide pertinent information that can be used to help improve communication and encourage positive interactions between parents and teachers, as well as help prepare future teachers for what they may experience in the classroom when dealing with parents. The researchers addressed the problem with the following research questions:

RQ1. How do teachers perceive overparenting influences parent–teacher interactions?

RQ2. How do teachers perceive overparenting influences teacher autonomy?

Methodology

We utilized a qualitative case study design to provide a holistic view of the perspectives of teachers regarding overparenting in an independent school. A qualitative study allowed for the exploration of a phenomenon that was difficult to measure and offered an avenue to acknowledge and listen to the voices of teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study allowed for the in-depth examination of teachers' experiences and perceptions in a single independent school to better understand the phenomenon of overparenting from teachers' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Multiple data sources were collected, including documents, interviews, and open-ended questionnaires (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Documents such as the school profile and the National Association for Independent Schools' Data and Analysis for School Leadership (NAIS DASL) were used to gain information about school statistics such as enrollment information and tuition. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit 10 to 15 individuals teaching Grades 6 through 12 at an independent preK–12 school. Purposeful sampling allows a researcher to recruit participants who match the stated purpose for the research. For this study, participants had to be middle or high school teachers at the chosen independent school, had to self-report that they had experienced overparenting, and had to volunteer for participation in the study. All respondents who met these criteria were included as study participants.

Each participant first completed an open-ended questionnaire containing questions regarding teacher experiences and perspectives using Qualtrics, an online software that allows users to create surveys and questionnaires that can be answered by participants. The online questionnaire consisted of eight open-ended questions to gather additional information on the participants and determine if they experienced overparenting in the classroom, descriptions of those experiences, and how the participants defined overparenting (see Appendix A). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person or virtually using an interview protocol to provide the researcher with additional insight and understanding of the data. Participants answered open-ended questions about their experiences and perceptions of overparenting in the classroom. Since the interview was semi-structured, although an interview protocol guided the interview (see Appendix B), the primary researcher had flexibility to ask questions in a different order or use further probing questions as needed throughout the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The primary researcher used the interview to identify parent–teacher interactions that the participant considered examples of overparenting and how those interactions impacted the participant. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Google Recorder. The primary researcher kept field notes and assigned each participant a number to protect their privacy.

The researchers utilized multiple data sources; the gathering of data from various sources increased the credibility and internal validity of the study through triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Utilizing data from questionnaires and interviews provided multiple descriptions of teacher experiences of overparenting, and the documents on the school itself provided context for the study. Researcher bias was identified and clarified to help the reader understand the researcher's position within the inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is important to acknowledge that the primary researcher for this case study was a counselor at the school responsible for crisis intervention, small groups, and accommodations for students in preK–12 during the time of the research. She reported directly to the head of the school and had no members of faculty or staff that reported to her office, therefore, having no direct supervision of any participants nor any experience with the case study subject as she was not a teacher herself. To support the trustworthiness of the findings, the research conducted by the primary researcher was overseen by a secondary researcher who had no affiliation with the school. Finally, the researchers used member checking throughout the study to gather participant feedback to verify the accuracy of findings and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were solicited to provide feedback on emerging results to reduce misinterpretation of participant experiences and limit researcher bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A holistic analysis of all data was conducted to identify themes and develop naturalistic generalizations to help individuals learn from the case and apply information to other similar cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Codes were developed using an in vivo method of coding using the program Dedoose (Dedoose, 2021); these codes were then grouped together to form the major themes that answered each research question. Data collection and analysis continued until the data reached a point of saturation, where no new information was being discovered in the data analysis process. Member checking was also used to verify the established themes and results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Context of the Setting and Participants

The independent school was purposefully selected for this case study and was located in the southeast United States. The selected independent school was one of 52 National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) members in its state. NAIS members must have 501(c)(3) nonprofit status, be governed by an independent board of trustees, be fully accredited by an approved organization, demonstrate a commitment to diversity, and agree in spirit with the NAIS Principles of Good Practice (NAIS, 2020). The city where the school was located was home to a little over 200,000 people. Almost 30% of the population is under the age of 18, and about 45% of students from kindergarten through Grade 12 attend private schools (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a).

The school consisted of just under 400 students in grades preK–12 at the time of the study. The independent school population was 72% White and 28% people of color. The median household income in the city where the school was located was just under $45,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b). The tuition of the selected independent school ranges from $12,650 to $17,725. Research suggests that overparenting is more likely to occur among upper-middle-class families, which made this independent school appropriate for the case study (Ulferts, 2020).

At the time of this research, the independent preK–12 school included 52 faculty members, 48 of whom were full-time. The faculty was comprised of 3.9% people of color. Half of the faculty had over 15 years of experience, and 65% of the administrators and faculty had earned advanced degrees. At the time of this research, there were 21 full-time middle and high school faculty members, and approximately half (52%) of those participated in the research study. Of the 11 participants in this study, there were 10 females and one male. Teaching experience among the participants ranged from 4 to 47 years; 7 of the 11 participants held graduate degrees, and two participants held a doctoral degree.

Results

From the data analysis, three themes emerged during coding that related directly to the research questions posed in the study. First, teachers felt that parent–teacher interactions exhibited overparenting and were often filled with conflict and confrontation. Second, teachers felt that overparenting required them to set clear boundaries in how they handled conflict with parents. Third, due to the presence of overparenting in their classrooms, teachers felt an increase in their workload to deal with the conflict caused by overparenting. Each of these themes is discussed in more detail in the following section including the use of direct quotes to illustrate the themes.

