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Requests for Manuscripts

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.

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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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Grace Francis, Alexandra Reed, and Kelly Conn-Reda examine the challenges faced by teachers of students with disabilities and extensive support needs during the 2020 pandemic, providing considerations for ongoing practice. Max Antony-Newman points out the need for a consistent policy framework across levels of governance and countries to optimally support teachers in engaging the parents of their students. Meanwhile, Hope Casto, Kristie LeBeau, and John Sipple depict a colorful and useful school–community framework for leaders "in the quest for educational opportunity, equity, and community vitality." Authors Marisa Macy, Marla Lohmann, Elizabeth Neukirch, and Kelcie Burke advocate for community partnerships utilizing service learning as a way to combat the shortage of early childhood teachers.

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With both sadness and deep gratitude, we acknowledge the recent passing of Oliver C. Moles and his faithful participation in our editorial review board from 2000–2024. His insightful comments helped to polish many, many of the articles we have published over the years.

Lori G. Thomas
November 2024

Editorial Review Board

Reframing Family Engagement: Inclusive Strategies That Elevate and Validate

Marliese R. Peltier, Patricia A. Edwards, and Jacquelyn Sweeney

Abstract

Educational research consistently underscores the significance of family engagement in children's education. However, diverse ideals regarding family involvement often constrain the potential for meaningful school–home interactions within culturally diverse urban communities. Amidst education reform priorities such as high-stakes testing and teacher accountability, the crucial connections between schools and families are frequently overlooked. In this essay, we explore strategies for urban schools to foster partnerships with families and communities that leverage the full range of urban families' literacies, knowledge, resources, and experiences. Informed by findings from our previous research, we propose an approach that encourages teachers to critically examine their assumptions and biases regarding family engagement in schools. Through reflective practices, educators can discern how their mindsets, language, and actions influence the perceptions of families as valued stakeholders in their children's education. By embracing a shift in perspective, teachers can develop more inclusive and respectful family engagement strategies tailored to the unique needs of urban schools and communities. This framework equips educators with the tools to design initiatives that honor the diverse backgrounds and contributions of families, ultimately fostering stronger partnerships between schools, families, and communities.

Key Words: family–school–community partnerships, family engagement, urban education, partnerships, respectful strategies, home, parents

Introduction

> Teachers often see parents' goals and values as impediments to students' academic accomplishments. Parents in turn believe that teachers are antagonistic toward them and fail to appreciate the actual conditions that shape their children's lives. This lack of trust between teachers and parents—often exacerbated by race and class differences—makes it difficult for these groups to maintain a genuine dialogue about shared concerns. The resultant miscommunications tend to reinforce existing prejudices and undermine constructive efforts by teachers and parents to build relational ties around the interests of children. (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 6)

The task of educating children can involve multiple stakeholders which include school staff and the children's families. As Bryk and Schneider (2002) highlight in the above quote, school staff and children's parents do not always agree on the goals, values, educational approaches, or school happenings. This lack of trust can inhibit teachers' and school leaders' abilities to foster effective family–school partnerships and function as a community. Sheridan and colleagues (2012) defined family–school partnerships as a cross-systems and cross-contextual approach "wherein families and professionals cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate to enhance opportunities and success for children and adolescents across social, emotional, behavioral, and academic domains" (p. 3). We extend this definition to recognize that effective partnerships are truly family–school–community partnerships since families and schools are situated within community contexts. Thus, the historical, cultural, racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic factors of the families, school staff, and communities influence the interactions amongst the three entities. We also assert that one hallmark of effective family–school–community partnerships is their ability to function as a community—elevating and validating the roles and contributions of all members.

When designing family–school–community partnerships, it is essential to consider how the partnership will support family engagement. Educational research has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of family engagement in a child's education (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement [NAFSCE], 2022). While connecting families with school-based learning may seem obvious, varying ideals

and visions of family engagement limit the ways in which school communities understand, encourage, and benefit from meaningful school–home interactions. This is frequently the case in culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse urban communities where education reform has focused on high-stakes testing, teacher accountability, and school choice, but less on the fragile connections between schools and the families they serve (Gay, 2018). What many urban schools have designed and implemented are one-way initiatives that position school staff as the experts and providers of resources (Edwards, 2004, 2016). These types of one-way initiatives devalue the knowledge and resources that families possess.

In this article, we examine how urban schools can (re)frame family engagement initiatives in ways that build upon urban families' full repertoires of literacies, knowledge, resources, and experiences as one step towards developing effective family–school–community partnerships. First, we define how family engagement can be broadly conceptualized and discuss specific considerations for urban educational contexts. Then we define the types of urban spaces that schools and families may experience within contemporary society. Informed by our research, we then describe critical cognitive flexibility—an approach that engages school staff in critical reflection about their assumptions and biases pertaining to families' engagement with schools. Lastly, we share how school leaders, teachers, and the broader community can use critical cognitive flexibility to consider why and how they can shift their mindsets, words, and actions so that families feel valued and respected as legitimate stakeholders in their child's education. We detail family engagement strategies that are more inclusive and validating for urban schools, families, and communities. To note, we use the terms family, caregivers, and parents interchangeably throughout the article.

Conceptualizing Family Engagement

When considering how to draw in community assets to support family–school–community partnerships across varying urban education typographies, it is helpful to define family engagement so that teachers and school leaders can plan validating and respectful family engagement. Many school administrators and teachers recognize Joyce Epstein as one of the leading authorities on family involvement in schools. Thus, Epstein's (1991) scholarship around family and parental involvement in schools is foundational to understanding how the roles of families within urban school contexts have shifted across time. In her initial parent involvement framework, Epstein (1995) defined the following six key components:

- Parenting: Support families to create home contexts that support learning
- Communicating: Design bidirectional communication between home and school contexts about student learning and school programs
- Volunteering: Secure and organize caregiver volunteers
- Learning at Home: Provide one-way communication from the school describing how to support student learning at home
- Decision-Making: Include caregivers in school-based decisions and develop their leadership abilities
- Collaborating with Community: Integrate community assets into schools

Since 1995, schools have used Epstein's framework to conceptualize family involvement and guide how they create opportunities for families to interact with the school. Typically, when schools work from a parent involvement stance, they plan and implement opportunities and events with minimal to no input or guidance from families (Edwards, 2016; Zeichner et al., 2018). These parent involvement opportunities are typically one-directional with the flow of information going from the school to home contexts. Schools are positioned as experts who have complete knowledge of what should be taught and the approach that should be used. Schools possess all decision-making power and access to the financial resources necessary for implementation.

As schools have used Epstein's initial framework to guide their family involvement approaches, there has been growing criticism around how families' roles and contributions are diminished and devalued. The consensus position is that caregivers should not just be positioned as passive receivers of information and knowledge from the schools, but rather interactions amongst families, schools, and the communities should mutually inform each other. In agreement with this position, Epstein and her colleague (2006) suggested that parent involvement should be replaced with the concept of families, schools, and communities working as partners. Furthermore, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) emphasized that shifting away from parent involvement involves "both parents and school staff undergo[ing] a reinterpretation of both their own and the other's role and agentic positions" (p. 401). Stakeholders have termed this reinterpreted form of participation as family engagement or family–school partnerships.

Since the process of replacing longstanding views of parent involvement is not a simple or quick process, we use this article to continue to advance reinterpreted ways of family engagement. In this article, we endorse NAFSCE's (n.d.) definition of family engagement as being a

> shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families

> in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development. Effective family engagement cuts across and reinforces learning in the multiple settings where children learn—at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in afterschool programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community. (para. 1)

This conceptualization of family engagement thus contrasts family involvement in that it focuses on engaging families in ways that draw in their knowledge, expertise, and experiences to design and implement opportunities. As this definition indicates, power, prestige, position, and access are shared amongst the families and the school. Schools actively position families as possessing knowledge and expertise that are valuable for school-based learning. In addition, the flow of information is bidirectional between the school and home contexts. This instills collaboration between all stakeholders to construct learning goals and engagement opportunities.

Especially within urban school contexts, there is a need to acknowledge how politics, culture, race, ethnicity, and linguistic histories influence the conceptualizations and enactments of family engagement within the contexts of the family, school, and community. For instance, while the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) required parent involvement, it did so in ways that reflected White, middle-class forms of involvement; namely, the school retained the power, positioning, and access to design these forms of involvement (Hursh, 2007; Nygreen, 2019; Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020). Illustratively, Posey-Maddox and Haley-Lock (2020) found that their participant educators still preferred school-centric and teacher-initiated family engagement—engagement that often required families' physical presence and inflexibility to families' schedules. Current research has indicated that these recent educational policies emphasizing achievement coupled with punitive accountability measures have in fact reduced and even eliminated the limited number of family-centric or relational approaches to family engagement that some schools were attempting to implement (e.g., Ahmann, 2017; Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Mediratta et al., 2009). Furthermore, as members of NAFSCE (2022) recently noted, "The role of systemic racism, implicit bias, and income inequality in shaping educational and opportunity disparities are more pronounced than ever before and require mutual reciprocal relationships among families, communities, and institutions to rebuild trust and equity in our society" (p. 3). Therefore, there is a clear need to identify effective family engagement strategies that draw in the assets of the family and community into urban educational spaces in ways

that honor, validate, and uplift the children, families, and community. Identifying these types of strategies holds the potential to promote the cultivation of school communities that draw on family–school–community partnerships for the benefit of student learning.

Types of Urban Spaces

Urban education is an elusive term. In his research, Milner (2012) described how urban education definitions tend to be disconnected from other discourses and research in related disciplines (e.g., urban sociology, urban geography). In an attempt to add clarity to the field of urban education, Milner provided a three-level examination of "urban" contexts to include *urban intensive, urban emergent,* and *urban characteristics* based on the school community's population size and infrastructure. In Table 1, we apply Milner's classifications to a selection of school districts. Since our focus for this article is on family–school–community partnerships, we present the school district population numbers in the table rather than general population numbers for the urban context.

As the exemplar cities featured in Table 1 reveal, *urban intensive* school districts are located within large cities that offer a different way of living such as opportunities for using mass transportation, living in close proximity to others, and neighborhoods containing shopping, entertainment, and churches. Not only are there strong cultural bonds, but there are also a myriad of cultures living together within the same proximity. For instance, New York City Public Schools consists of a large Latino/a population and a larger Asian population than Los Angeles Public Schools. In fact, there are 176 different languages spoken among students in New York Public Schools. This equates to about 20% of students identifying as speaking a language other than English as their first language.

Urban emergent, according to Milner (2012), includes school districts within medium sized cities or areas. One example may be Maryland's Prince George's County Public Schools with enrollment of 131,000 students. The district's schools are situated in areas that have characteristics similar to *urban intensive* spaces, but with key differences. For example, some urban emergent spaces are close to mass transportation and in walking distance to stores and services, while others require a car to access jobs, schools, and business due to these spaces being spread across suburban and/or rural settings. Wealth and poverty are scattered throughout the district as found in most public school districts, with some schools providing close to 100% free and reduced-price lunches while others have little to no need for these services.

Within *urban characteristic* schools, school districts are smaller but may have characteristics found in larger districts. Examples might include districts such as Lansing, Michigan; Portage, Indiana; Kansas City, Kansas; or Portland, Oregon. Urban characteristic schools are mostly spread across rural and suburban communities. Urban characteristic schools may be beginning to experience some of the barriers, challenges, and differences associated with urban intensive or urban emergent schools.

Table 1. Applying Milner's (2012) Evolving Typology of Urban Education

Typology	School District	Total Student Enrollment	% of Student Body				
			Asian/ Pacific Islander	Black	Latino/a	Native American	White
Urban Intensive	Los Angeles Unified District (CA)	548,338	3.5	7.3	74.5	.1	9.7
	New York City Public Schools (NY)	938,000	17	25	42	1	14
	Chicago Public Schools (IL)	322,106	4.5	35.8	46.5	.1	11
	Miami-Dade County Public Schools (FL)	325,000	1.1	19.1	72.7	0	6.4
Urban Emergent	Prince George's Co. Public Schools (MD)	131,646	2.76	52.23	36.46	.29	3.82
	Tucson Unified School District (AZ)	122,021	2.1	6	63.8	3.6	20.5
	Metro Nashville Public Schools (TN)	80,494	4	37.9	29	.1	26.4
	Charlotte-Mecklenburg S. District (NC)	142,536	7	37	27	n/a[a]	26
Urban Characteristic	Lansing Public Schools (MI)	9,989	6	39	19	n/a	24
	Portage Township Schools (IN)	7,046	.7	14.5	26.5	.2	52.8%
	Kansas City Kansas Public Schools (MO)	22,140	n/a	54	27	n/a	11
	Portland Public Schools (OR)	49,000	6.3	8.3	17.3	.5	55.2

Note. [a]The school district's website does not provide student enrollment data for this racial/ethnic identity.

Even though Milner (2012) introduced his conceptualization of the three types of urban typographies more than a decade ago, it tends to be underutilized in contemporary research literature. Notably, Welsh and Swain (2020) conducted a comprehensive literature review examining how the term *urban education* was used. They noted that urban education continues to be defined in different ways and generally described from a deficit position. Furthermore, there was a tendency to depict urban schools as being located in large metropolitan areas experiencing high levels of poverty, and residents were traditionally marginalized due to their racial, cultural, and linguistic differences. These depictions typically did not recognize how the residents provided resources or their possessed assets.

In this article, we combine Milner's (2012) three categories of urban contexts with the six descriptive categories of urban contexts that Welsh and Swain (2020) identified in their literature review. These categories include: (a) population, location, and geography; (b) enrollment; (c) student demographics; (d) school resources; (e) educational inequality; and (f) social and economic context. We suggest that teachers should reflect upon the types of community spaces in which their school exists—a reflection that moves beyond student demographics and the types of school resources. Teachers and school leaders could contextualize what they know about their school context within the broader community context, identifying how the community population, geographic location, historical educational inequality, and community socioeconomics intersect with students' learning and how families might engage with the school.

The changing composition of school districts may provide us with pause. Teachers and school leaders ought to recognize that each of these community spaces, regardless of the "urban" categorization into which it falls, possesses a different array of community assets and needs which, in turn, informs how schools' teachers and leaders might conceptualize family engagement that includes and validates all community members. For example, teachers employed by school districts with an increasing number of children whose first language is not English may see language as a barrier to family engagement and school success. Instead, if teachers and school leaders understand the contemporary cultural context of their schools, they can plan the best strategies to meet the needs of students and families. Armed with this insight, teachers and school leaders can better connect students to language resources so that their heritage language is maintained and becomes a resource students can draw upon when learning English. In summary, community knowledge can assist teachers and school leaders in planning for ways to provide parents with the cultural, linguistic, and social

capital (Bourdieu, 1986) needed to navigate the educational system. This, in turn, may help extend quality connections between families, teachers, and leadership. Before we turn to sharing some effective strategies, we briefly discuss the educational theory of cognitive flexibility—a theory that undergirds the approaches and mindsets teachers and school leaders can employ when engaging families in urban school contexts.

Conceptual Framework

According to NAFSCE (2022), family engagement efforts are most successful when school staff and families form family–school partnerships that co-construct learning outcomes for children through the identification of equitable teaching and learning approaches. To create effective family–school partnerships, one must remember that no family, school, or community is the same. Thus, members of family–school partnerships need to think flexibly when approaching each situation rather than treating it as a stagnant case. Cognitive flexibility theory (Spiro et al., 1987) has many affordances for teachers who desire to think flexibly and want to develop this ability. Cognitive flexibility theory emphasizes that every situation has variations. One must first think flexibly about how to integrate prior knowledge and experiences with the current situation's unique variables. For instance, a teacher who has encountered a family who is multilingual may draw upon their prior interactions with other multilingual families, knowledge from teacher preparation coursework about multilingual learners, and informational websites such as Colorín Colorado (i.e., https://www.colorincolorado.org/, a website synthesizing information and resources about multilingual learners and families). Drawing upon all these interactions and knowledge, the teacher can then craft a plan for how to interact and respond to the current situation in an individualized and informed way.

In our research, we have theorized how teachers might engage in the critical application of cognitive flexibility theory (Edwards et al., 2019, 2023). We suggest that the critical application of cognitive flexibility theory involves more than simply identifying and integrating prior knowledge and experiences. When teachers engage in cognitive flexibility theory from a critical approach, we mean that they consider how their past experiences and knowledge intersect with the current situation. They then critically reflect on how power, prestige, position, and access influence the actions, thoughts, and words of all participants. By *power,* we mean the degree of control an individual experiences in designing, implementing, and evaluating the forms of family engagement. *Prestige* relates to the degree of

power and the related status that an individual experiences. An individual's *positioning* includes the types of roles that are available, ascribed, or denied within a specific interaction or context. Lastly, *access* is the ability to obtain and use the necessary resources for engaging in designing, implementing, or evaluating family engagement opportunities. It is important to remember that how power, prestige, positioning, and access are enacted or experienced does not happen in a vacuum. Rather, politics, culture, race, ethnicity, and the linguistic histories of the individuals involved influence these factors.

Inclusive Family Engagement Strategies

We now turn to discussion of inclusive family engagement strategies that elevate the voices, knowledge, and experiences of families who live within urban spaces. As Epstein (2011) suggested, "The way schools care about children is reflected in the ways schools care about the children's families" (p. 389). For the school to function as a community, it takes all members of the school to care about families and support student success, so we describe what each stakeholder can do to promote effective family engagement that validates and uplifts families.

School Leaders

Reynolds (2010) contended that many urban school leaders, in concert with policymakers, have come to accept the idea that urban parents are more of a hindrance than an aid in their children's educational development. Some school leaders have created environments where parent opinions, ideas, and questions are considered bothersome (Stelmach & Preston, 2008). Quite often, caregivers refer to the attitude or behavior of the school leader as the reason why they do not want to be involved. How then can school leaders support their staff and students' families to intentionally shift their mindsets, words, and actions so that families feel valued and respected as legitimate stakeholders in their child's education? There are several ways in which leaders can provide inclusive strategies to elevate and validate families through a shared vision and by advancing social justice and antiracist principles.