Conflict and Confrontation

When discussing teacher perceptions of overparenting and parent–teacher interactions, all participants overwhelmingly identified feelings of conflict and confrontation. According to participants, confrontations took place face to face in the classroom, as well as during conferences, emails, and phone conversations. When asked about parent–teacher interactions with overparenting in the classroom, Participant 7 emphasized the challenge of identifying parent and teacher roles—helping parents understand where the line of appropriate parent role ends and the teacher role begins. Participant 10 admitted at times feeling that parents "usurped the professional authority of the teacher." This was apparent in teacher comments such as Participant 11 discussing parent overinvolvement with classwork, Participant 2's concern about parents micromanaging all of their children's academic obligations, hindering the learning process for the child and creating anxiety, and Participant 5's description of parents taking charge of homework and responsibilities such as packing student books and bringing missing work to school. Participants shared examples of conflict and confrontation, such as parents asking for alternative assignments, questioning curriculum, questioning teacher education and experience, and disrupting classroom learning. Participant 5 went so far as to classify some parent–teacher interactions as combative, and multiple participants admitted to feeling personally attacked. Participant 2 reported,

> A student made a poor grade, and when that happened, they [parent] contacted me every day. The student missed a homework assignment, and the parent came into my classroom, stood at the back of the classroom like this (participant crossed arms in front of body) until their daughter finished it.

Other participants shared similar experiences of aggression and confrontation with teachers. Participant 8 remarked, "The parent had a few run-ins with

other teachers, including an incident where she called and left a screaming voicemail for another teacher and an administrator." Another teacher, Participant 9, shared experiences of confrontation when parents interrupted class time:

> I'm teaching, and I had a parent walk into my classroom, slam open my door, bring a homework assignment their child forgot, and then blamed me for ruining their day because they had to bring their child their homework, and I said, "No, that was your choice. You should allow the child to take a zero so they will learn responsibility," and then the parent began to fuss and cuss at me and call me names.

Although participants had various years of experience working in multiple environments and with different age groups, each participant had at least one negative interaction with an overparenting parent and shared feelings of conflict and confrontation. When asked how often such interactions and confrontations take place, teachers reported answers such as "often at this specific school," "at least once a week," "at least one every year, more often two or three," and "once or twice a month." Eight of the participants acknowledged that working at an independent school was a unique experience regarding overparenting, often resulting in different expectations and more incidents of overparenting. These participants shared similar experiences in the private school setting with statements such as, "That was not the first time I've been attacked by a parent. It is unfortunately quite common, especially in private schools" (Participant 8).

Participants who discussed conflict and confrontation also shared concerns about the impact of such confrontation on students. As shared in interviews, participants believed students were embarrassed by parent behavior. Some students even apologized to teachers on behalf of their parents. Participants also identified the need for conflict resolution practices and experience dealing with overparenting parents and confrontation.

Participant responses suggested that teachers would prefer productive conversations that benefit the student and the ability to form a united front rather than an adversarial relationship with parents. The theme of conflict and confrontation was evident in both the questionnaire and interview responses. All participants identified conflict and confrontation as a universal experience of parent–teacher interactions with overparenting.

Setting Boundaries With Parents

All participants explained in either their interview or their questionnaire that overparenting forced them to set very clear boundaries and expectations. However, the setting and enforcing of boundaries looked very different for each

participant. For some participants, this meant involving the administration as an advocate or intermediary. At least four teachers mentioned referring parents directly to administrators when conflict occurred or, at minimum, having an administrator be present at parent–teacher meetings to discuss the conflict.

Other examples of boundaries set by teachers included providing clear policies and syllabi for students and parents. Having clear expectations, policies, and a syllabus at the beginning of the school year helped participants maintain healthy boundaries and avoid confusion. Participant 2 used the syllabus to allow herself to stand firm and be consistent. For some, boundaries meant limiting parent interactions and access to teachers, especially after hours. When discussing boundaries, Participant 8 commented, "It's forced me to be very careful about the boundaries I set as far as when I do work and when I answer emails because otherwise, I don't have time to reset." Similarly, Participant 2 stated, "So professionally, you had to learn to set more boundaries with some of the parents and students; that's been the biggest one." The participant went on to explain that some parents go to different lengths to contact teachers and monitor student progress, commenting:

> Several parents want direct access to all of the student's [online] classroom material and content. Several parents will argue for credit if work is forgotten or turned in late. Parents want their child to switch lab groups for experiments so their child may be with their friends. Parents have found out my cell phone number and called me late at night to discuss their child's grade.

Another participant explained the importance of having and maintaining boundaries. Participant 10 stated that teachers must "set boundaries for yourself and your students as much as is reasonable and healthy." Participants admitted that boundaries have shifted in recent years due to the availability of technology and the increase in parents trying to communicate with them after hours. Participants acknowledged the need to have time for family and a life outside of school. Boundaries were a clear theme when discussing how participants perceive overparenting impacts teacher autonomy.