Shared Vision

School leaders can focus on building trusting relationships with families to counter negative perceptions and beliefs about how families in urban contexts engage with education stakeholders. It is imperative that school personnel work in collaboration with families since research has

long established that when caregivers are engaged with schools, children are more likely to: achieve at higher rates, avoid retention, attend school regularly, develop positive social skills, demonstrate leadership qualities, adapt well to school, graduate from high school, and attend postsecondary education (Epstein et al., 2018; Jung & Sheldon, 2020). A first step school leaders can take in fostering trusting relationships with families is to develop a schoolwide family engagement vision. The school leader can facilitate the collaborative process of developing the school vision to elevate the importance of family engagement. School leaders can also identify teachers who are eager to assist with translating the school vision into action. School leaders can support these teachers by cultivating a supportive environment for this translational work to occur and building trust amongst the school staff as they grapple with shifting family engagement opportunities to reflect the school community and families (McCauley et al., 2023).

As school leaders and teachers develop a shared vision, it is imperative to move beyond performative acts of involvement and planning. Leaders can support teachers' reflection of their biases and assumptions so that school leaders and teachers might authentically engage families to co-develop a shared vision (McCauley et al., 2023). As Admiraal and colleagues (2021) noted, "we can conclude that the more embedded an intervention is in the organization and culture of a school, the more sustainable impact it has, moving schools towards a culture of professional learning and collaboration" (p. 696). The school leader should expect school staff to partner with families, community members, and students to create this shared vision. Fullan (2000) reiterated this point by saying,

> Effective schools use their internal collaborative strength to seek out relationships with the community. They see parents more as part of the solution than as part of the problem. They pursue programs and activities that are based on two-way capacity building in order to mobilize the resources of both the community and the school in the service of learning. (p. 4)

Thus, collaborative family–school–community partnerships extend beyond the school walls in the hope of building a shared vision that promotes respective and collaborative relationships that are beneficial to the success of the school and its students (Epstein, 2011).

Leadership for Social Justice and Antiracist Principles

In creating a vision for family engagement, Jung and Sheldon (2020) found that school leaders who adhered to strong transformational leadership practices, on average, had "more teachers implementing active

family engagement practices" (pp. 23–24). Transformational leadership begins with engaging parents in positive conversations that seek to identify how the school supports and limits family engagement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Through these conversations, leaders might discover that families experience barriers to family engagement such as (1) lack of awareness or communication regarding opportunities, (2) minimal connections or relationships with the school, (3) time limitations, (4) work conflicts, (5) limited financial resources, and (6) childcare needs (Edwards, 2016).

Recognizing the barriers to family engagement is not sufficient towards adopting a socially just, antiracist leadership stance. As decades of research show, schools have implemented many strategies to advance educational opportunities and resources for children, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or social class. Yet millennial era school leaders in high poverty urban districts are still grappling with many of the same equity issues as their predecessors (Cook et al., 2020; Paige & Witty, 2010; Robertson, 2008). What many urban school leaders fail to recognize is the interrelationship between family engagement and the institutionalized, systematic effort to perpetuate educational inequities between people of color and dominant populations. Leaders must acknowledge how years of dehumanizing and abusive policies contribute to positioning specific "types" of families in ways that advance their individualized power and privilege while oppressing other "types" of families (Allen, 2008; Cross, 2007; Ferber, 2011).

Therefore, urban school leaders must reject deficit-based views of families and engage their staff in doing the same. According to Fiarman (2016),

> We must eliminate the stigma around talking about our bias. School leaders need to help their staff understand that unconscious bias is not deliberate; it doesn't reflect our goals and intentions. We can increase awareness and normalize talking about bias through direct teaching, modeling, and explicitly naming it. This allows teachers to discuss and examine their own biases more freely and productively. (p. 7)

The new normal must be built on antiracist and social justice principles. Educators must see, celebrate, and embrace families from all backgrounds (e.g., cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, socioeconomic) as equal partners and experts on their children and communities. The new normal requires a collaborative family–school–community partnership. Educators and families should work together to define their shared vision and potential challenges to implementing this vision.

Urban school leaders should integrate family engagement into equity agendas. Schools and educational systems in urban settings will continue to

struggle to enact equity efforts if their staff are disconnected from the communities they serve. Urban school leaders should develop equity agendas that emphasize building trust and deepening relationships with families of different races and ethnicities in order to pave the way for educators to recognize how racialized power imbalances between home and school influence their work. As part of an equity agenda, urban school leaders must develop authentic family engagement policies and metrics. Leaders who truly want to elevate family engagement in urban settings will apply the same tools they use to advance their other priorities. That means creating policies that support a liberatory vision for family engagement and expose bias related to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Crafted policies should also articulate specific, measurable expectations for the system's improvement over time. There are several ways in which teachers can be supported to include shifting mindsets from deficit to asset ways of thinking, working together to map community assets, encouraging caregivers to share stories, focusing on bidirectional communication between home and school, and providing curriculum-based over event-based opportunities as described below.

Teachers

Oftentimes, teachers may view families as disengaged, challenging, having "language barriers," or "don't care" attitudes. Thus, teachers may benefit from examining the ways in which they view families whose backgrounds may differ from theirs. As Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) indicated,

> If we are to teach, we must first examine our own assumptions about families and children, and we must be alert to the negative images in the literature. Instead of responding to pathologies, we must recognize that what we see may actually be healthy adaptations to an uncertain and stressful world. As teachers, researchers, [school leaders], and policymakers, we need to think about the children themselves and try to imagine the contextual worlds of their day-to-day lives (p. 203).

Consequently, teachers may not be aware that their personal experiences as children and the communities in which they lived could have shaped their perspectives about how families should engage in schools. In addition, teachers may not be cognizant of the wealth of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and experiences that families bring to urban schools, especially that of race, ethnicity, culture, and language, as educators often regard these as barriers instead of rich resources. We describe several strategies teachers

might consider when reframing family engagement in ways that elevate family members' power, prestige, positioning, or access.

Shifting Mindsets

To assist teachers toward an asset view, discussions can begin early within teacher preparation programs where class activities can help preservice teachers to unravel the complexities of urban spaces that encompass geographical locations as well as socioeconomic, cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences. Designing conversations in ways that address assumptions can be particularly helpful. For instance, connecting preservice teachers with families so that they have opportunities to discover that "powerful learning is possible when people have the opportunity to hear stories and perspectives from a wider range of voices" (Damrow & Sweeney, 2019, p. 263). When connecting with families, preservice teachers could converse with caregivers from varied cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to discover caregivers' range of expectations for ways in which schools should assist children's learning (D'Haem & Griswold, 2017). These conversations can provide opportunities for preservice teachers to consider how families' current forms of power, prestige, positioning, and access inhibit or facilitate schools' integration of the family's expectations.

In-service teachers can examine their mindsets toward urban teaching practices through professional development. Examples of notable professional development related to race, culture, and critical examination of our mindsets include Singleton and Linton's (2006, 2021) *Courageous Conversations About Race* and Trumbull and Greenfield et al.'s (2001, 2020) Bridging Cultures Project. Through professional development opportunities such as these, administrators and teachers learn to critically reflect on their own experiences with race, ethnicity, and culture; interrogate their cultural competence related to their own race/ethnicity and that of their students; identify how cultural practices intersect with their instructional practices and interactions with families; and develop their critical consciousness. As teachers critically reflect about their own race, ethnicity, position, prestige, power, and access, they can also interrogate how socially constructed views of race/ethnicity intersect perceptions of intelligence and students' innate ability to learn. As Mesler and colleagues (2021) concluded, teachers' adoption of a growth mindset (i.e., belief that intelligence is not a fixed attribute, but rather is malleable) is positively associated with students' developing growth mindsets. When teachers adopt a stance that they along with their students can grow and develop, teachers may be more apt to turn to families and communities, bridging student learning across contexts.

Mapping Community Assets

Teachers can identify families' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) by intentionally recognizing the strengths and resources that the students and caregivers possess. Green (2017) developed the concept of a community-based equity audit, an instrument that supports teachers with mapping community assets. Green recommended starting by using Google Maps to locate where community institutions are and the ways in which they benefit the community members. Since many teachers are community-outsiders, it is the families who have the deep knowledge of the community assets—knowledge that transcends what is available on Google maps or gleaned from driving around the community. Thus, teachers can draw on the families' funds of knowledge and insights about community resources to develop a richer and more complete map of community assets. By including families in the process of developing the community asset map, families' positioning and prestige are elevated and valued.

Discovering Caregiver Stories

In their work with parent literacy, Edwards et al. (1999) indicated that parents' stories can help teachers access knowledge that will assist with parent–teacher relationships. Stories can provide a window into the children's and their families' lives that can help with creating lessons as well as assisting with challenges that parents face. Teachers can learn about a parent's stories through thoughtful dialogue that demonstrates honor, respect, and equitable discourses. For instance, a teacher may inquire, "Can you describe 'something' about your home learning environment that you would like the school to build upon because you feel that this 'something' would enhance your child's learning potential at school?" (Edwards et al., 1999, p. 40). A collection of caregiver stories can serve as a space for teachers to practice cognitive flexibility—(re)shaping their knowledge, beliefs, and discourses about how to connect each student's individualized and unique home language practices and family literacy experiences with formal, school-valued literacy practices.

Checking for Consistent Bidirectional Communication

As in all professions, communication is key. However, bidirectional communication between parents and teachers is instrumental to address students' growth. Common examples of bidirectional communication include phone calls, home visits, family–teacher conferences, and virtual meetings (Graham-Clay, 2024). When engaging in these forms of bidirectional communication, teachers need to consider how commonly held assumptions and biases may impact their enactment of these strategies.

For instance, D'Haem and Griswold (2017) found that preservice teachers held common stereotypes about parents from varied cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and "candidates were focused on giving information to parents and not on creating reciprocal relationships" (p. 82). Further, Benner and Quirk (2020) indicated that parent engagement consumes much time, and some teachers do not see parent communication as an important part of their work. Feelings such as these could contribute to decreased bidirectional communication, perpetuating limited access, prestige, positioning, and power for families.

Bidirectional communication has the potential to create space for families to share important perspectives pertaining to teachers' assessments regarding the highlights and challenges of their children's school experiences. According to Leenders et al. (2019), building strong trusting relationships with parents "before there is anything substantial to talk about" (p. 11) is imperative, since parents don't always feel supported. Leenders et al. suggested the following strategies to encourage bidirectional communication:

- Involve parents in the decision-making process.
- Maintain boundaries with the best interest of the child in mind.
- Show a proactive and flexible attitude.
- Do not be timid about discussions related to difficult subjects.

Additionally, identifying and addressing barriers to family engagement with bidirectional communication is important. Graham-Clay (2024) noted potential barriers involve transportation, language, access to technology, finances, and the ability to read communications. There is no one-size-fits all form of bidirectional communication. Rather, this form of communication should be collaboratively developed with caregivers. As caregivers experience elevated forms of power and positioning as they collaborate to design communication approaches, teachers are also building trust and deepening their own knowledge of the families' backgrounds and preferences.

Offering Curriculum-Based v. Event-Based Opportunities

Schools often provide special event-based opportunities such as *Donuts with Dad* and *Spaghetti Dinners*. These are common activities that take place at schools throughout the U.S. as parents gather together. The missing element is a focused discussion on academics and curriculum that might best help parents learn ways in which to assist their children with schools' expectations. According to Edwards et al. (2019), there are several options for providing curriculum-based opportunities:

- Provide ideas on how best to help with specific assignments.
- Survey students about their likes and dislikes and create a list of books

that parents can help obtain through the library, online, or by additional means.
- Compile a classroom fact notebook to help parents with terminology, study resources, and ancillary materials.
- Create a phone or online hotline where parents can find out about forgotten or missing assignments.
- Start a blog to share what's going on in the classroom, and keep parents updated on assignments, field trips, and study strategies.
- Record videos for parents for quick updates.

These activities take teachers' time and effort; however, so does planning major events where parents may come together but not necessarily around academics and without the specialized teacher knowledge that can help students find success. When teachers engage families in curriculum-based opportunities, they send the message that families are integral members to the child's learning team and that teachers need the families' collaboration so that they know how to best support each child's growth and development. Community members also have much to offer within school–home communications as leaders can help with connecting resources and community knowledge as well as assist with building varied forms of capital to assist families.

Community Members

Oftentimes, schools may only look within their school contexts for individuals to draw into family engagement opportunities. Research has demonstrated that tremendous value lies in creating opportunities for community members and leaders to have a role in supporting the development and enactment of effective family engagement opportunities (Zygmunt et al., 2016). For this article, we define community members as individuals who have a vested interest in the community (e.g., people who live in the community, people who were raised in the community but have moved away, staff of businesses that serve community members). While there are many inclusive strategies that involve community members, we highlight three interconnected strategies that together amplify the community's impact on (re)framing family engagement.

Learning From Community Leaders

There is a growing body of research that examines how preservice teachers and practicing teachers can develop more inclusive family engagement strategies through the involvement of community members (e.g., Murrell, 2001; Zeichner et al., 2018; Zygmunt et al., 2016). This body of research indicates that an initial strategy is to identify community leaders and elders

who have deep knowledge of the community and its families. Community leaders and elders are able to offer a counternarrative to the often deficit-oriented perspectives that accompany urban contexts and families (Zygmunt et al., 2016).

A second inclusive strategy is that teachers and school leaders can learn from the identified community leaders and elders. In particular, teachers and school leaders can learn how to develop the mindsets and abilities necessary for adopting the stance of a *community teacher*. Murrell (2001) defined community teachers as "possess[ing] contextualized knowledge of the culture, community, and identity of the children and families he or she serves and draw[ing] on this knowledge to create the core teaching practices necessary for effectiveness in diverse settings" (p. 52). Community leaders and elders can share the histories, cultures, languages, and ethnicities of the children and families who reside in the community. For example, Zeichner and his colleagues (2018) engaged preservice teachers in a series of panel presentations and discussions hosted by community members. These panel presentations and discussions served as spaces where preservice teachers could connect their course-based learning with the "real-world" histories and experiences of families and community members. Community leaders helped to support preservice teachers' sense-making of their "disrupted" views of families and children who experience marginalization. In their work with preservice teachers, Seidl and Friend (2002), provided opportunities for preservice teachers to participate in a community partnership with a local Black church in order to build an "equal status" partnership. These are a few examples in which community connections might allow for development of cross-cultural competencies.

Murrell (2001) cautioned that teachers "have to avoid the fatal assumption that they know all they need to know about the culture, values, traditions, and heritages of the people they purportedly serve" (p. 31). Thus, community members can serve as critical listening partners who support and encourage teachers to relate their personal identities back to the identities of their students, families, and community members. As a critical listening partner, community members and teachers can together explicate how institutional systems perpetuate racism, discrimination, and power imbalances and identify ways to rectify educational conditions that limit the power, prestige, positioning, and access children and families have (Murrell, 2001; Zygmunt et al., 2016).

Identifying Community Capital

The final inclusive family engagement strategy is to form a family–school–community partnership that works towards the goal of mobilizing

and engaging the broader community in the education of its children. The task of mobilizing the broader community is a sizable one—a task that needs to be approached with thought and intention. We suggest that members of the family–school–community partnership can begin by identifying the types of *community capital* (Yosso, 2005) that the community possesses. Yosso (2005) defined the six types of community capital as follows:

1. Aspirational capital: "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77).
2. Linguistic capital: "the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (p. 78).
3. Familial capital: "those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition" (p. 79).
4. Social capital: "networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions" (p. 79).
5. Navigational capital: "skills maneuvering through social institutions" (p. 80).
6. Resistant capital: "knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (p. 80).

When the partnership knows what forms of capital exist in the community, they can set about designing family engagement opportunities that elevate and build upon this capital.

Throughout their research, Scaife and colleagues describe multiple efforts to incorporate community capital into family engagement (e.g., Scaife et al., 2023; Zygmunt & Cipollone, 2018; Zygmunt et al., 2018). One such effort involves using community leaders to teach preservice candidates about the community's resistance, navigational, and aspirational capitals (Scaife & Zygmunt, 2024; Zygmunt & Scaife, 2024). As part of their coursework, preservice candidates meet with community leaders at Shaffer Chapel, a historic site at the center of the community. Community leaders share the oral histories of the chapel and the community's recent work to restore the chapel and to create a community museum in the chapel's basement. The preservice teachers hear how these stories represent the community's forms of capital and what they should expect when engaging with the community's children at the local elementary school. Preservice teacher candidates are then supported to craft their teaching and interactions around these forms of community capital during their fieldwork experiences at the elementary school located in the community. It is expe-

riences such as these that position a community's forms of capital as assets that family–school–community partnerships can draw upon as they work to enhance educational experiences.

Conclusion

Family engagement has been recognized as the missing link in many urban educational contexts (Wood et al., 2014). In this article, we have built the case for how urban school leaders, teachers, and community members should (re)frame their thoughts about family engagement within urban school contexts in their quest to create validating and inclusive school communities. As Epstein (2011) noted, "Just about all families care about their children and want them to succeed and are eager to obtain better information from schools and communities so as to remain good partners in their children's education" (p. 393). When school leaders and teachers (re)frame how they envision family engagement, there is the potential to elevate and validate families' knowledge, literacies, and experiences.

We have outlined suggestions and strategies that hold the potential to work with the contextual circumstances pertinent to urban schools and communities. Implementation of these strategies is best done collaboratively since the efforts of practicing teachers and school leaders are not sufficient to promote effective system change. We advocate for the intentional inclusion of families and community members when (re)framing of family engagement. As research has shown, family–school–community partnerships with a vision to elevate and validate all members' contributions and roles can positively impact students' learning and academic success (e.g., Zeichner et al., 2018; Zygmunt et al., 2016). In summary, the children in urban contexts reap the educational benefits when all members of their families, schools, and communities work together towards a shared vision of educating future generations in ways that reflect asset-views, respect, and validation.

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Following the Family: Applying Bioecological Theory to Strategies Learned From a Family–School–Community Partnership

Katy Gregg, Nicolette P. Rickert, and Alisa Leckie

Abstract

There are many models and examples of family–school–community partnerships. Local to Savannah, Georgia, Parent University is a unique community organization designed to support, guide, and empower parents and their children (from birth to 18 years old) to build bridges between the community and the schools. This nonprofit has successfully partnered with families, schools, and other community organizations for over 20 years and offers an illustrative example of how schools are crucial partners for the success of family–community programs. In applying theory to highlight the work of a parenting program, the purpose of this article is to (1) describe how the local school system, families, community members, and Parent University work together to engage and empower parents; (2) delineate the characteristics of the program's sustained success through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006); and (3) highlight the interdependence of Parent University, the local school system, and community organizations. Implications for practices within other school–community organizations are discussed.

Key Words: family–school–community partnerships, family–community programs, bioecological model, community development model, parent education, family engagement

Introduction

Family engagement in schools has long been viewed as a precursor to building positive school–family relationships. More recently, recognition of cultural differences, family needs and views of education, and history of educational systems have been on the forefront in research when considering families' and schools' definitions and assessments of participation (Brandon et al., 2010; Gregg et al., 2012; McCauley et al., 2023; Yamauchi et al., 2017). Extending partnerships to include communities, neighborhoods, and myriad other supports for programs is stressed in the *community development model*[1] of school–community partnerships. Stefanski et al. (2016) described four models in their typology of school–community partnerships. The first, most simplistic model focuses on coordinating delivery of services *to* families, and then the models progress through coordinating an array of modalities to support and engage families.

The most complex of Stefanski et al.'s (2016) models, the *community development model,* includes the traits of the preceding three models then expands to include the goal to "transform whole neighborhoods…beyond the other three in its goals and vision and requires both interorganizational and cultural commitment and change" (Stefanski et al., 2016, p. 141). Empowering parents to act in roles beyond a passive partner, volunteer, or meeting attendee is key to this *community development model* as is the commitment of other community organizations that support families and impact youth.

Parent University of Savannah, Georgia (Parent U) is a family–school–community program that aligns with the *community development model* of school–community partnerships. Parent U has successfully partnered with schools, families, and community organizations for 25 years. Recently, other cities or school districts have reached out to Parent U leadership about beginning a similar program in their communities. As such, it is important to articulate through a rich program description the factors that contribute to Parent U's long-term success so that others can engage in similar efforts. In systematically reviewing literature in family–school–community partnerships, Chavkin (2001) recommends "descriptions of both individual participation and of partnership participation….The former focuses on individuals and families and the latter on the program and partnership work" (p. 90). Additionally, Chavkin (2001) suggests that interpreting relationships between theory and partnership activities help strengthen concepts within specific family–school–community partnerships. Considering these recommendations, the purpose of this article is to (1) describe how the local

school system, families, community members, and Parent U work together to empower parents; (2) delineate the characteristics of the program's sustained success through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006); and (3) highlight the interdependence of Parent U, the local school system, and community organizations.

What Is Parent University?

Originating in Savannah, Georgia, Parent U defines itself as "a community collaborative that provides services and support to families...[and] encourages parent involvement and participation in the education of our community's children and youth" (Parent University, 2022, p. 3). Their programming includes family-focused sessions designed for parents, caregivers, and other adults with a stake in the lives of children from birth to 18 years old. Parent U was formed through grassroots efforts to respond to community needs, the school district's partnerships with families, and research tied to developmental science. After substantial research and planning, the program leaders, then in partnership with the Savannah Early Childhood Foundation[2], realized that making generational changes in their community had to start with children (particularly those from birth to five years), but to influence children, they needed to reach their parents and caregivers. Over time, the parent-centric approach to supporting community and educational needs has led to a successful parenting education program when measured by the number of attendees at each session over time (Dove et al., 2018).

Parent U's mission, which is to "provide a parent-driven education and development approach meeting 'parents' where they are so they can embrace their full potential and see their value as individuals and parents" (Parent University, 2022, p. 5), has depended on the collaboration and support of the local school system. Since its inception over 20 years ago, Parent U has operated parallel with the local public school calendar and held its events in schools. In a typical year prior to the COVID-19 closures, Parent U could offer more than 20 events in person at Savannah-Chatham County public schools on Saturdays. Since the Fall of 2021, they have alternated in person and virtual events at least twice a month. For all sessions in person, Parent U provides transportation using school buses, childcare and youth programming, meals for attendees and their children, and attendance incentives (door prizes). These efforts removed some of the barriers that often prohibit parent participation (Baker et al., 2016). Their sustained efforts to overcome families' barriers to participation and incentivize attendance has been foundational to their success based on data from program longevity, participant reflections, and consistent attendance.

Hosting events at area schools has helped Parent U overcome some obstacles to family and community participation. The physical spaces within school buildings such as cafeterias, auditoriums, gymnasiums, and classrooms make serving food, caring for children, and holding classes feasible for large numbers of attendees. Additionally, the content of many of the sessions provides parents with knowledge and skills that help them interact more effectively with schools to improve the educational experiences of their children (Harper Browne, 2016). In fact, one of the seminal reasons for the formation of Parent U was a disconnect between a group of families and the school district in 1999 with a goal of supporting families in navigating the school system. The traditional forms of parent involvement (Yamauchi et al., 2017) were not engaging many of the school district's Black families, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and this was exacerbated by allegations of discriminatory practices. Thus, Parent U helped bring a group of concerned parents together to provide recommendations in approaching the school district's partnerships with families. Their early and consistent focus on applying a *community development model* by listening to and learning from parents (Stefanski et al., 2016) resulted in partnerships, trust, and support that were more representative of the diverse needs of the Savannah community.

Inclusion of other community organizations as "vendors" and instructors at Parent U events has been essential in making connections between community resources and community members. The barriers that prohibit caregivers from participating in school-based events are often the same barriers that inhibit their access to resources in the community. Through formal class sessions and informal conversations at booths during the event, community organizations provide information and resources about a wide range of topics such as: supporting literacy development at home, ACES and domestic violence, apartment-style gardening, self-care during the peaks of the COVID pandemic, and employment opportunities/skill development. It is through Parent U that community organizations in Savannah and the Savannah communities they intend to serve can connect.

Who Does Parent University Serve?

Parent U is inclusive of the local population of Savannah (52.7% Black/African American, 38.3% White, 6.4% Hispanic/Latino, 4.5% two or more races, 2.8% Asian; U.S. Census Bureau, 2023) with attention to those voices that are often marginalized, particularly in systems of education. Our demographic analysis for the 2022–23 school year (see Table 1), consistent with data collected since 2017, included Parent U Savannah participants[3]

who identified as 85.4% Black, 84.5% female, and 46.2% making less than $35,000 a year (Gregg et al., 2023). Almost 30% of attendees had earned a high school diploma or less, and 28% had at least some college or a two year degree. In all, there were 271 "parents" that attended Parent U sessions during the 2022–23 school year with the majority attending three or more events.

It is worth noting that the connections and sense of community that developed through Parent U was instrumental in supporting families during the pandemic. In the 2020–21 academic year, during the height of the pandemic, Parent U actively and consistently engaged over 200 parents in a virtual format. Of these parents, 86.6% identified as Black, 88% identified as female, 52.9% earned less than $35,000 a year, 24.9% reported their highest education level as a high school diploma, and 30.3% had at least some college or a two year degree. Considering that economically disadvantaged Black families were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 (Chen et al., 2022), the import of Parent U's ability to provide support and resources to families cannot be underestimated.

A limitation of data represented in this article includes the necessity of a research consent. While the data currently (see note in Table 1) reflect attendees who have consented to participate, there are likely a small number missing who did not consent. A remedy for this limitation is already in place, and the research team has helped Parent U take over the database management. In an additional example of our partnership, we continue to use the deidentified data to assist in reporting, but Parent U staff now enter and manage the participant database.

Recently, Parent U leadership has expanded to additional sites in Pensacola, Florida and Chicago, Illinois, and they have been approached by other communities wanting to duplicate their program model. Given that their approach focuses on localized needs of communities and parent ownership, the Parent U leaders' primary challenge in helping other locations replicate their program is that what it looks like in Savannah is not what it will or should look like in other places with different families and social contexts.

Table 1. Demographic Data From 2019–2023 for Parent U Attendees

Year	*N*	Race	Sex	Income	Education
2019–20	245	82.9% Black 8.6% White	83.7% female 14.2% male	63.3% < $35,000	38.6% high school 28.0% some college/ two year
2020–21	217	86.6% Black 4.6% White	88.0% female 12.0% male	52.9% < $35,000	24.9% high school 30.3% some college/ two year
2021–22	155	85.6% Black 6.5% White	84.3% female 15.7% male	52.6% < $35,000	18.2% high school 39.6% some college/ two year
2022–23	271	85.4% Black 5.7% White	84.5% female 15.5% male	46.2% < $35,000	29.4% high school 28.0% some college/ two year

Note. This data is based on yearly demographic surveys completed by participants who consented to participate and therefore is a conservative representation of the total number of participants who attend Parent U events throughout a given school year. In 2019–20, demographic data was available up until March 2020 when Parent U transitioned to virtual meetings and focused on helping parents with technology and the pandemic. In 2020–21 and 2021–22, all Parent U events were virtual due to the pandemic. Starting August 2022, Parent U events have alternated between in-person and virtual sessions.

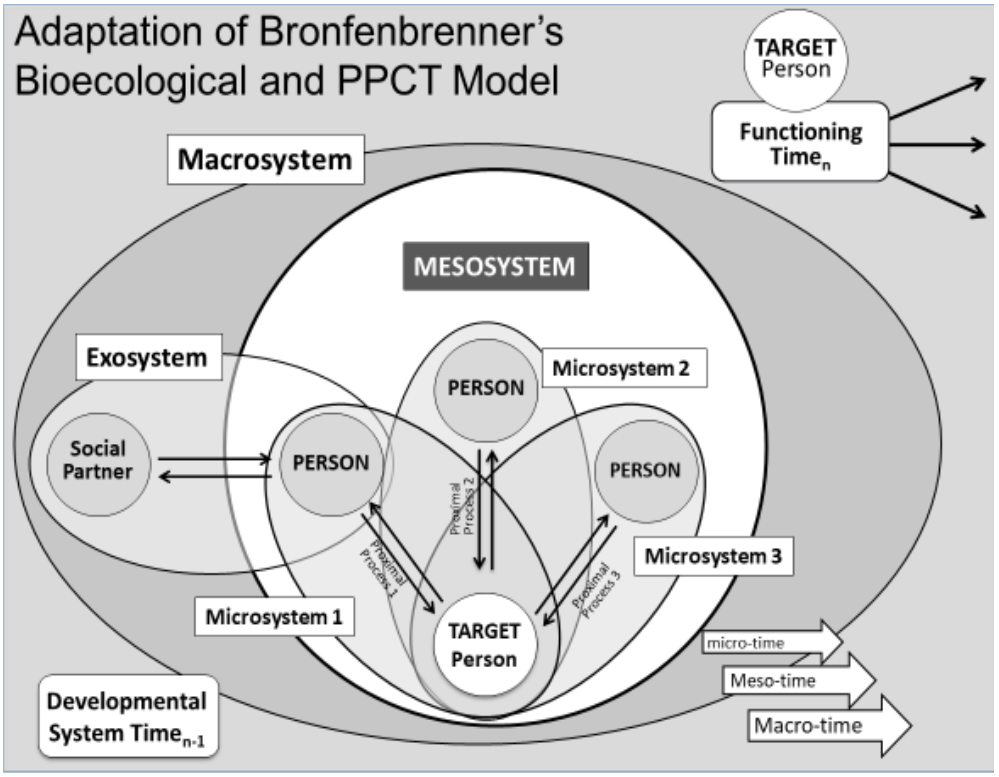
Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory and Family–Community Programs

With supporting other communities in developing and implementing a similar programmatic framework in mind, we examine how Parent U has been successful in working with family systems and supportive contexts through a theoretical model. To do this, we apply Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory as a lens to explain Parent U's components of a responsive school–community partnership. Before delineating the program's characteristics based on the theory, we briefly summarize Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory, a popular and useful model for examining family systems, development, educational outcomes, and the interconnections between contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

As a direct improvement to the original ecological model, which stressed the importance of context in human development, the *bio*ecological model reemphasizes the significance of the developing or target individual and their characteristics (thus the addition of "bio") in describing and explaining their well-being. The newest version of this model further posits that development occurs as a result of the characteristics of the *person*, proximal

processes, influences of *context*, and change and stability over *time* (see Figure 1 for a recent conceptualization of this model; Skinner et al., 2022); this is referred to as the Person–Process–Context–Time or PPCT model within Bronfenbrenner's theory (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Figure 1. Adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological and PPCT Model



Note. Adapted with permission from Skinner et al., 2022.

Person and Processes

Beginning with the "bio" aspect of the bioecological model, *person* involves forces (e.g., responsiveness, proclivities, curiosity), resources (e.g., abilities, skills, liabilities), and demand characteristics (e.g., attractiveness, sociability, passivity) of a target individual that can foster or disrupt their development and well-being (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Each target individual engages in *proximal processes* with other people, objects, or symbols around them. Considered the engines of development, proximal processes are bidirectional interactions between the developing individual and a person, object, or symbol that occur frequently (i.e., on a daily basis) and adjust or scaffold over time to continue promoting the development of

the target individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For example, a parent and child reading together is a proximal process: both parent and child are actively participating in the process of reading, on a regular basis, and the parent is adjusting the interaction to meet the needs, questions, age, and interests of the child (the target developing person). Thus, while the child is developing the skill of reading, the parent is also developing teaching, scaffolding, and responsiveness skills, making it a reciprocal or bidirectional process. The characteristics of each participant within the proximal process may support or hinder the developing individual and their partnering person, object, or symbol.

Context

With regard to the "ecological" aspect of the model, it is posited that each person is embedded within a nested structure of *contextual* systems with the developing individual at the center. *Microsystems* refer to the most immediate environments in which proximal processes occur and are contexts that contain the developing or target individual and their social partners (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For example, the microsystem of the home or family is often where the proximal process of parents and children reading together occurs. Therefore, the quality or characteristics of a microsystem (e.g., supportive, well-resourced, controlling) may moderate proximal processes and their influence on an individual's development and well-being. *Mesosystems* are linkages and processes between two microsystems containing the developing individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Mesosystems may take many forms (see McIntosh et al., 2008; Skinner et al., 2022), but one common example is a parent–teacher conference where the microsystem of the home meets the microsystem of the school as parents and teachers come together to interact and support the child's educational experiences.

An *exosystem* involves the linkages and processes that occur between two microsystems that do not directly contain the developing individual, but nonetheless still indirectly affect them (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For example, a parent's microsystem of their workplace and their proximal processes with their employer or coworkers may impact the parent's interactions with the developing child in their home microsystem; a pay cut or argument with their boss may make the parent more stressed and reactive in their interactions with their child at home. The *macrosystem* refers to the underlying and overarching cultures, norms, laws, governance, and policies that permeate and influence all lower systems (i.e., micro-, meso-, and exosystems; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This could include, for example,

culturally relevant parenting practices, laws on corporal punishment, or the prevalence of government funding for family welfare programs.

Time

Finally, bioecological theory and its PPCT model highlight the role of *time*, which is considered to moderate proximal processes and capture stability and change in the nature of the person's characteristics. This is often referred to as the *chronosystem* or the underlying dimension of time in the ecological model in which microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and the macrosystem fluctuate, ranging from specific episodes or moments (i.e., micro-time) to weekly or yearly change (i.e., meso-time) to wider cultural and historical shifts (i.e., macro-time; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

While the above examples have assumed a child as the developing or target individual at the center of the bioecological model, this framework can be used to highlight or focus on any individual, including a parent. This is of particular relevance when considering Parent U's role in promoting the education, development, and well-being of parents; the contextual influences on Parent U's proximal processes with parents; and change in these relationships and influences over time.

Applying Bioecological Theory to Parent University

Using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model helps organizations clearly understand who makes up their community, in particular the "who" within their community that benefits from a program (or who it intends to benefit). Parent U's inclusive approach to who is defined as a parent provides insight to their intended beneficiaries. In considering the impact of Parent U through the *person* level lens, "parents" are the focus of this program's influence (i.e., target or developing individual), yet not in the traditional sense of the word. Parent U does not limit the sphere of influence to just those parents or guardians in a same household but includes the community that surrounds children and those parenting them. Within their strategic plan, Parent U creates a definition of parents most inclusive for their community: "'Parents' are thought of as any person involved in raising or contributing to raising a child, and can include relatives, grandparents, guardians, foster parents, teachers, etc." (Parent University, 2022, p. 3). In accordance with their perspective, we use the term *parent*[4] to include any of the individuals who attend Parent U events and thus potentially influence children within their communities. As Saxena (2022) summarized, extended family is most often considered external to the family microsystem, thus having

less impact on family relationships in a household, until a more cross-cultural understanding of who can fit into a family's microsystem is applied. Considering the direct interactions between intermediate and extended families across cultures and communities, Parent U's definition of "parent" provides a different perspective on those direct, proximal processes that influence family functioning.

Parent U serves to impact those in the lives of children, thus indirectly impacting children. Within the bioecological theory with parents placed at the center or *person* level (see Figure 2 section A), the presumed influence is targeted on parenting knowledge, self-efficacy, confidence, and behaviors. Parent U strives to do this by providing an environment that empowers resilience in parenting, builds stronger networks, focuses on community capital, and supports knowledge of child development (Harper Browne, 2016).

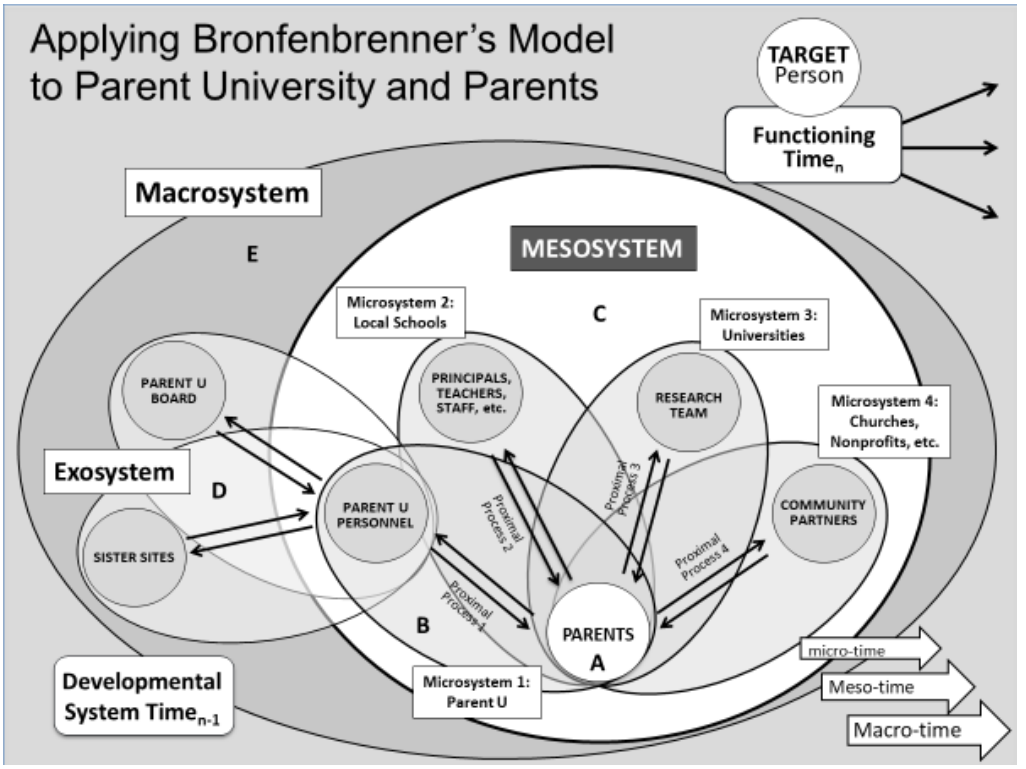
Microsystem: Parent U's Proximal Processes With Parents

As described by Stefanski et al. (2016), the *community development model* of school–community partnerships serve, include, and engage parents but then must show direct, intentional work to extend their reach to empower through "helping parents…develop their leadership skills" and "working to bridge the culture and power gap that typically exists between family and local community members, on the one hand, and the professional educators employed in the neighborhood schools on the other" (p. 152). Parent U recognizes the power dynamics within educational systems, thus placing an emphasis on empowering families with the confidence to share information within their community and in schools. As a mediator between families and schools, this example of recognizing and intentionally acting on potential reasons parents may not engage with schools highlights a strength of this program and illustrates a defining feature of the proximal process between parents and Parent U. At a Parent U session, you can easily recognize parents interacting to teach and support one another to create belonging and trust in their community.