Increased Workload

According to participant responses in the questionnaires and interviews, overparenting requires additional time, preparation, and documentation. All participants mentioned how dealing with overparenting such as setting boundaries and expectations for parents resulted in more work and required more time to prepare for parent–teacher interactions. When preparing to communicate with parents, 10 of the 11 participants referred to more work that included

creating policies, writing emails, being proactive, and anticipating parent complaints. Participant 2 asserted that overparenting influences teacher autonomy and commented, “It’s changed some of the things that I do and how I communicate; I started sending out weekly emails about what was going on in the classroom.” Participant 11 acknowledged the additional work overparenting can cause and stated, “They can very much put a lot of extra work on you, and it does for me.” When discussing the additional work overparenting resulted in, Participant 7 mentioned the time, the data, and the frustration overparenting causes them. Participant 8 shared similar experiences with increased workload, explaining that when she has overinvolved parents, they take up a large portion of her time.

Six participants gave specific examples of overparenting resulting in not just additional time and work but also having to provide additional time and attention to some students that may not be provided to other students. For instance, Participant 6 shared, “I did have to make sure and check on her more than every other student in the class, kind of like an accommodation, like a check for understanding more than I would for all of the other students.” Overparenting required teachers to be proactive and anticipate parent needs and complaints, resulting in what Participant 3 referred to as more preventive rather than reactive work. To preempt any parent complaints, Participant 9 confessed to increasing email communication with parents. Overall, the participants felt an increased workload due to the necessary documentation that came with dealing with overparenting in their classrooms.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although there is extensive research on overparenting, studies often focus on identifying and defining overparenting. Research that focuses on the effects of overparenting revolves around young adults entering higher education and the impact of overparenting on child development and parents (Howard et al., 2019; Locke et al., 2016; Moilanen & Manuel, 2019). Some researchers have begun to explore overparenting in education settings; however, those studies focus on parent perception of parent–teacher interaction (Hampden-Thompson & Gailindo, 2017; Houri et al., 2019; Locke et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2018). There is little information available on the impact overparenting has on teachers, especially from a teacher’s perspective. Therefore, findings from this study aimed to provide more insight into teacher experiences and provide information to assist in preparing future teachers and school personnel for family–school interactions (Kirmaci, 2019; Reinke et al., 2019; Smith & Sheridan, 2019).

Knowledge of parent–teacher interactions provides a better understanding of the influence overparenting has on classroom teachers and can help future teachers prepare for these interactions. In answer to the first research question posed in this study, participants overwhelmingly identified feelings of conflict and confrontation with parent–teacher interactions. Participants identified feeling defensive, distrusted, and insulted when describing such interactions. These feelings are in direct contrast to other research which demonstrates that feelings of equity, consideration, and trust are necessary to help establish positive and healthy partnerships between families and schools (Holmes et al., 2020; Palts & Harro-Loit, 2015).

Participants in the study associated feelings of conflict and confrontation when dealing with parents and described parent–teacher relationships as adversarial. Acknowledging teacher feelings of conflict and confrontation are important to the field of education. Previous studies have identified that the aggressive behaviors of overparenting, interference, unreasonable expectations, and time demands of parents are a factor in educators leaving the profession (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Participants in this study shared the need to have conflict resolution practices and experience to help with parent–teacher conflicts and confrontations. Insight into the teacher perceptions of how overparenting influences parent–teacher interactions can help school leaders identify areas of improvement in school environments and teacher preparation, including providing teachers with conflict resolution training. Understanding the teacher perception of parent–teacher interactions can help schools establish formal and informal forms of communication, identify parent and teacher roles, and work to build trust and positive communication between parents and teachers to develop a healthy partnership that can benefit students, parents, teachers, and schools.

Regarding the second research question, when discussing teacher perceptions of overparenting impacting teacher autonomy, participants identified the need to set boundaries and the increased workload that overparenting creates for teachers. The topic of boundaries occurred numerous times throughout interviews and questionnaires. Participants in the study stated that overparenting required clear boundaries to limit parent interactions and access to teachers, especially after hours. When discussing teacher autonomy, participants asserted that setting these boundaries and excessive communication with parents resulted in what participants identified as increased workloads.

Understanding the teacher experience is imperative when considering teacher satisfaction and retention. Research suggests that the most critical reasons teachers leave the field of education are dissatisfaction with administration, classroom autonomy, and intrusion on teacher time (Sutcher et al., 2016).

Participants in this study explained that overparenting forced them to set clear boundaries to preserve teacher autonomy. Research suggests loss of teacher autonomy and decreased authority can leave teachers feeling helpless and insecure (Dor & Mentzer, 2019). Participants explained the importance of maintaining healthy and reasonable boundaries, making time for family, and mentally resetting each day. Participants established boundaries in different ways, including using administration as an advocate, creating clear policies and syllabi, and limiting parent interactions and access, especially after hours.

Studies also show that increased availability of communication has led parents to raise their expectations of teacher communication and availability (Thompson et al., 2015). Participant comments supported this prior research, with teachers explaining that overparenting changed how many communicated with parents and students, requiring additional documentation and increased time spent preparing for communication. Participant responses also pointed to additional time and attention paid to certain students. The majority of participants indicated the extra workload was a result of trying to be proactive and anticipate parent needs and complaints. Past research supports these findings, suggesting that overparenting interrupts learning, takes teacher time and attention to manage issues, and requires adjustments to the curriculum (Garst & Gagnon, 2015). Studies also show that teachers often make exceptions or exemptions for students in order to prevent conflict with overparenting parents (Calarco, 2020). Findings from this study support such research, with some participants admitting to avoiding interactions with parents altogether. Acknowledging and understanding the unique experiences of middle and high school teachers with overparenting provides additional insight into the phenomenon of overparenting and its impact in an educational setting. Recognizing the need for boundaries and the additional workload overparenting can create may encourage school leaders to set additional policies for parent–teacher communication and provide support for teachers.