Given Parent U's parent-led approach, the educational component of their programming is culturally and locally responsive. This intentional honoring of parents' values aligns with recommendations of cultural competence and responsiveness in educators (Harper Browne et al., 2016). Thus, trainers for the educational sessions are recruited and vetted not only based on their topics and experience, but on their relevance to the Parent U community. The Parent U Director of Training reviews all trainers' materials to check that they are designed in a culturally and locally relevant way. Considering that parenting beliefs impact parenting behaviors, Parent

U's goal is to directly influence the information parents receive at events and encourage active engagement during these sessions, such as through open discussion. Simultaneously, through this proximal process, Parent U intentionally moves from a focus of family involvement to one of family empowerment, promoting each family as the author of their own story.

Figure 2. Applying Bronfenbrenner's Model to Parent University and Parents



Note. Adapted with permission and applied from Skinner et al., 2022. Section A denotes the characteristics of the target person (parents at Parent U). Section B refers to individual microsystems that support parents, most notably Parent U. Section C highlights mesosystem interactions between microsystems, such as Parent U and school partnerships. Section D denotes indirect exosystem influences on the target person. Section E refers to greater cultural, historical, and macrosystem influences on parents, Parent U, and all other systems.

As we are viewing the parents as the target of Parent U in the model (Figure 2 Section A), without the mediation of Parent U, there would be parents who could not overcome disadvantageous proximal processes with the school thus hindering development for their family. Rather than select a one-size-fits-all parent education curriculum, Parent U responds to the needs of its community. Their equitable program planning includes parent

feedback and also provides information relevant to current community needs. For example, Parent U shares where to find childcare, provides updates on public health concerns, and engages with school staff on changes to education systems. Further, they provide direct, meaningful opportunities for parents to offer input such as at parent feedback retreats in the summer, surveys, informal conversations, and focus groups. The staff ask parents for feedback after sessions to ascertain the instructors' connections with the audience, which assists the staff in vetting speakers in the future. They are responsive by actively recruiting parents to become staff, volunteers, and leaders in the Parent U and related communities. Parent "leaders" can serve in capacities from helping with logistics such as running sessions, collecting paperwork, and driving buses, to completing targeted leadership courses. At each event, the director or assistant director of Parent U remind parents of their role in the ownership of Parent U and empower them to reach out to other families in the community to see what resources are available to them through Parent U. Parent U understands and acts on the importance of the community seeing themselves reflected back in the staff, program leaders, and shared vision of the organization (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Stefanski et al., 2016).

Mesosystem: Parent U's Interactions With Other Microsystems

In addition to acting as a microsystem for parents with frequent, reciprocal, proximal processes, Parent U also supports the development of parents as part of the mesosystem level in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. As a mesosystem refers to two (or more) microsystems interacting to directly support a developing individual, Parent U is active in a variety of mesosystems. As noted in Figure 2 section C, the microsystem of Parent U interacts with several other microsystems, including local churches, other nonprofit organizations in the community, university researchers, and the local school system.

Local School System

Perhaps one of the most important mesosystem partnerships has been Parent U's long-standing relationship with the local schools, principals, teachers, and staff in the Savannah–Chatham County school district. From its earliest beginnings, Parent U has collaborated with local schools to host Parent U events. Most in-person events occur at schools, which shift from event to event in order to better access parents living in different neighborhoods. This is of particular importance as the physical space of the school provides a familiar setting for parents to navigate. Given the early challenges experienced by parents in communicating with schools, Parent U

has acted as a cultural broker (Ishimaru et al., 2016) between schools and families, based on parents' trust, comfort, and familiarity with Parent U. For example, in response to parents' questions and concerns about accessing their child's grades and attendance information from schools, Parent U offered a class training parents on how to access that information through the school district's parent portal. Additional classes have included "Back to School & Beyond: Effective Parent–Teacher Communication" and "Transitioning: Returning to In Person School." Shared characteristics and experiences with Parent U leaders and staff as well as physical proximity to schools at events is one way in which the mesosystem of Parent U and schools has helped facilitate parents' relationships with the local school district. As noted, when describing the microsystem processes between Parent U and families, the *community development model* of school–community partnerships involves "working to bridge the culture and power gap" between local school systems and the families and communities they serve (Stefanski et al., 2016, p. 152). Parent U provides a conduit for this knowledge of the school system from courses on how to speak with staff in the school systems to having school district leaders at sessions. By bridging this gap between community and schools, families at Parent U increase their knowledge of how the school system works and are empowered to advocate for their children, leading to increasing access to concrete support when needed (Harper Browne, 2016).

In addition to brokering these relationships, schools are one of the few physical places large enough to host the numerous attendees at Parent U events while also providing classrooms for the 8–10 breakout sessions during each event. As previously noted, the classrooms, cafeteria, gymnasium, and playground are also critical in supporting the childcare services offered at each Parent U event. Further, Parent U directly works with the school district to facilitate each event, including: reserving school buses to transport parents without cars to events, utilizing school security (as required by principals) during events, and hiring school cafeteria staff to prepare breakfast and lunch (free of charge to all in attendance). While Parent U has occasionally used different spaces for their events (e.g., universities or churches), schools have been the physical bedrock of Parent U events and essential in meeting the needs of and eliminating barriers for parents.

Universities and Researchers

Parent U has also been working with local universities and researchers since 2015, constituting another mesosystem interaction in support of

parents. More specifically, Parent U initiated a research partnership in order to track participation and begin program evaluation, with the goal of better understanding and tailoring Parent U to meet the needs of parents. Initially, the nature of the partnership was focused on supporting data collection and entry to document attendees' demographics. This collaboration has expanded to include: administering brief, yearly demographic surveys and presenting data summaries at Parent U leadership retreats; conducting focus groups and interviews highlighting parents' voices in their experiences with Parent U; attending and observing Parent U events and classes; creating class evaluations for parents to provide feedback on each educational session; acting as representatives on the Parent U board; applying for grants to support research collaborations; and, most recently, training parents as co-researchers through a participatory action research (PAR) project. The goal of this mesosystem partnership has been to help Parent U in assessing and meeting the changing needs of parents, highlighting parents' voices, and promoting their development and well-being, while also aligning with the *community development model* of empowering parents to take on leadership roles in the program (Stefanski et al., 2016).

Partnerships With Other Microsystems

In addition to schools and universities, Parent U has also worked with other microsystems in its mesosystem collaborations to support the development, well-being, and parenting practices of parents. Two of the key staff members of Parent U share employment with community organizations: Childcare Resource and Referral (Parent U Director of Training) and the Wesley Community Center (Director of Children's Programming). These have also included a variety of local organizations, including other nonprofits aimed at supporting and educating parents and their children. For example, Ferst Readers (literacy with children and families), Forsyth Farmers' Market (sustainable food production and education), and Step Up Savannah (financial security for low-income families) have offered numerous class sessions, trainings, and presentations at Parent U events. The One Hundred Children's Foundation often provides opportunities for parents to obtain free books for children during in-person Saturday events. Healthcare providers and organizations have also partnered with Parent U to offer vaccinations and health screenings at in-person events as well as workshops on CPR, basic first aid skills, and information on the SARS-COV-2 virus. Parent U has also partnered with local churches as speakers during class sessions or occasionally as the hosts of Parent U events (e.g., when schools were closed to outside events during the pandemic).

Exosystem: Indirect Influences on Parents Through Parent U

Moving away from the immediate contexts of the developing individual within microsystems and mesosystems, parents who attend Parent U are also indirectly impacted by contexts, people, and events within the exosystem (see Figure 2 Section D). For example, the Parent U board governs Parent U and its funding but does not necessarily directly interact with attending parents. The local Savannah–Chatham County government also indirectly influences Parent U parents through grant funding. The Savannah City Mayor and Police Chief serve as advisory board members and appear at occasional sessions and board meetings to hear about how they can support the community. In addition, Parent U has expanded beyond Savannah and set up sites in Pensacola, Florida and Chicago, Illinois. While Parent U leaders and staff across sites collaborate, share information, and learn from one another, thus benefiting parents, attendees across sites do not directly interact with one another.

Macrosystem: Historical and Cultural Influences on Parents and Parent U

While parents are impacted directly and indirectly by Parent U, mesosystem partnerships, and exosystem influences, their development and well-being is embedded within a larger macrosystem, cultural context (see Figure 2 Section E). More specifically, Parent U and its parents are placed within Savannah–Chatham County. According to the United States Census Bureau Report (2023), most individuals located in Savannah report having a high school diploma (90%), with a smaller number completing a bachelor's degree or higher (31.1%). The median household income is $54,748 (compared to $71,355 for the state of Georgia) with 19% of the Savannah community reportedly living in poverty (compared to 12.7% for the state of Georgia). Parents are embedded in the macrosystem of Savannah, Georgia and their participation in Parent U events allows them to identify and name many of the "invisible" forces impacting their lives and the lives of their families. From educational disparities to transportation and access inequities, there are many aspects of daily living influencing, and often challenging, families. The ability to name the forces impacting their lives is the first step in addressing challenges and taking advantage of the opportunities in the broader community.

Parent U's mission of meeting parents where they are and being parent-centric enables them to co-create their programming and shift strategies without losing sight of their larger goal, even in the face of substantial macrosystem shifts. One illustration of this is how Parent U leaders adapted to

COVID-19 lockdowns. Parent U quickly supported their families through virtual Parent U sessions the week after school lockdowns began in the area. A research team member was able to support this virtual endeavor by providing content quickly and limited technology support, and their parents responded. Parent U quickly had to upgrade to a full, paid Zoom account to accommodate over 100 participants logging in on Saturday mornings. In another application of the *community development model* (Stefanski et al., 2016), Parent U followed the families to adjust their approach to meet families where they were during the COVID-19 isolation and after. Just like for their in-person sessions, Parent U has worked to minimize any barrier a family may have to participating virtually; they walked families through using their phone or student's laptop to join in the virtual sessions. Since August 2022, Parent U has been offering alternating virtual and in-person Saturday sessions each month not only in response to the pandemic, but also due to parent feedback on appreciating having two session formats, which offer flexibility in attendance, reduce the need for transportation, and allow for parents outside of the local community to attend Parent U sessions more easily.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

Parent University has been working with school systems and organizations in Savannah, Georgia effectively and productively for over 20 years. As leaders at Parent U are being asked to translate their success with parents in Savannah to other communities, it is imperative to identify a model that helps explain why Parent U is so effective in engaging parents, schools, and communities. Using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model as a lens to examine the various systems impacting an organization's "target developing person"—whether that is a child, parent, or other entity—can help identify possibilities in interorganizational and cultural commitment and change that can lead to a *community development model* of school–community partnerships (Stefanaski et al., 2016).

Mapping out the microsystems impacting members of the target audience as they relate to the work of the organization can pinpoint both gaps and possibilities. For example, are principals, teachers, and staff engaging with the target audience through the organization in proximal processes that are bidirectional, frequent, and promote the development of the individual? How can the organization serve to adjust or scaffold those processes over time so that they are positive and productive? The mapping of microsystems can also identify other microsystems or mesosystem

collaborations that can be leveraged to directly strengthen and support both the developing individual and the organization.

Our work with Parent U exemplifies this possibility as well as illustrates the underlying role of time, or the chronosystem. Until 2015, our research team was not a part of Parent U parents' mesosystem. Once Parent U identified a gap (i.e., the need for data to document attendance and impact for continued funding), we began engaging with parents in specific episodes (micro-time) to collect attendance and demographic data. Over several years (meso-time), our proximal processes with parents have shifted to be more bidirectional and productive, particularly as we engage parents in the data collection, analysis, and research processes through our PAR project. Our simple presence as a mesosystem entity with Parent U would not have prompted those shifts. Instead, it was our adjustment of interactions with parents to explain the process and purpose of research to develop trust that eventually led to parents' understanding of the data gathering/research processes. This in-progress PAR project is intentionally designed to gather impact data on participant (parent) behavior change based on their involvement with Parent U. In turn, several parents are now actively engaged in serving as co-researchers and collaborate with the research team and staff to design possible surveys to measure impact on parenting behavior, assess presentation of this data collection process, and eventually collect the data at Parent U sessions.

We posit that if organizations examine their own mesosystem collaborations and the different microsystems that their target audience interacts with as a result of their engagement with the organization, they can identify gaps and strengthen the bidirectional interactions that are happening in each of those microsystems. It is this type of analysis and action that can move schools and organizations from being mere collaborators with families (i.e., coordinating service delivery) toward a model that not only assists parents and their children, but also transforms the community. By identifying possible microsystems to serve parents and then encouraging parents to engage with and make decisions about those microsystems, a school or community organization can progress from simply serving to including, engaging, and eventually empowering parents.

Endnotes

[1]*Community development model* is italicized throughout the article to indicate that this represents the definition described by Stefanski et al. (2016).

[2]The Savannah Early Childhood Foundation (SECF) was designed and operated under the umbrella of Parent U, operating with a distinct focus, board, and budget, until their official merger into one 501c3 organization in December 2020. Parent U maintains the

"Early Learning College" topic classes at each session.

[3]After moving to virtual sessions with the pandemic in March 2020, Parent U was able to reach participants outside of the Savannah area into 34 different states. Given the transition back to in-person and virtual events and the fact that Parent U was originally created to serve parents in the Savannah–Chatham County School District, we report only those numbers from the Savannah sample in this article.

[4]We use the term *parent* as Parent U defines it. As a reader reviews this article, we encourage you to consider all those attending their sessions and events as part of your sphere of thus applying parenting behaviors.

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Factors Associated With Life Satisfaction in Adolescents: Implications for Families and Schools

Marilyn Price-Mitchell and Brett Clay

Abstract

Research shows a decline in U.S. adolescent mental health over several decades. It also suggests that higher levels of life satisfaction lead to better mental health outcomes in this population. The purpose of this study was to investigate correlations between adolescent life satisfaction and eight developmental attributes that can be fostered by families and educators—curiosity, creativity, empathy, integrity, resilience, resourcefulness, self-awareness, and sociability. Correlations were also examined for grade-point average (GPA), gender, and grade level. The study hypothesized that young people who rated themselves highly on the eight developmental attributes would also score higher in life satisfaction, regardless of GPA. Quantitative survey research was used to investigate the correlations between these constructs and life satisfaction in U.S. eighth and ninth graders (N = 602) attending public schools in two Midwestern states. Self-awareness, resilience, and resourcefulness were most highly correlated with life satisfaction. Moderately strong correlations were obtained for sociability, curiosity, and integrity. GPA and empathy were the lowest correlates of life satisfaction among measured factors. Adolescent males were almost twice as likely to report very high life satisfaction compared to their female counterparts. These findings should expand the goals of family–school partnerships beyond raising academic performance to insure that all children enjoy the relationships and relational experiences that help them attain life satisfaction and more positive mental health outcomes.

Key Words: positive youth development, adolescence, high school students, middle school students, teachers, parents, youth mentors, adolescent mental health, developmental equity

Introduction

For several decades, encouraging outcomes have been linked to social–emotional learning (SEL) curriculum in U.S. schools (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2020). However, during the same period, adolescents have shown a significant decline in mental health. Studies show the major effects of anxiety, depression, substance use, and other mental health issues on middle and high school students, often impairing academic performance, social relationships, and emotional well-being (McLeod et al., 2012; Twenge et al., 2019). Suicide, the third leading cause of death among 14- to 18-year-olds, surges among adolescent females and students of color, as do rates of suicidal ideation and attempts (Gaylor et al., 2021). While it is imperative to respond to mental health issues through early identification, school-based mental health services, and relational support (Atkins et al., 2010; García-Carrión et al., 2019), preventative developmental support from families and educators is also critical toward addressing mental health issues in American schools.

Research suggests that when adolescents have higher levels of life satisfaction, they have better mental health outcomes. This includes lower levels of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and social difficulties (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Huebner et al., 2004). Life satisfaction is also key to positive outcomes in adulthood, such as higher earnings, improved physical health, and longevity (DeNeve et al., 2013; Willroth et al., 2020). It is vital, therefore, to identify developmental attributes most associated with life satisfaction during childhood and adolescence. Then, these attributes can be more purposefully fostered by the combined and systemic efforts of families, schools, and communities.

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between life satisfaction and eight developmental constructs—curiosity, creativity, empathy, integrity, resilience, resourcefulness, self-awareness, and sociability—to better understand linkages that can improve teen mental health and well-being. Using cross-sectional, quantitative survey research, we explored whether practicing behaviors related to these constructs in daily life correlates positively with life satisfaction in adolescence. Additionally, we examined the correlations between life satisfaction and three factors: (a) grade-point average (GPA), (b) gender, and (c) grade level.

Psychological well-being, an all-inclusive term that incorporates subjective well-being (Diener et al., 2017), refers to a "combination of feeling good as well as actually having meaning, good relationships, and accomplishment" (Seligman, 2011, p. 25). Su et al. (2014) proposed seven core dimensions of psychological well-being. The first of these is in the form of high life satisfaction, defined in the literature as "the degree to which a person evaluates the overall quality of his or her present life-as-a-whole positively" (Veenhoven, 2015, p. 6) based on both affective and cognitive information (Veenhoven, 2009). Life satisfaction is considered integral to well-being. Measuring life satisfaction is a reliable way of measuring subjective well-being (Diener et al., 2010; Veenhoven, 2012).

In general, the eight developmental constructs examined in this study are human attributes that emerge and develop over time, often woven through stages of development (Erikson, 1968). Unlike more stable personality traits, developmental attributes strengthen as they are nurtured by positive relationships and relational experiences (Cozolino, 2006). Research that expands our understanding of how specific developmental constructs improve adolescent life satisfaction is limited. This study bridges an important gap in the literature, draws on previous research, and uses established methods of measuring life satisfaction. Findings provide critical information for families, schools, and communities toward the goal of improving students' development, mental health, and well-being during their formative years.

Attributes That Promote Thriving and Well-Being

Researchers have identified a variety of human attributes related to human thriving, particularly those that can better equip individuals to serve self, others, and community—a core foundation of civil society (Lerner et al., 2003). Peterson and Seligman (2004), for instance, classified 26 character traits and six virtues associated with thriving, and thousands of studies have examined how these and other attributes contribute to health, well-being, and life satisfaction. Researchers examining human thriving across the lifespan conceptualize the term as a growth-oriented, developmental process (See, e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009; Bundick et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2003).

The current study builds upon Price-Mitchell's (2010b, 2015) qualitative study with civically engaged youth. Her research suggests eight attributes—curiosity, creativity, empathy, integrity, resilience, resourcefulness, self-awareness, sociability—were observable in highly successful youth prior to the end of high school. These attributes were fostered by

relationships with supportive adult mentors, including parents, educators, extended family, and afterschool program leaders. These findings support theory and research that point to the critical role of positive relationships to a young person's development, academic success, and psychological well-being (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Cozolino, 2006, 2013; Siegel, 2020; Vygotsky, 1962). Using Price-Mitchell's eight constructs as a conceptual framework, the current study seeks to understand the importance of these constructs to a young person's attainment of high life satisfaction.

Literature Review

The constructs in this study have been widely investigated by researchers. Most often, they have been studied individually rather than examined in a group. Conceptualizations of constructs vary by discipline and are often ill-defined. Because developmental constructs are abstract entities that represent behaviors, internal processes, and individual characteristics, it was critical for this study to clearly define each construct, including its value to individuals and society, prior to designing a survey. We relied on research in the following literature review that describes common behaviors of individuals who demonstrated these eight developmental attributes. This literature informed the conceptualizations of each construct and design of scales used for measurement.

Creativity

We conceptualize creativity as an everyday human capacity to produce new ideas, discoveries, and processes. Creativity has been defined and studied from multidisciplinary perspectives, including cognitive psychology (Ward et al., 1999), motivation (Collins & Amabile, 1999), personality (Feist, 2010; King et al., 1996), and systems theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). The focus of everyday creativity is on the diverse ways individuals engage in activities that use their creative minds (Conner et al., 2018; Cotter et al., 2018).

Creativity has been linked to human flourishing for its ability to connect individuals with life's meaning, a theme that underscores much of human inquiry (Wright & Pascoe, 2015). Individuals who engage their creative abilities tend to respond more effectively to change, becoming more adaptable, flexible, and responsive to life circumstances (Bruner, 1993). For society, creativity and innovation are vital to solving multidisciplinary global problems (Ahlstrom, 2010).

The current study assesses behaviors and beliefs that have been recognized by researchers as representative of individuals who demonstrate everyday creativity. These include one's self-efficacy for generating new and

innovative ways of doing things (Karwowski & Beghetto, 2019), ability to appreciate artistic expression by others (Wright & Pascoe, 2015), and views about one's creative abilities (Putwain et al., 2012).

Curiosity

We conceptualize curiosity as a human desire to seek and acquire new knowledge, skills, and ways of understanding the world. A subject of inquiry in multidisciplinary fields, curiosity has been viewed as a mental state (Inan, 2012), an emotion (Brady, 2009; Silvia, 2008b), and an intellectual or moral virtue (Baehr, 2011; Baumgarten, 2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Most contemporary scientists view curiosity as a basic element of cognition, a motivator of individual learning and decision making, and a vital force to human development and well-being (Kang et al., 2009; Kidd & Hayden, 2015; Park et al., 2004; von Stumm et al., 2011). The benefits of curiosity have mostly been observed in individuals, but healthy outcomes for society have also been noted, including tolerance of uncertainty, positive emotions, humor, out-of-the-box thinking, creative innovation, and positive social action (Celik et al., 2016; Clark & Seider, 2017; Kashdan et al., 2013).

The current study assesses behaviors and attitudes that have been linked to the aspects of curiosity that Kashdan et al. (2020) defines as joyous exploration and stress tolerance. The pleasurable experience of finding the world intriguing has been linked to a love of learning and a fascination with acquiring new knowledge and abilities (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009; Park et al., 2004; Schutte & Malouff, 2020). Curious individuals must also believe they can cope with high levels of challenge, complexity, and uncertainty (Silvia, 2008a). These aspects of curiosity mirrored the information-seeking behaviors of purpose-driven young people (Price-Mitchell, 2010b, 2015).

Empathy

We conceptualize empathy as the ability to recognize and respond to the needs and suffering of others. A complex, multifaceted construct, theorists agree that there are affective and cognitive aspects to empathy (Davis, 1983; Deutsch & Madle, 1975) and that empathy is related to prosocial behavior and altruism (Batson, 2010; de Waal, 2008; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Hoffman, 2008). Slote (2001, 2004) argued that empathy is foundational to a person's ability to care for others, and research suggests empathy can be measured by assessing one's intentions to behave in caring, prosocial ways (Batson, 2011; Batson & Shaw, 1991; Baumsteiger & Siegel, 2019; Zaki, 2014).

Research in human development and social neuroscience suggests empathy benefits individuals by fostering positive interpersonal relationships

(Batson et al., 2015; Cozolino, 2006; Decety & Svetlova, 2012). It has also been shown to facilitate greater cooperation and less conflict within social or work-related groups (Cikara & Van Bavel, 2014) and to benefit society through altruistic, caring actions (Batson et al., 2015).

The current study focuses on a person's motivation to care for the well-being of others (Decety, 2015). It measures empathy by assessing one's intent to behave in caring, prosocial ways. This more narrow, cognitive measure of empathy is supported by literature and helped us focus on empathy's outcome rather than the psychological complexities that underlie the construct. The study's focus on caring actions also supported behaviors observed in civically engaged youth (Price-Mitchell, 2010b).

Integrity

We conceptualize integrity as an ability to act in ways consistent with the values, beliefs, and moral principles that one holds. Integrity is derived from the Latin word *integritas*, meaning wholeness. Rogers (1961) described psychological integrity, or congruence, as a time when an individual's feelings "are available to him, available to his awareness, and he is able to live these feelings, be them, and is able to communicate them if appropriate" (p. 61). Peterson and Seligman (2004) classified integrity as a character strength and virtue and linked it to moral courage, honesty, responsibility, authenticity, and trustworthiness.

Integrity has inherent value to self and society. In contemporary literature, it has been shown to include both moral and psychological aspects of self that help individuals integrate values and actions across the lifespan (Cottingham, 2010; Cox et al., 2003). It has also been associated with self-actualization and positive interpersonal outcomes (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For society, perceived integrity has been shown to have a strong positive relationship to transformative leadership (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2002).

The current study assesses three types of behaviors that have been recognized by researchers as representative of individuals who demonstrate integrity. These behaviors include displaying consistency of words and actions (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007; Simons, 2002); being true to oneself; and showing moral/ethical behaviors, like honesty and moral courage (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Resilience

We conceptualize resilience as an individual's psychological capacity for positive adaptation despite adversity. Historically, the study of resilience has been the purview of developmental researchers who have worked on

identifying protective factors that promote resilience in children, particularly in at-risk populations (Luthar, 2015). Some theorists link resilience to aspects of personality like hardiness and ego resilience, a trait that reflects general sturdiness of character (Eisenberg et al., 2004). Resilience in adulthood has been studied far less than in childhood, but a growing body of research links resilience to positive adaptation throughout the life span (Ong et al., 2009; Snyder & Lopez, 2002).

Developmental researchers have mainly studied resilience in individuals. But resilience has also been shown to be integral to all social systems, including schools (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007), families (Patterson, 2002), organizations (Duchek & Raetze, 2017), and society (Walker, 2019). Individual resilience is improved when children and adults are members of those adaptive family, social, and cultural systems (Masten & Obradovic, 2006).

The current study assesses the behaviors and feelings recognized in the literature as representative of individuals who demonstrate psychological resiliency. Resilient people express feelings of hope, optimism, and faith about their futures (Ong et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2000); convey positive emotions during difficult times (Cohn et al., 2009; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Ong et al., 2009); and value social connectedness as a means of support when life is challenging (Ryff, 2014; Ryff & Singer, 2003).

Resourcefulness

We conceptualize resourcefulness as an ability to find and use available resources to problem-solve, achieve goals, and shape the future. The literature on resourcefulness focuses on a common theme—the processes by which individuals achieve goals. Several threads of research contribute to understanding why some individuals accomplish their highest goals despite challenges while others encounter unending setbacks. In his theory of learned resourcefulness, Rosenbaum (1990, 2000) suggested that a repertoire of mastery behaviors that included planning, problem-solving, and evaluation help individuals attain higher levels of achievement. Dweck (1999) suggested that an individual's beliefs about intelligence guide their goal-setting and corresponding performance. She described this belief as a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006).

The benefits of human resourcefulness are many. It has been associated with adaptation to new and challenging situations and linked to more positive health outcomes (Zauszniewski & Bekhet, 2011). Resourcefulness helps students mitigate academic stress and depression (Akgun & Ciarrochi, 2003). For society, resourcefulness is key to achieving social innovation through the capacity of communities to engage in collaborative goal setting and problem solving (Ulug & Horlings, 2019).

Similar to Kennett and Keefer's (2006) integrated approach to evaluating resourcefulness, the current study draws from both Rosenbaum's and Dweck's work. It assesses three types of behavior and/or beliefs of resourceful individuals: they enjoy achieving goals despite challenges (Dweck, 1999, 2006), monitor and evaluate their goals, and employ problem-solving strategies (Rosenbaum, 1990).

Self-Awareness

We conceptualize self-awareness as an ability to examine and understand oneself relative to one's surrounding environment. The human ability to self-focus—to shift attention from one's environment to oneself and vice versa—has been a focal point of multidisciplinary research for decades (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). It is generally agreed that self-focus has private and public dimensions that can be viewed from both a dispositional and situational perspective (Fenigstein et al., 1975). Dispositional self-focus is often referred to as self-consciousness and is considered a relatively stable personality trait. Situational self-focus and reflection, the constructs used in the current study, are most often labeled self-awareness and considered more momentary and short-lived (Carver & Glass, 1976). Yet, despite its transitory nature, situational self-reflection and awareness has been shown to be essential for positive development, particularly during challenging periods of time (Ardelt & Grunwald, 2018).

Self-awareness is a tool for monitoring and adjusting one's behavior and beliefs about the world, both within oneself and between others (Lou, 2015). It has been linked to greater emotional intelligence (Serrat, 2017); an ability to make meaning from life experiences (Gardner et al., 2005); self-efficacy (Caldwell & Hayes, 2016); and the development of mindfulness, self-compassion, and gratitude (McGehee et al., 2017). Self-awareness and reflective thinking contribute to society in many ways, including the ability to understand other's worldviews, co-create new relationships between diverse groups (Yan & Wong, 2005), and become an effective organizational and societal leader (Gardner et al., 2005).

The current study assesses the private and public behaviors and beliefs that have been recognized as representative of individuals who demonstrate self-awareness. In addition to the above references, self-aware individuals understand their strengths and weaknesses, reflect on their life experiences, and can identify connections between their emotions, words, and actions (Serrat, 2017). They also work hard to understand their values (Gardner et al., 2005) and life purpose, and they believe in themselves (Caldwell & Hayes, 2016).

Sociability

We conceptualize sociability as the capacity to understand and express feelings and behaviors that facilitate positive relationships. A multidimensional construct used in numerous lines of inquiry, researchers recognize its association with positive emotions and social competencies in children and adults (Eid et al., 2003; Wilmot et al., 2019). The brain's social engagement system has helped researchers better understand how relationships are formed through the interplay of behavior and emotions (Porges, 2011). From an early age, the ability to foster positive relationships is a core aspect of SEL and central to adult development (Dusenbury et al., 2015). While sociability can be considered a personality or dispositional trait (Cheek & Buss, 1981; Goldberg, 1990; Harari et al., 2019), our focus is on learned behaviors that have been shown to foster healthy relationships from childhood and throughout the lifespan (Mahoney et al., 2020).

The ability to engage in positive relationships is linked to thriving in youth and adulthood, including increased resilience, health, and well-being (Luthar, 2015; Noble & McGrath, 2012). In youth, social competencies and friendship networks are predictive of academic achievement (Asher & Paquette, 2003). Positive work relationships produce better individual and organizational outcomes, including greater learning and creativity (Dutton & Ragins, 2007). Sociability is related to prosocial behavior and civic involvement (Foschi & Lauriola, 2014) and improves societal well-being (Adler & Seligman, 2016).

The current study assesses sociability in two dimensions. First, it examines individual practices (Interpersonal Behaviors Subscale) that are shown to enhance social relationships in multiple contexts, including communicating clearly and negotiating conflict (Dusenbury et al., 2015). Second, based on Porges's (2001) polyvagal theory of social engagement, it assesses an individual's practice of regulating emotions (Self-Control Subscale) in ways that promote positive social interactions, including managing negative emotions, anger, and defensiveness, despite disagreements and conflicts (Cozolino, 2006).

Current Study

Using an online survey developed from the reviewed literature, this study sought to contribute to the research on youth thriving by examining the associations between eight developmental constructs and a young person's self-reported measures of life satisfaction. We hypothesized that young people who rated the constructs like or very much like themselves would also rate themselves higher in life satisfaction and that some constructs

would correlate more highly with life satisfaction than others. Additionally, we examined correlations between a student's GPA, gender, and grade level to the developmental constructs and life satisfaction. We expected that GPA would not be as high of a source of life satisfaction as most of the developmental constructs. Given current mental health challenges for adolescent females, we predicted lower life satisfaction scores among this population.

Methods

Participants

The current study collected data from 602 U.S. eighth and ninth grade students attending public schools in Michigan and Wisconsin. Of participants, 53% were eighth graders; 47% were ninth graders. Ages ranged from 13–15 years. All but 4.8% of participants reported ethnicity, in which multiple categories could be checked. Ethnicities included 85.9% White, 8.5% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Black/African American, 4% Asian, 3.5% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 1.2% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. All but 2.5% of participants reported gender identifications, including 50.5% male, 43.2% female, and 3.8% other. GPA range for the past two years included 48.8% in the A range (3.76–4.0+), 31.9% in the B range (3.00–3.75), 13.8% in the C range (2.25–2.99), 3.8% in the D range (1.50–2.24), and 1.7% below D (0.00–1.49).

Procedure

Surveys were collected through Alchemer, a secure online data processing platform used by researchers. Students were asked to complete the survey by their eighth or ninth grade public school classroom teachers who found the survey linked on a website specializing in positive youth development. The survey introduction invites 10- to 17-year-olds to take a free 13-minute survey that will help them identify, understand, and strengthen core attributes that help them thrive. It states that personal information and results are kept private and confidential and shared only with individual participants via email. Participants are told, for research purposes, that data will be aggregated and summarized with other survey-takers.

Adhering to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, children 13 and over checked their informed consent prior to the beginning of the survey, indicating that they read, understood, and consented to the terms of service and understood that some survey questions may refer to sensitive data. Three 12-year-olds were eliminated from the study because the researchers had no way of confirming parental consent for this age group.

Links to a comprehensive privacy policy and terms of service were provided. At the completion of each survey, participants received their scores by email with an educational handout to help them understand scoring and how the eight attributes are shown by research to contribute to positive life outcomes. No reports were sent to teachers or schools. In fact, that information is not known to the researchers.

It is important to note that the scores of over 5,000 children and adults from the U.S., Canada, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East have been tracked over a two-year period using the same survey, along with referral sources that include schools, word-of-mouth, family, friend, counselor, therapist, nonprofit organization, social media, internet search, and so on. We chose the population for this cross-sectional study because U.S. eighth and ninth graders were completing the survey in greater numbers—the same adolescent population that also showed declines in mental health. In addition, schools in Michigan and Wisconsin were asking this age group of 13- to 15-year-olds to complete the survey as a classroom assignment, giving researchers the opportunity to examine the attributes of an average adolescent classroom in America's Midwest at a particular point in their education rather than from individual respondents in a variety of educational and geographical environments.

Measures

The study used a 51-question survey we developed and derived from the reviewed literature to measure nine constructs—creativity, curiosity, empathy, integrity, resilience, resourcefulness, self-awareness, sociability, and life satisfaction. Each construct was composed of a five-question Likert scale, except for sociability, which contained nine questions in two sub-scales.

To measure life satisfaction, the three-question Subjective Well-Being Life Satisfaction Subscale of the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT; Su et al., 2014) was integrated into the 51-question survey. Questions included: "I am satisfied with my life," and "My life is going well." Permission to use the CIT is granted by its authors for research purposes.

Questions related to the nine constructs were randomly placed throughout the survey, with some questions being reverse-keyed. For example, two related questions that measured curiosity—"If there is a chance to explore new ideas, I jump right in," and "I rarely enjoy the process of learning new things"—required opposite scoring. A third related question was asked from the perspective of others: "Others would describe me as someone who likes discovering new things." We used these three ways of asking questions to triangulate the data for separate constructs as proposed by Denzin and

Lincoln (2003). As a reliability and validity strategy, it adds rigor, depth, and breadth to an investigation (Flick, 1992).

Questions that measured self-awareness included "Others would describe me as someone who knows my strengths and weaknesses" and "I like taking time to reflect on my life experiences." For resourcefulness, questions that required opposite scoring included "I like to achieve goals despite their challenges" and "I often forget to keep track of my goals." For resilience, questions included "Even when life is challenging, I stay positive" and "I feel certain I can get through bad times." Questions related to integrity included "Others would describe me as someone who stands up for my values and beliefs" and "I usually act in ways that feel true to myself."