This study peered into the perceptions of middle and high school teachers regarding overparenting in the classroom. Participant responses raised several opportunities for future research into overparenting. Areas of future research could include duplicate case studies examining differences in perceptions in other independent schools across the United States, as well as further investigations on what factors might impact these perceptions of overparenting such as differences in diversity, tuition cost, or location. Case studies could also be conducted in public schools (perhaps especially in middle and higher income areas) to compare teacher perceptions of overparenting in public and independent schools. Studies could also be conducted in other countries to investigate experiences of overparenting globally.

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Appendix A. Middle and High School Teacher Experiences With Overparenting Questionnaire

Instructions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this questionnaire! Following are eight questions, which ask for information about your perceptions and experiences with overparenting in the classroom. While these topics are the focus of this study, I recognize that some of your answers may apply to related aspects of parent–teacher interactions and communication. Please include any information you believe is relevant to answering each question. Thank you again for your willingness to participate!

1. Name
2. How long have you been an educator?
3. Are you currently a full-time middle or high school teacher (Grades 6–12)? *Yes or no answer will suffice.*
4. What grade or grades do you teach?
5. Have you ever experienced challenging circumstances with parents? If so, please provide examples. *Some examples may include disagreements, difficulty with communication, or confusion of teacher and parent roles.*
6. How would you define overparenting in the classroom?
7. Have you ever experienced overparenting in the classroom? If so, please describe your experience of overparenting.
8. How often do you find yourself in overparenting situations?

Appendix B. Middle and High School Teacher Interview Protocol

Semistructured Interview Protocol

Date of interview: Time of interview:
Place of interview:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Position of interviewee:

The purpose of this interview is to help explore the unique experiences of middle and high school teachers and their perceptions of parent interactions in relation to overparenting.

I will ask you a series of questions. If you are unclear on the question being asked, then please ask for clarification. You may choose to skip a question at any time.

The interview questions provide structure for our conversation. Feel free to include any information you consider to be pertinent to the study. I will write some notes as we proceed to recall what you stated. I will digitally record the interview so that I can review it later. I will transcribe the interview verbatim so that your statements are accurately represented and exact. All information I take from this interview will be strictly confidential. Recordings will be destroyed after the interview is transcribed. Additionally, you will be given a pseudo-name for the study.

Please take a moment to review the interview questions.

What questions do you have before we begin?

Interview Questions

1. Briefly describe when you began teaching and what led to your decision to do so.
2. What grades and courses are you currently teaching?
3. How would you describe overparenting?
4. Tell me about an interaction you have had with a parent where you felt the parent was overparenting.
5. How did that interaction impact you personally?
6. How did that interaction affect you professionally?
7. How did the interaction impact the way you engaged with the parent?
8. What other interactions can you describe that represent overparenting?
9. How did the interaction impact you personally?
10. How did the interaction affect you professionally?
11. How did the interaction impact the way you engaged with the parent?
12. How does overparenting influence parent–teacher interactions?
13. What professional advice would you offer teachers experiencing overparenting in the classroom?

Book Review

Polling Student Voices for School Improvement: A Review

Eva Patrikakou

Relationships and contexts play a paramount role in human development—development which doesn't happen in isolation, but rather is fostered by the continuous interaction of a person's characteristics (genetics and epigenetics) with multiple systems of influence (Brofenbrenner, 1994; Patrikakou, 2016). However, the impact of such influences is not one of absolute value, but rather a relational and perceptual one, since influences from events and interactions are filtered by an individual's perception of them (Osher et al., 2020). Such influences include experiences from the home and school environments.

In addition to the family context, one of the central microsystems within which development occurs is school. The impact of school environment on children's development has been indicated to be multifaceted and profound. Such effect—whether intentional, unintentional, or within the construction of supportive learning conditions—contributes not only to academic learning, but also to identity formation, especially during adolescence (Verhoeven et al., 2019). Long documented are also the importance of the sense of belonging in school and the adverse effects on students who feel disconnected within the school environment and from their teachers (Havik & Westergard, 2020; Korpershoeka et al., 2020). We also know that overall school climate influences mental health and student well-being (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018). So, if student perceptions significantly affect their academic, emotional, and social engagement in learning, why haven't school systems sought out student perspectives more actively? Why haven't they integrated and systematized students' needs assessments based on student views?

In the first edition of their book on *Polling Student Voices for School Improvement* (2016), Strom and Strom placed an emphasis on the importance

Available at http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx

of the student perspective and the missing piece of its inclusion, especially when reviewing and revising school policies and practices. In this second edition (Strom & Strom, 2024) reviewed here, the authors maintain the focus on the importance of collecting student perceptions in a systematic way and also address some of the critical needs that have arisen since. The book's overall contribution is that it provides school principals with specific steps and assessment tools, in addition to an evidence-based rationale. The book is structured in four parts related to what the authors characterize as "conditions" of learning: (a) mental health, (b) identity and status, (c) cognitive and academic, and (d) social and emotional. The three first parts include three chapters each, whereas the last part consists of two chapters.

All three chapters in Part I offer implementable recommendations for parents, in addition to suggestions for school personnel. This common thread links the two important microsystems of human development (home and school) and explores their interrelationship in a mesosystemic way. With most states in the U.S. implementing a broader framework of multitiered systems of support (MTSS; Zhang et al., 2023), integrating the contributions of learning and behavior specialists, school counselors, school psychologists, and social workers in the book's next edition, will provide an even more comprehensive basis for addressing rapidly increasing overall and mental-health-specific student needs.

The first chapter offers an evidence-based rationale for polling student perspectives and a 10-step process on school polling. The authors offer online access to learning polls for educational leaders. Chapters 2 and 3 are additions to the previous edition of the book. They place a much-needed focus on mental health and aspects such as self-awareness and self-management (CASEL, 2024). Such a focus is of *paramount importance* and a significant central contribution of the book, especially when one considers reported U.S. statistics on children's and teenagers' mental health. Specifically, data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) indicate that almost 10% of 2–17 year olds have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), 7.4% with a behavior problem, and 7.1% with anxiety (CDC, 2021a). The actual numbers represented in these percentages indicate that anywhere from 4.5 million to more than 6 million children and teenagers have had such diagnoses. Alarming statistics also indicate that more than 17% of U.S. children aged 2–8 years, significantly young ages, have a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder, which represents one in six children (Bitsko et al., 2018).

In Part II, authors address identity formation. Chapter 4 discusses career exploration as a function of identity formation and integrates the supportive and functional role parents play in the adolescents' pursuit of a career path. Given the fast emergence of new fields and career paths, it is also essential to integrate

the critical role school counselors play in college and career counseling (CCR) for both students and their families (Novakovic et al., 2021). Educational leadership in the school building should be expanded to include school counselors in order to provide the best wraparound CCR services for students and their families. In addition, in a subsequent edition, polls in this chapter could benefit from existing questionnaires in the field of school counseling resulting in a further-informed tool.

Chapter 5 tackles the critical issue of time management and does so with an eye on supporting both students and educators. Such an approach is valuable as this issue is not usually addressed in an integrated way from both the student and teacher perspectives. Time management could have been part of the first part of the book on mental health, as it also relates with several diagnoses whose prevalence is increasing, such as that of ADHD (CDC, 2023). It is interesting that Chapter 6 on "cheating and values," included in Part II in this second edition, was moved from the first edition's "social conditions" component, potentially because it also relates to moral development. This last chapter in Part II highlights aspects of academic dishonesty. It is important that the authors, in addition to a poll regarding this aspect, also recommend specific ways through which educators should review the purpose of individual and group projects they assign, and most importantly, clearly outline expectations to avoid misunderstandings. However, a significant aspect that has been brought about especially in the post-COVID era and must be addressed when discussing academic integrity is the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Such use, misuse, and abuse of AI by students in their assignments is part of schools' and colleges' new reality, and therefore, it is of paramount importance that expectations regarding such use are also clearly articulated. Is AI allowed for a particular project? For what function? For example, it may be allowed for source gathering, but not for topic analysis. A realistic approach on the use of these tools will best support student work and development.

Part III covers cognitive and academic conditions of learning. Chapter 7 discusses the impact of multitasking and various distractions on academic performance. Research evidence indicates that multitasking and concurrent media use interferes with various cognitive processing functions such as attention and short-term memory, amongst others, adversely impacting academic achievement and even self-regulation (May & Elder, 2018). Although the included study involves only a small community college population, the issue raised is critical in today's education landscape across all levels of education, and the poll in this chapter can help school leaders gauge important student practices and preferences. Promising online interventions that could provide attention training for students so that they can monitor and manage multitasking may

offer positive future application for educational agencies to consider (Mrzek et al., 2020). Chapter 8 delves further in the issue of the use of online information with what the authors call "internet learning." The chapter emphasizes informed choices educators could make in order to be responsive to the realities of the information age. The included poll can assist schools to better understand the use and motivation of their student population in an effort to capitalize on student use, needs, and preferences. Part II concludes with Chapter 9 which examines peer tutoring and cooperative learning as potential means of improving student literacy and other academic skills. The benefits of cooperative learning and peer tutoring have long been documented and more recently also expanded to playing a significant role in reducing disparities in education (Ryzin et al., 2020). The poll included in this chapter is a helpful tool for assessing student perspectives at a given school. The overall use of peer-mediated instruction is another topic that should be viewed within the MTSS framework which aims to provide support and early intervention for student struggles. In this way, approaches and evidence-based strategies won't be viewed and used in a siloed or fragmented manner, but instead as part of an overall system addressing student needs in a timely and inclusive manner.

Chapter 10, the first in Part IV of the book, continues on the theme from the previous chapter on the role of peers by investigating the impact peers have on each other during groupwork. Since such preferences vary from class to class based on subject matter, teacher instructional approaches, and other factors, the poll in this chapter will be most useful at the classroom level, as results of student preferences and needs when working in groups will be most meaningfully applied at that level instead of the overall school. The last chapter of the book examines cyberbullying, which is a widespread concern. A 2022 report on adolescents and cyberbullying by the Pew Research Center indicated that 46% of U.S. teens ages 13–17 had experienced at least one of six cyberbullying behaviors, with the most prevalent being called offensive names online. One of the most important contributions of Chapter 11 is debunking some of the myths surrounding this problematic behavior and the characteristics of those engaging in it. Discussions on cyberbullying, other abusive behaviors, and their traumatic impact should definitely be a part of class discussions. Adverse childhood experiences have a pervasive and long-term impact, and as such they should be addressed in a systematic manner (CDC, 2021b). Teachers can play an important role in trauma-informed practices; however, they should not engage in these conversations without the presence and assistance of trained mental health school professionals, such as school counselors, school psychologists, or social workers, so that issues that may stem from such classroom discussions can be appropriately handled. The suggested poll in this chapter

can provide school administrators with a valuable picture on cyberbullying behaviors in their school, as well as needs for targeted services to address concerns the voices of students express.