To assess internal reliability for each scale used in the survey, we calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951), an established method for determining if a multiitem scale is measuring the same construct. While the current study has a sample size of 602 eighth and ninth graders, initial pilot studies were conducted with more than 2,000 youth and adult participants. After each pilot phase, the scales were revised to improve consistency, increase the clarity of reverse-keyed items, and adjust the conceptualization of several constructs based on additional literature reviews.

For example, to measure sociability more effectively, we developed two subscales during the pilot phase. One scale focused on measuring interpersonal behaviors (IB), and a second focused on measuring self-control (SC). Questions in the IB scale included "When conflict occurs between myself and others, I try to help resolve it" and "Others would describe me as a good communicator." Questions in the SC scale included "When someone provokes my anger or frustration, I calmly control my reactions" and "Others would describe me as someone who stays calm during conflicts with others." These behaviors are shown in the literature to be related to promoting positive relationships, key to our conceptualization of sociability.

To improve reliability for the empathy scale, we refocused our questions on the outcome of empathy rather than the psychological complexities that underlie the construct. This more narrow, cognitive measure of empathy and emphasis on caring actions is supported by the literature and closely fit behaviors observed in civically engaged youth (Price-Mitchell, 2010b). For example, two questions related to empathy required opposite scoring: "When a friend is sad, I distance myself from them" and "When someone I know is experiencing a hardship, I comfort them."

Data analysis and revisions for clarity and consistency during pilot phases contributed to achieving acceptable alpha coefficients, derived using a correlation-based formula, of over .70 for each scale in a combined

youth–adult population. This study's eighth and ninth grade student responses produced similar alpha coefficients, with the exception of creativity, as shown in Table 1. In reviewing questions on the creativity scale, including the reverse-keyed, "I seldom think about new ways of doing things," we suspect that the eighth and ninth grade respondents in this study found it more challenging than the average respondent to understand this question. Because creativity did not meet an acceptable alpha coefficient in this population, it was eliminated from further analysis in this study. Other researchers have had similar issues with reversed-keyed questions, even with adult-only populations (Zhang et al., 2016).

Table 1. Cronbach's Alphas for Each Scale: Pilot Studies vs 8th–9th Graders

Scale	Pilot Studies	8th–9th Graders
Creativity	.74	.60
Curiosity	.77	.73
Empathy	.75	.71
Integrity	.81	.73
Resilience	.82	.84
Resourcefulness	.77	.76
Self-Awareness	.81	.73
Sociability: Interpersonal Behaviors (IB) Subscale	.75	.73
Sociability: Self-Control (SC) Subscale	.86	.82
Sociability (Combined scales)	.85	.83
Life Satisfaction (LS)	.91	.83

As a means for assessing external reliability in pilot phases, we sent a feedback questionnaire to each participant three days after completion to assess how close individual scores matched what they may have predicted in each of the eight attributes after reading our educational materials. Feedback questionnaires were returned by 5% of participants. The percentage of participants that strongly agreed or agreed with their scores after understanding how we conceptualized each construct ranged from a low of 74% to a high of 91% for each attribute. Those who were undecided or neutral about their scores averaged 13%. Those who disagreed with their scores averaged 5%. No one strongly disagreed with their scores.

Data Analysis

To inquire into the relationship between the remaining seven developmental constructs and life satisfaction, we evaluated correlations and

variance. Correlation is a measure to assess the relationship between two variables, quantifying the degree to which changes in one variable are associated with changes in another variable. While correlation neither confirms causation nor a direction of influence, for the purposes of this study, we examined the correlation of eight developmental constructs on life satisfaction. The other possible direction of influence, that is, examining the possible influence of life satisfaction on developmental constructs, is outside the scope of this study.

Variance, which is the square of correlation, is a measure of how much of the variance in one variable is "explained" by the variance in another. Again, variance does not imply causation, and the term "explained" can be understood as the strength or importance of the relationship. For example, in this study, we wanted to understand the importance of each construct to the outcome of life satisfaction. For the purposes of this study, we assume that life satisfaction is an outcome and that it is the dependent variable.

We also calculated correlations and variance between additional variables provided through the survey, including GPA, gender, and grade level. Because academic achievement is associated with student success, we thought it particularly important to measure the association between GPA and life satisfaction. Therefore, we eliminated five eighth graders and 17 ninth graders that opted not to share their GPA. While we compared males and females, 6.3% of students categorized themselves as "other" or "prefer not to answer." Because the online youth survey is being used by youth worldwide, including those in Arabic countries, we were not able to identify LGBTQ+ students, a limitation of the study. While we collected data on race/ethnicity, we found no correlations between it and any other variables measured, raising the question of whether there was sufficient racial/ethnic representation to make reliable comparisons.

Results

Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients (r) for the seven developmental constructs, life satisfaction, GPA, grade level, and gender. Numbers above zero represent positive correlations; numbers below zero represent negative correlations. When grade level is negatively correlated with another variable, it indicates the other variable is lower for ninth graders than for eighth graders. When gender is negatively correlated with another variable, it indicates the other variable is higher for females and lower for males.

Table 2. Correlation Coefficients Between Variables

	Curiosity	Empathy	Integrity	Resilience	Resourcefulness	Self-Awareness	Sociability	Life Satisfaction
Life Satisfaction	.43	.20	.38	.69	.53	.72	.49	
GPA	.34	.25	.22	.36	.45	.34	.39	.32
Grade Level	-.08	-.08	-.15	-.14	-.19	-.19	-.16	-.17
Gender	-.02	-.39	.07	.08	.04	.05	-.02	.17

Table 3 shows the variance for the seven developmental constructs, life satisfaction, GPA, grade level, and gender. Variance is denoted in the table as a percentage. For example, the first number in the table (.18) suggests that 18% of the variance in life satisfaction is explained by the variance in curiosity or vice versa.

Table 3. Variance Between Factors

	Curiosity	Empathy	Integrity	Resilience	Resourcefulness	Self-Awareness	Sociability	Life Satisfaction
Life Satisfaction	.18	.04	.14	.48	.28	.52	.24	
GPA	.12	.06	.05	.13	.20	.12	.15	.10
Grade Level	.01	.01	.02	.02	.04	.04	.03	.03
Gender	.00	.15	.01	.01	.00	.00	.00	.03

Tables 4 and 5 show GPA range distribution and life satisfaction of study participants by gender. As previously noted, we did not ask questions to further identify gender, including LGBTQ+ students, and therefore can only examine the differences between female and male.

Table 4. GPA Range Distribution by Gender

GPA Range	Female	Male
3.76 - 4.00+	63.1%	37.5%
3.00 - 3.75	19.2%	42.4%
2.25 - 2.99	11.9%	14.8%
1.50 - 2.24	5.0%	2.6%
0.00 - 1.49	0.8%	2.6%

Table 5. Life Satisfaction by Gender

	Female	Male
Very High	5.4%	9.9%
Med High	33.8%	43.7%
Neutral	39.6%	35.5%
Med Low	16.1%	8.2%
Very Low	5.0%	2.6%

Discussion

Previous studies have linked curiosity, sociability, resilience, resourcefulness, integrity, creativity, self-awareness, and empathy to youth, adulthood, and societal thriving. This is the first study to correlate this collection of constructs to life satisfaction in adolescence and to examine if GPA is more or less related to life satisfaction compared with the developmental constructs. This study added evidence to the body of literature on seven of the eight constructs, indicating significant to strong correlations between each of them and life satisfaction in U.S. eighth and ninth graders. (See Measures section for explanation of why creativity was eliminated from this study.) As expected, some constructs correlated more highly than others, with four constructs—self-awareness, resilience, resourcefulness, and sociability—being the strongest correlates of life satisfaction. Constructs that correlated lowest with life satisfaction were curiosity, integrity, and empathy. GPA was also among the lowest factors associated with life satisfaction.

Correlation Analysis

Measuring correlations of psychometric data, such as developmental constructs, is more complex than measuring non-psychometric data, such as GPA, grade level, gender, and so forth. Therefore, developmental constructs generally tend to have lower correlations than non-psychometric data. Achieving correlations above .70 for developmental or psychological constructs is relatively rare. On the other end, correlations less than .20 explain less than 4% of the variance in the variables. For the purposes of this study, we considered correlations above .50 to be relatively strong. Correlations between .35 and .50 were considered moderately strong; correlations between .20 and .35 were considered significant; and correlations below .20 were considered weak or negligible. Below, we discuss each developmental construct, in the order of how strongly it correlated with life satisfaction, followed by other analyzed factors, including GPA and gender.

Self-awareness is strongly correlated to life satisfaction (r = .72), suggesting that 52% of the variance in life satisfaction is explained by the variance in self-awareness. This correlation is very high for a developmental construct, and the study design did not allow for the possible presence of a latent variable or high social desirability bias to be identified. That said, a strong correlation for self-awareness is not surprising in this 13-to-15-year-old population, as this attribute is integral to the formation of self-identity, the most primary task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Schwartz et al., 2013). Through self-reflection, adolescents develop a coherent sense of self, including their beliefs, values, aspirations, and roles in society.

Resilience is strongly correlated to life satisfaction (r = .69), suggesting that 48% of the variance in life satisfaction is explained by the variance in resilience. This relatively high correlation for a developmental construct supports the growing body of research that not only recognizes resilience as an indicator of positive adaptation during childhood and adolescence, but also its vital role through the life span (Ong et al., 2009; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). Scientists agree that developing resilience is critical for children and adolescents, building capacity to adapt positively to adversity, maintain psychological well-being, and thrive despite significant challenges (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2014).

Resourcefulness shows a relatively strong correlation to life satisfaction (r = .53), suggesting that 28% of the variance in life satisfaction is explained by the variance in resourcefulness. Also noteworthy is the moderately strong correlation between resourcefulness and GPA (r = .45), suggesting that 20% of the variance in GPA is explained by the variance in resourcefulness. While resourcefulness may be related to constructs like grit, perseverance, goal-orientation, and growth mindset (Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Dweck, 2006), we argue it is an understudied construct that deserves additional research. Akgun and Ciarrochi (2003), for example, showed that high academic stress adversely impacted the grades of low resourceful students but had no effect on students with higher levels of resourcefulness. This suggests that resourcefulness may mediate academic pressure, a top contributor to the decline in adolescent mental health.

Sociability scores were calculated by combining two scales, one that measured positive interpersonal behaviors and the other that measured self-control. Sociability shows a moderately strong correlation to life satisfaction (r = .49), suggesting that 24% of the variance in life satisfaction is explained by the variance in sociability. This finding supports research showing that strong interpersonal skills help adolescents form supportive

relationships, experience a sense of belonging, and develop social competencies that contribute to their overall well-being (Rubin et al., 2015). It also supports research showing that higher scores on self-control predict better psychological adjustment, less substance abuse, and higher grades (Tangney et al., 2018).

Curiosity shows a moderately strong correlation to life satisfaction (r = .43), suggesting that 18% of the variance in life satisfaction is explained by the variance in curiosity. Not surprisingly, curiosity shows a significant correlation with GPA (r = .34), supporting research that links curiosity to a love of learning, which can motivate students to overcome academic challenges and achieve better academic outcomes, regardless of intelligence (von Stumm et al., 2011). Curiosity has also been shown to be an ingredient in the development of well-being and meaning in life (Kashdan & Steger, 2007).

Integrity shows a moderately strong correlation to life satisfaction (r = .38), suggesting that 14% of the variance in life satisfaction is explained by the variance in integrity. This finding supports research that emphasizes how integrity guides adolescents in making choices that align with their principles, which can lead to better stress management and mental health (Damon, 2008). Adolescents with high levels of integrity are also likely to form healthier and more meaningful social relationships, serving as a buffer against mental health issues (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014).

Empathy shows a significant but much weaker correlation to life satisfaction (r = .20), suggesting that only 4% of the variance in life satisfaction is explained by the variance in empathy, measured in this study as cognitive rather than affective empathy. Being female shows a moderately strong correlation with empathy (r =.39). This finding is not unusual. Research suggests there are variances in gender that affect empathy, including neurological and evolutionary differences. For example, the neurobiological underpinnings of empathy show gender differences in the brain networks involved in both affective and cognitive forms of empathy (Christov-Moore et al., 2014). The stronger correlation of being female to empathy supports concerns by some social scientists about the promotion and teaching of affective empathy—the ability to feel what others feel—in school-age children. Because females show naturally higher levels of empathy, they are more likely to internalize the emotions and conflicts that occur within adolescent social circles. These stressors can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression (Rudolph, 2002). While empathy is an important motivator for compassionate action in the world, children must also be taught how to understand, manage, and navigate emotional boundaries. More research is

needed to further examine if the moderately strong correlation of gender to empathy may be a factor in greater rates of anxiety and depression in female adolescents.

GPA shows a significant correlation to life satisfaction ($r = .32$), suggesting that 10% of the variance in life satisfaction is explained by the variance in GPA. This correlation supports research that adolescents who achieve higher grades tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction (Lyons & Huebner, 2016). Longitudinal studies also suggest the benefits of high academic achievement on subjective well-being that can extend to adulthood (Fraine et al., 2005). However, there is debate among researchers on the value of correlations of GPA to life satisfaction. Recognizing the complex relationship between GPA and life satisfaction, many researchers suggest that GPA has not been shown to be a consistent predictor of life satisfaction and is more likely associated with other mediating factors, including psychological development, social relationships, cultural values, academic pressure, and economic disparities that can strengthen or weaken the association of GPA to well-being (Rueger et al., 2010; Suldo et al., 2006; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Our study shows that six developmental constructs—self-awareness, resilience, resourcefulness, sociability, curiosity, and integrity—are higher predictors of life satisfaction than GPA, and these factors may also predict higher GPA.

Incidental findings that emerged from this study are noteworthy. Table 2 shows that being in ninth grade correlates negatively with all of the developmental constructs and life satisfaction. Research suggests that the shift to high school brings additional challenges, including increased workload (Suldo et al., 2009), pressure to achieve on standardized tests (Conner & Pope, 2013), and developmental challenges that include more complex social dynamics, forming an identity, and seeking greater autonomy (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). This finding may suggest that fostering developmental attributes in young people is particularly important before students reach high school age.

The data in Tables 3 and 4 comparing GPA and life satisfaction by gender are also significant. In this study's population, female students are 1.7 times more likely to have a GPA in the highest range compared to male students. Male students are 1.8 times more likely than female students to have very high life satisfaction. This disparity has been found in other studies that link females' greater academic performance with higher levels of internal distress (Pomerantz et al., 2002). For optimal mental health, we would hope to see most students' evaluation of life satisfaction to be in the medium high to high range. In this study, only 39.2% of female students and 54.6% of male students reported life satisfaction in these mid to higher ranges.

Implications for Families and Schools

The concept of family–school partnerships echoes back to the ideas of Harvard professor, Ira J. Gordon—that families and schools have equally valued roles in education and child development (Gordon, 1977). For this partnership to flourish, both must adapt to change and engage in learning to enhance their capacity to achieve positive outcomes for children. Systems theorist Peter Senge (2000) said it well,

> If I had one wish for all our institutions, and the institution called school in particular, it is that we dedicate ourselves to allowing them to be what they would naturally become, which is human communities, not machines. Living beings who continually ask the questions: Why am I here? What is going on in my world? How might I and we best contribute? (p. 58)

We began this research by considering Senge's line of questioning. We assume families, schools, and communities are here because they care deeply about the positive development and well-being of youth. What is going on in young people's worlds, and how might teachers, families, youth mentors, and adolescents themselves best contribute? These are driving questions that guide our research into youth development.

Factors affecting the psychological health of today's young people are multifaceted and complex. Top contributors linked to a decline in adolescent mental health include increased academic pressure (Steare et al., 2023), social media (Popat & Tarrant, 2023), bullying (Sutter et al., 2023), and adverse childhood experiences (Scully et al., 2020). These factors are extremely challenging and slow to change because they are firmly embedded in school, family, and cultural systems. Yet progress on addressing the systemic causes of declining mental health in adolescence must remain a top priority.

This study identified aspects of a child's development that are associated with life satisfaction and are within the immediate purview and influence of families, teachers, and youth programs. Mental health researchers agree that effective schooling must include the healthy development of students (Atkins et al., 2010; García-Carrión et al., 2019). Family–school partnerships have long played a critical role towards achieving educational equity—seeking to raise academic performance for all children, especially those impacted by race and income (Mapp et al., 2022). But educational equity is not enough to improve children's life satisfaction and mental health. Children must also experience developmental equity—the right to enjoy the

relationships and relational experiences that help them attain life satisfaction and well-being. SEL interventions in schools cannot accomplish this alone. Families, schools, and communities must work together to respond to and act on Senge's (2000) question: "How might I and we best contribute?"

Addressing the many ways families and schools can foster developmental attributes in children was not in the scope of our research. However, our data suggests that six attributes—self-awareness, resilience, resourcefulness, sociability, curiosity, and integrity—are not only higher correlates of life satisfaction in adolescence than GPA, but that these attributes may also be predictive of academic achievement itself. This is a call for families, schools, and communities to recognize the significant impact of developmental attributes on achievement and well-being and to redefine the fundamental framework of family–school partnerships to include equal focus on educational and developmental equity.

The differences in contributions between "I" and "we" are significant to note. Parents, teachers, and youth mentors must play complementary and mutually reinforcing roles in child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, if this principle was part of the compact between families and schools, parent–teacher conferences might focus on how to mutually foster the developmental attributes in this study, understanding that developmentally vulnerable youth can also be among the most high-achieving students. Based on social, emotional, and cognitive observations in the classroom, teachers might suggest and provide educational resources to families with evidence-based ways to foster these attributes at home. In the other direction, families might suggest how teachers could be helpful in supporting their child's unique developmental needs as they observe them at home.

Adolescents themselves must become a critical part of the "I" and "we" dialogue about their own development. Youth-led initiatives focused on positive development should include families and teachers in collaborative dialogue about "what is going on in my world" and how adults can best support youth. A series of conversations might focus on a group of developmental attributes that help kids attain higher life satisfaction. This can be accomplished through a "World Café" approach, a successful tool widely used for participatory change processes in communities (Löhr et al., 2020). These types of approaches support the systemic nature of effective family–school partnerships as emergent processes that build relationships and improve learning in the peripheral spaces where parents and schools interact on behalf of children's positive development (Price-Mitchell, 2010a). They also promote the vital aspect of learning that Lave and Wenger (1991) argued does not rest with the individual but in a relational process situated in a cultural and historical context.