Adolescents' perceptions of being listened to by their school's administration can enhance academic engagement while also decreasing concerning behaviors (Gonzales et al., 2021). Polling student voices not only provides a tangible way to show adolescents that their perspective counts, but it also offers school personnel valuable data to inform improvement of processes, practices, and structures. This book by Strom and Strom provides educational leaders and, more broadly, educators with useful tools to collect such voices, and it also includes suggestions of how such voices can be incorporated in school improvement efforts. Although the book could benefit from content enhancements on additional current developments, the predictability of the book's organization is a notable strength. Specifically, the inclusion of polls on the various topics discussed provides a standardized format across chapters, making it user-friendly for those who would like to include student perspectives in structuring a more responsive school.

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Pathways to Strengthen School and Community Collaboration: A Book Review

Kevin Badgett

The work done in a school happens in a rich and complicated context where role players collaborate and sometimes collide in an effort to advance the students who will take the baton and lead in the not-so-distant future. Collaboration is a noble goal that can get complicated as we work at the intersection of good intentions, complex mandates, and sometimes competing priorities. Because collaboration and partnership building are desirable but complicated, we need clear vision, a toolkit of strategies, and a willing group of partners. In her book, *Pathways to Community Engagement in Education: Collaboration in Diverse, Urban Neighbourhoods*, Canadian Catherine Hands offers stories from practice and entry points for something new that honors educators' knowledge, skills, and experiences while also adeptly illustrating the need for and value of strengthened partnerships between schools and their communities. This book is a worthwhile read because *Pathways* offers an insightful vision and practical strategies while addressing structural considerations that can support individuals representing several constituent groups to strengthen school–community collaboration.

North American district and school campus leaders can glean wisdom from observations in her case studies of what has worked and what has not. A continuum of schools-as-community hub models (Chapter 10) follows Hands' deliberate foundation building by offering a lens that can support *how* leaders consider possible next steps that may be most appropriate to their setting(s). Business leaders can also benefit from a richer understanding of the complexities school leaders face in their efforts to build systemic capacity in schools to strengthen the community interface. That can, in turn, support their ability to anticipate and be responsive to needs in their community schools. Teachers

are given the chance to see themselves in roles that include but are not limited to "networker" (Chapter 5), "boundary-spanner" (Chapter 6), and "advocate" (Chapter 8). Finally, parents are offered a brief survey exploring how the institutionalization of education moved decision making about schooling from parents to bureaucracies that were ostensibly representative but did not guarantee that local perspectives were informing decisions (Chapter 1). Parents are also offered insights on how they can invest in the education of their children by playing roles that can advance the schools that are serving their communities (e.g., use of personal and professional networks – Chapter 5).

Hands begins each chapter by offering the reader an anecdote that serves to illustrate the situation of the school within the community as a natural and symbiotic partner in advancing our society. This approach is particularly engaging because it both offers intriguing information about the world in which we live and helps the reader more effectively perceive how the "education system is connected across multiple systems [and has]…permeable borders" (p. 78). In other words, she offers a clear and compelling picture that illustrates how our work as educators in the PreK–12 setting is deeply and naturally part of what happens within complex and interconnected yet different aspects of our communities. Hands accomplishes this through a narrative that layers research, editorial observations and implications, and practical considerations into a story that seems designed to give the reader more than static strategies or prescriptive ways of thinking. In addition to offering practical possible strategies for approaching partnership building, the narrative calls on the reader to recognize that effective and holistic service to our students and the communities in which they live requires diagnostic leaders who understand that "community and collaboration are embedded in social contexts" (p. 4). For that reason, the leader who will effectively bring partnerships to life in a school must think about how that work fits local needs and priorities.

One of her stated purposes for this book is to shift the focus for community engagement and partnership to "collaboration in the community, by the community, and for the community" (p. 20). A related and persistent theme throughout the book addresses the importance of context. Hands asserts that "while collaboration presents a valuable opportunity, schools cannot benefit from these resources without consideration of the conditions at the school and community levels that necessarily impact collaborative relationships" (p. 20). This theme fosters a recognition that purposeful engagement and partnership are co-constructed and that co-construction extends beyond the point of a handout into collaborative development, implementation, and evaluation.

In addition to addressing the importance of community context early and often in the book, Hands' narrative offers the school leader scaffolded and

practical insights that can support their own efforts to build partnerships that fit the needs and values of the communities where they lead. Starting with the importance of a mindset that "must situate all parties as valued and contributing members of the education system who uphold children's academic achievement and wellbeing" (p. 53), she acknowledges that partnerships can support school efforts to bake into their operations resources and supports they are not otherwise equipped to address (e.g., food security or other troubling in-home situations explored on page 85). Other readers (e.g., business leaders and parents) can see themselves as part of the "social context" in which the school operates with "permeable borders" between the school and other groups and individuals in the community.

Hands furthermore explores a variety of considerations relevant to readers from any background that cannot be fully unpacked in a brief book review but should be acknowledged for the reader. While not at all exhaustive, some of those considerations include: the importance of the role of the principal and teachers who will serve as connectors, advocates, and even gatekeepers; a revisiting of the lifecycle of a partnership originally shared in earlier work (Hands, 2005); the importance of networks and players within those networks; the role of the "boundary-spanner" (p. 126) who can effectively translate across organizations with different cultures and ways of operation; and the importance of "a strengths-based view of parents and community members as allies, advocates, and leaders" (p. 151) with a rejection of what Hands calls "deficit thinking" (p. 151). She then addresses the importance of partnership succession planning, consideration of alignment of beliefs and values between partners and potential partners, and the need for a champion. Hands addresses the importance of targeted partnerships that meet specific student/student group needs and situates the school as a potential community hub. She also offers the reader a possible continuum framework that can help diagnose readiness for appropriate entry points in building partnerships and partnership structures that fit the needs of individual schools, districts, and broader communities. This is all punctuated with a powerful observation near the end of the book: "when educators ignore the impact of the home and the community on teaching and learning, they limit learning opportunities and risk alienating students" (p. 234). Hands cautions that "at worst, siloed schools provide irrelevant education that is out of step with the society's needs and does little to prepare children and youth for productive citizenship" (p. 234). In *Pathways*, Catherine Hands' work eloquently reminds us "…the school is just one node…in a much larger network of relationships that serves community development" (pp. 237–238).

Importantly, this work adds to the research by offering a story about successes and challenges in the practice of partnerships between PreK–12 schools and

their communities. Though the story is limited in generalizability (consistent with the nature of qualitative research), this work offers thoughtful illustrations of what has and has not worked in various contexts and thus is instructive for a wide range of practitioners, preparers, and thought leaders who appropriately recognize the interconnectedness of diverse and varied players in our communities. For that reason, discriminating readers can choose for themselves which lessons resonate most and what to do with those lessons in their own settings.

This work is furthermore useful for readers of the *School Community Journal* because, in its exploration of challenges, solutions, values, and experiences, *Pathways* is fundamentally about a way to strengthen the fabric of the school community. In this book, school leaders, parents, business leaders, educator preparers, and scholars can find something to inform their perspectives and possible next steps in efforts to build stronger school communities, better equipped to move forward together in a wonderfully diverse symbiosis.

I close this review with questions, reflections, and a final observation: What if schools are service organizations that live at the intersection of complex and diverse communities (see Debruyn et al., 2005)? What if the children do not belong to schools, rather, what if schools belong to the children, their families, and the broader communities in which we operate? If we really belong to the community, maybe it's time for a recommitment to service that proactively seeks the insights, perspectives, priorities of, and partnership with those communities. *Pathways to Community Engagement in Education: Collaboration in Diverse, Urban Neighbourhoods* offers us a research-informed and practical set of tools and ways of thinking that will support the course adjustments needed to more effectively play our role as a responsive organization within our communities.

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Book Review

Time Well Spent, A Review of *The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind*

Sam Redding

Melissa S. Kearney may jolt us with her book's title, but good economist that she is, she lays out a clear thesis and marshals evidence to substantiate her claims. Mom that she is, she writes knowingly of family life. "I am keenly aware that behind every data point is a person or a family, people with their own stories and experiences," she writes (p. 11).

Kearney's thesis is that differences in the "resources of [the] home (including money, but also time and energy in the challenging work of parenting) … produce large economic differences in the lives of children" (p. 2). These differences, of course, track family socioeconomic status and are evidenced in children's educational attainment and economic and social situation in adulthood. This, as Kearney sees it, accounts for a least a significant portion of the "growing economic gap between America's wealthy and poor" (p. 2).

Kearney expresses her frustration with economists' tendency to divert their eyes from the home when proffering remedies for the widening wealth gap. Instead, they propose institutional or governmental solutions: fix the education system, the tax code, welfare, or competition from foreign workers, for example.

In a conversation with a fellow economist, the colleague asked Kearney, "If parents are divorced but the dad contributes a lot financially, are the kids still at a relative disadvantage?" Kearney detected a hint of personal guilt in the question. She responded: "Look, I'm not really that worried about the kids of rich parents who get divorced. The kids I'm worried about are the ones growing up in single-parent homes with very limited resources; they don't have anything near the experiences and opportunities kids from higher-income household have."

Student outcomes are impacted by three categories of family and school inputs: structure, resources, and practice. How is a family structured—one parent or two, how many kids, birth order, and so forth? How is a family resourced—its income, access to community services, and adult time available to each child? What are the patterns of family practice, the behaviors among family members, the routines of daily life?

For schools, structure is how the school is organized—elementary or high, charter or district, public or parochial, large or small, and how its staff and program are arranged. School resources are detailed in school budgets—the money available and how it is allocated, the staff it pays, the buildings it buys, and the technology it provides for classrooms. School practice is seen in behaviors and interactions, procedures and routines—customs, ritual in the school and its classrooms, what school people do, and the policies that organize their professional behaviors.