While SEL interventions are vital to social, emotional, and cognitive development, they are also complex and multifaceted, with challenges to implementation and sustainability over time (Durlak et al., 2011). Schools might consider adding a simpler, complementary framework and vocabulary that supports SEL goals and also makes communication about positive development with family, school, and community stakeholders easier to understand, discuss, and implement within their unique contexts. This study examined one such framework, Price-Mitchell's (2010b, 2015) *The Compass Advantage*, designed to help families, schools, adolescents, and youth programs understand why and how to scaffold development. Shek et al. (2019) reviews other frameworks, including Benson's 40 developmental assets, Lerner's 5Cs and 6Cs conceptions, and Catalano's 15 developmental constructs.

The findings from this study suggest that children would be more highly satisfied with their lives if family–school partnerships focused on two goals: developing a child's internal attributes and encouraging their educational achievement. This means that all adults who support youth learn how to build relationships with children that foster positive developmental attributes and well-being. Theory and research views child and adolescent development as a dynamic system and examines how constructs diverge or converge to foster thriving (Baltes, 1987). According to systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1956; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), success is more closely linked to broad patterns and relationships than to narrowly restrictive factors like GPA. When new patterns are identified and understood, small changes by those who care about the positive development of youth can boost young people's life satisfaction and success in school in big ways.

Study Limitations

Several limitations of the current study are worth noting. First, we did not measure all aspects of development that are associated with life satisfaction, including cognitive abilities that have been linked to performance, health, and longevity (Lövdén et al., 2020) and other character strengths that have been defined in the literature (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Instead, we limited our study to eight developmental constructs for the purpose of examining Price-Mitchell's (2010b, 2015) qualitatively derived conceptual framework through a statistical lens.

Second, correlation and variance differ from causation. Our research design limited our ability to conduct in-depth structural equation modeling (SEM) and path analysis of our data, which may produce greater understanding of the constructs' relationships. Consequently, we were not

able to measure each of the constructs' direct and indirect impact on life satisfaction and on the other constructs. Future studies would benefit from designs that incorporated SEM analysis. Specifically, correlations are often affected and inflated by latent sources of common method bias, such as social desirability bias. Identifying and controlling for common method bias requires the inclusion of a marker variable (Richardson et al., 2009). Future studies that inquire more deeply into the causal relations among constructs would utilize a research design that employs marker variables (Simmering et al., 2014; Williams & O'Boyle, 2015).

Finally, while our study was based on research that linked eight developmental constructs to individual and societal well-being, we measured their impact only on individual well-being. We would hypothesize that some constructs contribute more to individual development while others contribute more to societal development and well-being. Empathy, for example, was one of the weaker correlates to life satisfaction but may be more strongly correlated to societal well-being. Future studies might explore the relationship between these constructs and proxies for societal well-being such as individual contributions to community.

Conclusion

This study offers new data about developmental attributes that are associated with life satisfaction in U.S. eighth and ninth grade adolescents. Of the developmental constructs in the final dataset, self-awareness, resilience, and resourcefulness are the most strongly correlated with life satisfaction. Moderately strong correlations exist for sociability, curiosity, and integrity. GPA and empathy are the lowest correlates of life satisfaction among measured constructs.

In addition, this study shows that some developmental attributes are also moderately correlated with academic achievement, including resourcefulness, resilience, and sociability. Data indicates that female students are 1.7 times more likely to have a GPA in the highest range compared to their male counterparts, while male students are 1.8 times more likely to report very high life satisfaction than females. In addition, being in ninth grade is negatively associated with life satisfaction and each of the developmental constructs, suggesting a downward trend in well-being from eighth to ninth grade. Further research is needed to develop and refine methods to explore causation and systemic relationships between developmental constructs, including pathways to individual and societal thriving.

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Authors' Note: The survey conducted and datasets generated and analyzed for the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Experiences of Teachers of Students With Disabilities and Extensive Support Needs During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Administrator Considerations for Equitable Education

Grace L. Francis, Alexandra S. Reed, and Kelly Conn-Reda

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges teachers of students with disabilities and extensive support needs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine educators who taught in a public school district during the 2020 pandemic engaged in interviews at three points of time, when: (a) schools closed in March, (b) during summer break, and (c) when schools reopened in September. Participants described the challenges they faced transitioning to online instruction and back to face-to-face instruction, including: (a) failing to equip students with technology skills, (b) difficulty adapting instructional techniques, (c) inability to access student materials and resources, (d) discomfort with temporary IEPs, (e) dependency on families "acting as a paraprofessional," and (f) safety and logistical barriers. Administrative support, or the lack thereof, underpinned all discussions. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

Key Words: COVID-19, severe disability, education, barriers, administrators, principals, students with disabilities, support needs, equity, equitable

Introduction

An aggressive variant of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) spread rapidly in 2020, resulting in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) ordering states of emergency and "stay at home" orders to stymie the transmission of the virus. By the end of March 2020, over 50 million families of U.S. K–12 students scrambled to turn kitchen tables into desks, while teachers frantically set up online classrooms with as little as a few days' notice (Education Week, 2020; Hong et al., 2021; Schaefer et al., 2020). Research documents the toll that shifting to online instruction in the face of a global pandemic took on students, families, and teachers, including routine disruption, acute and chronic stress, and scrambling to secure needed resources (e.g., technology, childcare, instructional supplies; Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2023; Pfefferbaum, 2021). The majority of research and media reports, however, narrowly document the experiences of students without disabilities, failing to acknowledge the specialized needs of over 7.2 million students with disabilities in the U.S. (Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2023; Pressley, 2021; Schaeffer, 2023). In addition, students with disabilities receive special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004). As a result, special education teachers were not only faced with shifting specialized instruction online like other teachers, but also had to navigate challenges associated with providing legally mandated IEP services (Chen et al., 2022; Nadworny & Kamenetz, 2020).

A population of teachers who are nearly unrepresented in research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic are educators of students with disabilities who have extensive support needs (ESN; i.e., students with a cognitive disability, autism, and/or multiple severe disabilities who require sustained support across settings). Given the complex and pervasive nature of needs among students with ESN, special educators who teach this population of students maintain responsibilities that other educators do not hold, including providing care services (e.g., feeding, toileting), facilitating student augmentative and alternative communication devices and programs, and physically positioning students to ensure comfort and health—all in addition to providing students with high-quality instruction (Browder et al., 2020; Pufpaff et al., 2015). These practices involve specialized equipment and assistive technology (e.g., gastrostomy tubes, catheters, slider sheets, standers, high and low-tech communication devices, braillers, eye gaze devices, lifts), devices that these educators must

be knowledgeable about and adept in using (Reichle, 2011). Further, educators of students with ESN must employ myriad teaching strategies to meet their students' diverse communication, academic, behavioral, social, sensory, physical, health, and daily living skills, which often requires close physical proximity to students (e.g., hand-over-hand prompting, guiding, transferring; Browder et al., 2020; Tomaino et al., 2022).

Due to the substantial needs of students with ESN, the expertise that teachers of students with ESN use to meaningfully instruct and support students, and the importance of assistive technology and direct contact to provide necessary student support and engagement, it is understandable that teachers of students with ESN would experience increased levels of stress and professional dissatisfaction compared to other educators. In addition to diminished student outcomes, increased levels of stress and dissatisfaction has the potential to exacerbate teacher burnout and existing shortage of teachers of students with ESN (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Park & Shin, 2020). Without an exploration into the experiences and perspectives of teachers of students with ESN during the COVID-19 pandemic, school officials and policymakers miss an opportunity to learn from challenges to enhance teaching conditions and support mechanisms for teachers of students with ESN.

Further, education research during COVID has primarily focused on experiences during school closures in March of 2020. This narrow examination of the challenges faced by educators fails to document the comprehensive experiences of teachers as they transitioned from and back to in-person education between March and September of 2020 and paints an incomplete picture of how teachers traversed the immense task of relearning their profession twice over. This gross limitation of understanding limits opportunities for important systems change regarding shifting to online instruction—a circumstance that may occur again in the event of unforeseen circumstances such as: (a) resurgences of COVID-19 variants or other infectious diseases, (b) prolonged inclement weather, or (c) natural disasters (Hanreddy, 2022; Mark, 2022).

An examination of the holistic experiences of teachers with ESN is imperative to mitigating challenges to shifting models of instruction for students most vulnerable to skill regression and diminished health and wellness (Hanreddy, 2022). Moreover, lessons learned from this often-overlooked population of teachers may provide nuanced information applicable to all members of a school community, thereby strengthening school systems. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges teachers of students with ESN experienced at three points of time in 2020,

when: (a) schools closed in March, (b) during summer break, and (c) when schools reopened in September. Learning from challenges these teachers experienced can not only better prepare teachers to transition to and from online instruction, but can also inform the ways in which education decision-makers consider school system reform.

Methods

This study followed an interpretative qualitative approach to understand the lived experience of teachers of students with ESN during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The research team consisted of four members: two White female faculty members in a university department of special education, and two White female graduate students studying special education in the same department. All team members had experience teaching students with ESN in public school systems and maintained a critical constructivist positionality regarding research and knowledge construction. The team obtained university Institutional Review Board approval prior to participant recruitment.

Participants

We sought to recruit educators who: (a) taught students with ESN in a K–12 public school in March 2020 (the time in which recruitment occurred), (b) had experience in the transition from in-person to online instruction, and (c) agreed to engage in three video-recorded interviews for up to four hours across the three data collection periods within a six-month span. Approximately three weeks after school closures, the research team used convenience recruitment techniques (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), distributing emails to 14 teachers of students with ESN who they knew from previous teaching positions. These educators taught across seven schools in four districts located within a 20-mile radius of the university just outside of a major mid-Atlantic city. The team also sent recruitment emails to six school administrators within this region with whom they also held preexisting professional relationships, asking them to forward a recruitment message to teachers of students with ESN in their schools. Fourteen teachers emailed the primary investigator with an interest in participating, who then provided them with an online consent form and demographic questionnaire. Although all interested participants met inclusionary criteria (i.e., taught K–12 students with ESN in a public school in March 2020), only nine followed through with scheduling an interview. Table 1 provides demographic information for the nine participants, seven of whom at least one member of the research team knew.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Years of Experience	Student Categories[b]	Grade
1	F	White	6	IDD, MD	9th-12th
2	M	Hispanic	3	AUT, OHI	7th-8th
3	F	Hispanic	1	IDD, AUT, PD, OHI	9th-12th
4	F	White	13	IDD, MD, AUT, PD, OHI	6th-8th
5	F	White	4	IDD, PD, IDS	9th-12th
6[a]	M	White	2	AUT, IDD	3rd-6th
7	F	White	5	ID, AUT, OHI, SLD	4th
8	F	White	1	AUT, IDD	K-3rd
9	F	White	3	PD, IDS, AUT, OHI	9th-12th

Note. [a]This participant left the teaching profession in summer of 2020. [b]As reported by participants. IDD: Intellectual and Developmental Disability, MD: Multiple Disability, AUT: Autism, IDS: Severe/Significant Intellectual Disability, PD: Physical Disability, OHI: Other Health Impairment.

Data Collection

Each participant engaged in three rounds of interviews via Zoom occurring between (a) March and April of 2020—just as school closed, (b) June and July of 2020—during summer school/summer vacation, and (c) September and October of 2020—once schools reopened. Two members of the research team cofacilitated each interview. Team members debriefed after each interview, discussing field notes and memos and noting emerging themes. All interviews were recorded via Zoom and lasted approximately 25–60 minutes each.

For round one interviews, the team used a semi-structured interview protocol that included questions about participant experiences transitioning to online instruction (e.g., What does a typical work day look like for you right now? What is the current state of IEPs and other special education meetings?). Once round one data were collected, the research team engaged in initial open coding to inform the development of the interview protocol for round two. Protocol questions for round two targeted the evolution of online instruction and expectations for the start of the new academic year (e.g., What are your school or district's expectations or guidance for the

fall semester? Envision walking into your classroom in the fall; what do you need to feel prepared and make the fall successful?). The research team again used open coding procedures to inform the development of the round three interview protocol, which focused on participants' experiences returning to school, teaching strategies, "lessons learned," and recommendations for teachers and school leadership (e.g., Can you share a particularly successful lesson or instructional activity? How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic may influence the future of the teaching profession?). During round three, one participant left the profession due to a reported lack of support and satisfaction with the education system. This participant, however, still engaged in an interview, reflecting on his experiences.

Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently and iteratively throughout the study. The researchers used Otter.ai to transcribe interview recordings and cleaned/deidentified all transcripts prior to analysis. For round one interviews, each researcher engaged in initial open coding by independently reading the same transcript to identify initial keywords, reoccurring content, and significant statements (Moustakas, 1994). The team then met to compare their interpretations of the data and developed an initial codebook based on key terms, overarching concepts, and related concepts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The team used this initial codebook to code a round one second transcript before meeting again to refine existing codes, identify new codes, or determine irrelevant codes. The team followed the coding process of independently reading the same transcript and convening to refine the codebook for each round one interview, which resulted in an initial codebook for the study that consisted of 31 highly stable codes. The research team used the same three-stage process of (a) cleaning, (b) independently coding transcripts using the most recent iteration of the codebook, and (c) collaborating to revise the codebook until no new codes emerged for round two interviews. During this time, the team engaged in ongoing conversations to resolve discrepancies in coding. For example, the team shifted the codes "inconsistency," "uncertainty," and "stress" to create a new code of "negative emotions" to address inconsistent coding. This process resulted in a codebook consisting of 16 richly defined codes and a final codebook consisting of eight highly stable categories after round three. Finally, the research team recoded all rounds of transcripts using the finalized, eight-category codebook. Once all data were coded, the researchers summarized key themes into preliminary findings.

Trustworthiness

The research team took several measures to ensure trustworthiness (e.g., the degree to which researcher interpretations of data accurately reflect the meaning and intent of participants; Pilot & Beck, 2014). First, the researchers cofacilitated all interviews, with the primary facilitator asking protocol questions and the secondary facilitator recording robust field notes, including key concepts and participant reactions during the conversation. Second, the secondary facilitator conducted member checks with participants immediately after interviews by using field notes to review key ideas and interpretations and asking participants to react, correct, add, or expand on the information presented. Third, after interviews, the cofacilitators memoed their immediate thoughts, reactions, and interpretations and debriefed with one another to discuss and reflect on their memos and why they arrived at initial their interpretations. Fourth, before interview rounds two and three, the researchers reviewed key information from previous interviews with participants to establish a starting point for subsequent interview discussions (e.g., "When we left off four weeks ago…") and gain participant feedback on initial analysis and emerging codes (e.g., "Last time we spoke, support from families was very important to you…") to obtain additional participant feedback on researcher interpretations of data. During this time participants corrected information (e.g., districts shifted the phrase "distance IEP" to "temporary IEP" between rounds of interviews) but more often expanded on information by providing additional examples or transitioning to a new, related story. Fifth, the researchers cleaned all transcripts to (a) deidentify the data, (b) ensure accuracy, (c) add important contextual information (e.g., sighs, gestures, sarcasm) and to become more familiar with data to facilitate the analysis process. Sixth, the team reached 100% agreement across researchers for categories and codes in the finalized codebook.

Findings

During interview rounds one and two, participants primarily described challenges they faced when transitioning to online instruction and back, including: (a) failing to equip students with technology skills, (b) difficulty adapting instructional techniques, (c) inability to access student materials and resources, (d) discomfort with temporary IEPs, and (e) dependency on families "acting as paraprofessionals." Further, participants described safety and logistical barriers they experienced returning to school during

the pandemic during round three interviews. Within each barrier described, however, participants often provided recommendations or offered solutions to "take a step back" after the "chaos" that COVID-19 wreaked to "reexamine special education services." As one participant noted, "I think if people could look at that [educational disruption] as a way to open that [special education shortcomings] up. Maybe it's going to be an opening of a door instead of a closing of a door."

Failing to Equip Students with Technology Skills

Participants regretfully disclosed failing to prepare their students to use technology "period," thereby increasing parent and student frustration and limiting student learning and social engagement when school moved online. Some participants indicated that this, in part, was due to student behaviors impeding their ability to keep technology in the classroom:

> In my room we had a situation where we couldn't have any computers in our room because one of my kids is a destroyer. So we never did anything on the computers. And we have a kid who's obsessed with wires so we can't have any wires.

Far more participants, however, begrudgingly admitted that they maintained low expectations for their students to use technology "due to the severity of their disabilities." Likewise, participants reported that school administrators also maintained low expectations for students with ESN to use technology, as technological "resources aren't necessarily available" in their segregated special education classrooms: "I don't want to sound bitter or anything, but I feel like in technology, [special education] gets the 'remains' sometimes." The technology that was available to participants "was crappy, very outdated technology…so, I just didn't use it."

As a result, participants uniformly recommended that teachers of students with ESN use technology in face-to-face instruction in schools, develop students' technology skills early: "start of the beginning of the year" and "set expectations" for students to "turn on the computer, log on to [school-based learning programs]," "access links," and "troubleshoot a computer." Unsurprisingly, participants noted that, without administrators acknowledging their biases and addressing "disparities" in resources between students with ESN and their peers, this was an unattainable goal: "this [technology access] is more than—[long pause]—this is an equity issue."

Difficulty Adapting Instructional Techniques

Participants were challenged by (and often unable to meet) the extensive needs of their students online, including: (a) students with medical

conditions or sensory needs ("disorders like seizure disorders and vision disorders where we're asking to limit their screen time and someone who needs everything displayed so big—we can only present so big in our [online platform])," (b) students who required significant physical support (e.g., "two of my kids have OT [occupational therapy], like *significant* OT"), (c) students with "self-injurious behaviors…turning aggression onto the family, onto the device," and/or (d) students with significant cognitive support needs (e.g., "she's not receptive or expressive; she doesn't count… fields of four for her are even sometimes too much").

Participants indicated that school administrators failed to support them in providing effective instruction in online and in-person instruction by not "taking [students with ESN] into account" in school initiatives, despite "talking about equity for how many years now." For instance, many participants recounted receiving placating comments such as "Do the best you can" and "Well, it's going to look really different for your kids, and you're just going to have to be flexible" from school administrators during online instruction instead of guidance and support. Further, district administrators mailed weekly paper "learning packets" to student homes that included grade-level worksheets for students. Participants lamented that the packets were not adapted for the needs of students with disabilities—much less students with ESN—again leaving participants and their students overlooked and underresourced: "We got the worst end of it [online instruction], and it sucks."