Kearney focuses on what she calls "family structure" and explains it as a root of family resources and practice:

> If we can identify the reasons why having two parents in the home leads to better outcomes for children—say, because two parents bring in more money than one parent or they collectively are able to spend more time teaching or supervising their children—that doesn't mean family structure doesn't matter. Rather, it means that the *reason* that children from married-parent or two-parent ones tend to have better educational, economic, and social outcomes in life is because of something that two-parent homes are more readily able to provide for their children. (p. 51)

The conditions of home life that Kearney describes, any teacher can see in the behaviors of children in school and any parent can see in the faces of the children just around the corner—or in their own home. Kearney's conclusions from research do not conflict with common sense. With all the variation in structure, resources, and practice in real life, a child is most likely to thrive in a home with two parents married to each other who sustain their relationship over the long haul. Of course there are a multitude of exceptions, but Kearney's main point rings true even if we, like the economists, would rather look away.

Time looms large as a resource in Kearney's analysis, the time parents spend with children and what they do with the time, their practice. The family structure, especially the number of parents, naturally determines the adult time available for household maintenance and childrearing.

Kearney supports with data the fact that more-educated parents spend more time with their children than less-educated parents. The more-educated parents devote more of their time to interacting with their children, teaching

them, talking with them, and less of their time with household production activities (cleaning, cooking, laundering, shopping, paying bills). They also spend more time directly with their children and less time with their own leisure activities (sleeping, watching TV, hanging out with friends). These data points, as Kearney calls them, are complicated by the number of adults sharing the tasks, the number of children competing for their time, and the money available to pay for housekeeping and other services. Nonetheless, more-educated mothers spend more time with their children precisely in ways that "development psychology suggests are most beneficial to kids at various ages" (p. 112).

How much time a child receives from a parent depends, as Kearney stresses, upon how many parents are in the home, how distracted they are from attention to their children, and how inclined they are to invest their time in interactions that benefit the children's development. I wondered at this point if "screen time" might be robbing kids of the cumulative benefits of parent–child time, a few minutes (or hours) here and there, day after day, that once would have been spent between parent and child. That loss cuts across class lines but, of course, it draws from a shallower reservoir of available time in a single-parent household.

If time is a resource, must it be allocated "equally" or with some consideration of "equity" which implies variation according to each child's needs? Any parent or teacher knows the answer. For every child, there is a necessary minimum of time and attention from caring adults in order to thrive. For some children, more is required than for others. Variation of time in the school to meet individual student needs we call mastery learning. In the home, we call it savvy parenting.

Herb Walberg (2007, p. 95) uses the term Matthew Effect to describe situations of accumulated advantage or disadvantage such as Kearney describes for children in homes of less-educated, financially strapped, single parents. The reference is to the 25th chapter of Matthew in the Bible: "For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away." Neuman et al. (2018) pile inadequate schooling on top of adult-deficient home lives to explain the "double dose of disadvantage" in which some children experience a stunted language environment at school as well as at home. The unfairness that Walberg and Neuman describe rankles us for sure, but we suspect it is real. Acknowledging this truth may spur us to fill gaps for children disadvantaged by the circumstance of family resources and family practices, knowing that these disadvantages may stem from the family structure.

School communities can't leave the problem for policymakers to solve. The consequences of structural, resource, and practice deficits are seen in the faces

in the classrooms. How, exactly, might a school community reinforce the time each child receives from caring adults, fortify relationships in the home, and provide out-of-school experiences that are beyond the means of some families? Kearney offers some suggestions, including:

- Well-designed parenting programs
- Assistance with family finances, help managing money, referral for community resources, career guidance to reduce toxic stress from financial strain
- Fatherhood programs; boys especially are suffering from the absence of dads
- Community mentors and positive role models

These are broad categories of programmatic response to the problems we have outlined, and Kearney provides detail about each. None surprises us. The school community, of course, first serves all children by ensuring that they learn. That includes extending candid, practical advice and a helping hand for the adults who take the children home at night.

In *Opportunity and Performance: Equity for Children from Poverty* (2021), my colleagues and I argue that schools can fill the learning gap for children such as Kearney describes by amplifying their attention to verbal facility and the motivation to learn, the two deficits commonly spawned by impoverished home environments. Kearney emphasizes that the impoverishment includes one of adult time and attention.

The Coleman Report of 1966 alerted us to the significance of family and community influences on children's achievement in school, launching decades of attention to the gap for children from poverty. Years after the report, James S. Coleman, the lead investigator, observed anecdotally that there was a time when a young mother learned about child rearing from other mothers, chatting across the backyard fence. Neighbors helped neighbors. But now, Coleman suggested, such interactions between families are rare, especially for financially strapped and harried single-parent families. The school, he said, could bring parents together purposefully to learn from one another and achieve by design what once occurred more naturally in the course of life—in church, at the market, on the job, across the backyard fence. That's what school community builders do.

Kearney's mission is larger than what a school community can fully address, far greater than chats across the backyard fence. Therefore, this book is a valuable read for wide audiences, from parents to teachers to policymakers. Kearney seeks societal change that promotes marriage and, when that is not in the cards, shores up two-parent, positive engagement in children's lives. In 2019, she notes, nearly 40% of American children were not living with married parents. Nearly 20% of children lived with only their mother. These are big structural

challenges in the American family, compounded by inadequacies of resource (time and money) and practice (patterns of behavior in the home). We wish Kearney well. We know that every school that sees itself as a community of its families and staff is well positioned to do its part for the children in its midst, creatively and resolutely.

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