Further, based on the "amazing progress" students made online after they "stopped trying to push into regular classes" (supporting their students to participate in general education instruction) and, instead, focused on "one-to-one time" or working in "small groups," several participants began to question if inclusion was truly best practice for teaching students academic skills or if "we've done [inclusion] to just make ourselves feel good." For example, one participation spoke about inclusion specific to online instruction:

> In terms of virtually…man, this is going to sound bad, but maybe inclusion isn't the best. Yeah, in the classroom, they get to practice more social norms, etcetera, or learn social expectations. But virtually, I don't think it's the best…even if it were causing more work for me, I don't care.

Other participants extended this line of questioning to in-person instruction, such as one participant indicating that teachers of students with ESN "really have to ask ourselves, is everything we're doing [inclusion] the right choice for the student?"

Participants agreed that administrators should seek to learn from the experiences of teachers of students with ESN to understand what "learning" is "appropriate" for students with ESN in online spaces. Participants further recommended that administrators support teachers of students with ESN in logistical matters by proactively providing teachers with: (a) "adapted curriculum" that can be used in the classroom as well as online, (b) professional development "to create engagement in an online classroom," (c) "examples of lesson plans" appropriate for teachers of students with ESN, and (d) personal computers or tablets for each student "loaded with some sites that the students use in the classroom so that it would be easier for the parents to help them [at home]." Moreover, "given the physical challenges of [technology] access" among many of their students, participants recommended administrators "purchase supplies" such as basic adapted technology (e.g., switches, keyguards, "manipulatives," "physical things") "to send home with students during closures." "Then we know exactly what they have [at home]…so then we know how to create a lesson based on it."

Inability to Access Student Materials and Resources

The "biggest worry" among most participants was how the "last-minute" nature of school closures impacted student access to critical "personal equipment and belongings" that were left at school. For example, participants described the emotional distress (distress that led to aggressive or self-injurious behaviors among some students) that the absence of favored sensory tools, comfort items, and materials that students used to navigate their daily routines (e.g., visual schedules, reinforcement schedules) had on students at home. Additionally, student assistive technology such as standers, positioning tools, communication devices, and chargers for devices were also left at school, leaving students in adverse circumstances ("They don't have their systems. They can't communicate."). Several participants, however, were "really kept up at night" by the Medicaid-funded materials such "G-tube replacements" and toileting materials that were left at school:

> It's usually every three months they get their diapers, so that's like, "Oh, two packs get to go to school because you're there. One or two packs stay here [at home]." That was the thing that I was like *this* is imperative. They need this. I don't care if I go into school in a bubble suit and get them what they need.

In addition, nearly all participants' students experienced food insecurity, with many students largely dependent on school-provided meals for consistent nutrition. As a result, several participants reported "literally

knock[ing] on [a student's] door" to do wellness checks or dropping off food or other items they purchased for the student and their family (e.g., toys, sanitary materials, learning manipulates).

Discomfort With Temporary IEPs

Participants indicated that special education services as written on students' annual IEPs "totally stopped" when schools closed during the pandemic (e.g., "We're absolutely not in compliance [with IDEA], but we're not trying to pretend we are either"). During round two interviews participants discussed the temporary IEPs created by their districts for participants to use in lieu of students' annual IEPs during school closures. The temporary IEPs ultimately reduced the amount of special education services included on students' annual IEPs, which participants perceived as "pointless" because the temporary IEPs still overstated the amount of services students received (e.g., "My kids aren't getting OT [occupational therapy], they're not getting PST [physical and speech therapy], so they're regressing"). Further, participants found the temporary IEPs burdensome to write and lamented that they would have to "redo everything [IEPs] again" once school reopened. In short, participants believed that temporary IEPs were designed by administrators as a "CYA [cover your ass]" measure to prevent parents from filing complaints for out-of-compliance annual IEPs, evaluations, and eligibility meetings. Moreover, participants felt "at-risk" for "legal action" from parents, believing that school administrators would not assume responsibility for IEP issues and would redirect frustrated/angry parents back to teachers.

Moreover, participants were required to host IEP team meetings to finalize temporary IEPs. Some districts required participants to host temporary IEP meetings by phone, which significantly compromised participants' ability to communicate effectively with team members. During phone meetings participants found it difficult to facilitate conversations, with many people "talking all over each other." Teleconferences also made it impossible to read body language and use visuals to help convey information. These communication barriers were especially true when meeting with families who did not speak English as their first language. As one Spanish-speaking participant noted:

> We had the issue where they [school administrators] didn't want to do IEPs through Zoom or through Blackboard. It was all the phone call, and you know, there's a lot of language barriers—accents, things like that. I mean, you can read people's lips [if you can see them], but it [not having any visual] was a nightmare.

On the other hand, participants who engaged in video conference IEP meetings though an online platform such as Zoom or Google Meet described: (a) greater instances of shared decision-making among team members, (b) increased student and family engagement and comfort (e.g., asking questions, sharing family stories and photos, "chit-chatting"), (c) enhanced discussion about student data through interactive screen sharing, and (d) families inviting extended family members to their child's meeting (e.g., other family members, in-home professionals, bilingual friends and family members to support interpretation) who provided important perspectives and information. In fact, participants found that video conference IEPs were substantially more meaningful than in-person meetings held at schools before COVID shutdowns. Consequently, participants recommended that districts consider continuing the option of video conferencing for meetings with families.

Dependency on Families "Acting as a Paraprofessional"

Participants uniformly sympathized with the stress that families experienced during school closures, recognizing the numerous responsibilities they shouldered during stay-at-home orders, including the critical role they assumed providing continuous support to their children with ESN. As one participant noted, "They have to deal with their kid having a meltdown. [Parents] have other kids. All of the students have siblings. And [parents] are working from home. How do you work in business if you have to sit with your kid at a computer screen?" Unfortunately, however, participants uniformly agreed that, without families "acting as a paraprofessional," online education "would not happen." Participants "kind of tag-team[ed]" with families (e.g., parents, older siblings, grandparents) who helped students log into classes, reinforced instructions and prompted students to respond, assumed the role of related service providers (e.g., doing core-strengthening exercises with guidance), and even took data for temporary IEPs.

Given the degree to which participants needed families to serve as "instructional assistants," they spent considerable time teaching family members to effectively: (a) prompt students; (b) provide basic occupational, physical, and speech/language therapy; and (c) prevent or address challenging or dangerous behaviors. In addition, participants collaborated with families to utilize items from around their homes (e.g., pillows and towels for positioning, index cards for communication tools, Velcro and rice for sensory tools), often without the support of related service providers because they "were nearly nonexistent" (i.e., did not "show up") during online instruction.

In addition to teaching families instructional strategies, participants also spent considerable time teaching many caregivers how to access technology to support their child with ESN: "I made assumptions that some of the parents were able to use…the technology…but I really wish that I had set up a [technology] training with the parents." Participants recommended that school administrators create "ongoing, maybe once a month" workshops in "computer education" for families of students with ESN to prepare them to utilize technology for their students at home in the event of school closures and in support of at-home learning. In this vein, participants highlighted the need to offer education and support geared to the needs of different family populations, such as students who use differing assistive technology or "Latino parents because most of these students, if they can't read…if the parent can't use the email or doesn't have an email" they are unable to effectively support their children.

Safety and Logistical Barriers Returning to School

While returning to school was something all participants desired, during round three interviews participants described fearing for their safety and the safety of their students at school. Participant schools reopened incrementally to reduce the likelihood of COVID transmissions, with students with ESN being the first to attend. Because participants were among the first "wave" of teachers reentering schools, they were faced with gross uncertainty regarding how to manage CDC mandates (e.g., social distancing, masks) while also providing effective instruction. For instance, participants lamented that they did not have guidance or support on how to set up their classrooms in accordance with the minimum six-feet social distancing guidelines, which was made more challenging by the need to make small classrooms accessible for students who use large assistive technology devices (e.g., wheelchairs, adapted desks).

Participants also described hardships associated with desensitizing students to washing hands/using hand sanitizer and wearing CDC-mandated masks. One participant felt particularly distressed "forcing" students with severe, complex physical and communication disabilities who "don't have physical voluntary movement" to wear masks because these students would not be able to consent or remove masks without assistance. At the same time, participants' schools experienced personal protective gear shortages (e.g., masks, gloves, disposable gowns, face shields, hand and surface sanitizer), putting participants and students at risk for contracting and spreading COVID-19. This was especially relevant to participants, as they engaged in frequent, direct contact with their students (e.g., toiling, sanitary changing, feeding).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges teachers of students with ESN experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although a considerable amount of research has investigated the state of education during COVID-19 school closures, such research failed to consider the perspectives of teachers of students with ESN, a population of educators that often rely on hands-on, direct instruction to effectively teach their students. This study also uniquely documented the experiences of participants throughout three distinct stages of school closures during the pandemic. In addition, while educational research often focuses on barriers experienced, participants in this study also offered recommendations for preventing or addressing barriers.

Like other research examining special education during COVID, participants described challenges in meeting the needs of their students online, including adapting their instruction to online learning environments (Long et al., 2021; McDevitt & Mello, 2021). The focus shifted when conducting round two interviews, however, to the degree to which participants perceived their students as utterly disregarded, as evident by the absence of technology for their students and dearth of instructional, technological, logistical, safety, and legal support from administrators. In fact, participants indicated that a paucity of administrative support was the crux of educational inequity, as well the gateway to a just education for students with ESN. It was apparent that participants did not feel respected by school administration and did not trust (or even expect) administrators to come to their aid in the event of confrontations with families or in the face of adversity. Unfortunately, this finding reflects robust research on limited administrative proficiency in supporting special educators (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

In addition, participants pointed to the power that low expectations for students with ESN among administrators had on inequitable education. Participant observations of the influence of administrator expectations reflects literature documenting how administrator expectations impact the degree to which students with ESN experience meaningful inclusion, access to adapted general curriculum, and effective instructional practices (Agran et al., 2020; de Apodaca et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2018). As participants explored their interactions with administrators throughout rounds of interviews, the negative impact of low administrative expectations for students with ESN on participant expectations became crystalized. For example, it was not until schools closed that participants realized how grossly

unprepared their students were for engaging with basic technology and made the uncomfortable connection between their own low expectations for technology use and student opportunities to learn technology skills. Participants then traced—not blamed—the cycle of low administrative expectations influencing student access (in this example, access to technology and expectations for participants to teach technology skills) to their own low expectations for students to build technology skills (without them realizing it before). In summary, what this study points to is the cyclical nature of how one person's expectations (and behavior that occurs as a result of these expectations) constructs another's expectations (Archambault et al., 2012; Rubie-Davies, 2006), as well as the need to "break the cycle" of low expectations to support student outcomes (Gross et al., 2015).

The importance of family–professional partnerships is not a new theme in special education literature. In fact, family–professional collaboration is called for in federal special and general education law and is found to benefit students, families, and teachers alike (Kyzar et al., 2019). Although several studies conducted during COVID reinforced the important parental role in supporting the education of the children at home (Liu et al., 2020; Rousoulioti et al., 2022), this study documented how the ability for participants to instruct their students squarely fell on the shoulders of families. This finding reinforces the importance of developing collaborative relationships with families, including engaging in ongoing, two-way conversations about student and family needs, strengths, and goals (Turnbull et al., 2022). Doing so could enhance more comprehensive IEPs and family quality of life through the creation of goals important for all aspects of students' lives as well as the ability of teachers to meet the needs of families in collaboration with other school professionals and community organizations (e.g., food insecurity, access to the internet, need for additional sanitary items).

In addition, family expectations are among the most powerful influencers on student outcomes (Southward & Kyzar, 2017). Family–teacher collaboration also has the potential to bidirectionally affect expectations for students, which reinforces the need for high expectations from school leadership to create a positive "trickle down" effect. Moreover, participants' glimpse into the lives of families during online instruction not only amplified participants' empathy and commitment to family support (e.g., addressing food insecurity), but also reinforced the need for appropriate levels of support for families with members with ESN (e.g., support with student "meltdowns," toileting, navigating devices). Likewise, online IEP meetings created a portal into positive family dynamics and functioning, including meeting extended family members and hearing family stories. In

addition to informing student IEPs and understanding family needs, interacting with families virtually through online platforms has the potential for educators to build upon families' cultural wealth to enhance instruction and student support (Yosso, 2005; Delouche et al., 2024).

Finally, participants discussed the ways in which they questioned the "inclusion" of students with ESN in their schools. The core sentiment underpinning discussions revolved around whether inclusion was best for their students or simply something education decision-makers perceived as best for them. Research documents numerous benefits associated with inclusion of students with ESN, including gains in academics, social opportunities, communication, and self-determination (Kurth et al., 2015). The ways in which participants described their implementation of inclusion (e.g., providing support to students with ESN within general education settings, but completely separate from their peers without ESN), however, did not reflect best practices (e.g., learning alongside their peers without disabilities across education and community settings). Several factors must be in place for meaningful inclusion to occur, including a school community that supports inclusion and collaboration among all school professionals (Francis et al., 2016)—key factors that participants did not experience. This finding again denotes a need for administrative leadership that sets expectations for research-based inclusive practices within the school community.

Limitations

There are three primary limitations to this study. First, although convenience recruitment strategies are common in qualitative research, this approach can result in narrowed or biased perspectives (Yin, 2016). In this study, the recruitment process only allowed perspectives of teachers from a small geographic location. Further, although qualitative research is not intended to be generalized (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), the participants included in this study were also relatively homogeneous (e.g., majority female, one school district, similar years' teaching experience). In the same vein, although the researchers sought to diversify the perspectives and experiences of participants by recruiting via school administration, this process resulted in an inability to determine if and to whom invitations were distributed. Finally, at least one member of the research team knew seven of the nine participants. Although these existing relationships appeared to facilitate comfortable conversations, it is possible that the relationships may have negatively impacted discussions (e.g., acquiescence). The research team took turns facilitating across rounds of interviews in an effort to provide participants opportunities to speak as openly as possible.

Implications

School professionals and policymakers may draw several implications from this study. First, it is essential that administrators maintain high expectations for all students, continuously seek to grow their capacity to provide an appropriate education for students with ESN, and create a school culture dedicated to inclusion. For example, administrators can embed universal design for learning when purchasing technology and developing schoolwide materials. Moreover, all professionals within a school (e.g., general and special educators, related service providers, counselors, custodians) must be committed to equitable education for inclusion to occur. As a result, administrators should consider multiple mechanisms such as distributed leadership, ongoing professional development, continued guidance and support for teachers, and accountability measures for equitable teaching practices (Rigby et al., 2020; Tudryn, 2016; Woulfin & Jones, 2021).

Unfortunately, research reports limited administrative proficiency in supporting special educators and inclusive practices (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Due to the limited knowledge in supporting special education teachers (especially teachers of students with ESN), there is a significant need for higher education preparation programs to equip administrators with the expectations and skills necessary to establish and maintain a school community that values and supports all students and their families. Further, higher education programs may mitigate low expectations for students with ESN by teaching administrators how to critically examine their biases and assumptions through reflexivity practices (interrogating one's thoughts, biases, habits, and assumptions, including how they were formed and how they influence interactions with others; D'Cruz et al., 2007); skills that administrators can then build into the school community. For example, administrators may facilitate a professional development program on reflexivity processes such as the EASE Process, with individuals examining their identities, becoming aware of how their identities makes them feel and act in certain contexts, engaging in self-scrutiny about their actions, and evaluating the impact of their emotions and beliefs on how they act (Francis et al., 2023). According to participant data (including the participant who left the profession due to dissatisfaction with the education system), administrators who embody these skills and practices will not only enhance student outcomes, but may well retrain highly qualified teachers of students with ESN by helping them feel valued and gratified in their profession.

Future research should seek to address the limitations in this study by investigating the perspectives and experiences of more diverse teachers across the U.S., as well as the experiences of students and families, to more deeply understand how to optimize instruction and support for students with ESN. Further, it is critical to understand the experiences of administrators, including their perspectives of teachers of and students with ESN to determine how their perspectives deviate or coalesce with participants' perspectives in order to establish a foundation for advancing appropriate education for students with ESN. Future researchers should also continue to advance curriculum and instruction for students with ESN, including methods for increasing technology literacy among students with ESN. In addition, it likely goes without saying that future research must also investigate best practices for online teaching strategies and programs to advance educational equity for this population. For technology literacy and access to online education to occur, however, students with ESN must have access to up-to-date, adapted technology within their schools and homes. As a result, it is essential that researchers continue to critically interrogate disparities in education to elucidate necessary systems change. Moreover, future research should investigate the nature and efficacy of online IEP meetings in enhancing family–professional partnerships and, ultimately, student outcomes.

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Parent Engagement and the Teaching Profession: A Policy Framework

Max Antony-Newman

Abstract

Despite the well-documented evidence on the importance of parent engagement for academic achievement, emotional well-being, and social inclusion, as well as interest among policymakers to tap into the benefits of parent engagement at the system level, there is still a widespread lack of support for teachers to be able to engage effectively with parents and families. Prior research shows that teacher education programs and professional development initiatives infrequently include parent engagement. With the goal to improve teacher readiness for parent engagement, I propose an integrated parent engagement policy framework. This framework will include three mandatory components: (a) parent engagement policy for educators; (b) inclusion of parent engagement components in teacher education programs; and (c) requirements for parent engagement competencies in teacher certification standards. Such a framework will ensure teacher readiness for parent engagement by transforming a current "patchy" policy landscape and will support teachers throughout their careers to democratically engage with parents.

Key Words: parent engagement, teacher education programs, families, educational policy framework, educator certification standards

Introduction

Parent engagement in children's education has attracted the interest of sociologists of education, policymakers, and teachers for the last several decades (Epstein, 2010; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 1998). Parent engagement represents a range of activities in which parents and guardians participate at home (e.g., talking about school, arranging extracurricular activities and tutoring, creating learning opportunities at home) and in school (e.g., volunteering, fundraising, attending school events; Goodall, 2018, 2022). It also includes attempts by educators to encourage such activities to improve students' learning (Edwards, 2016). Parent engagement should be distinguished from parental involvement, which mainly focuses on school-centric activities (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Researchers have conclusively showed that parents and families play a crucial role in the academic achievement and social well-being of children (Boonk et al., 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2012). Subsequently, policymakers became eager to increase school-based parental involvement to improve schools' academic outcomes (Leithwood & McElheron-Hopkins, 2004; Mapp, 2012), while shifting significant responsibilities for students' educational success from the state to parents (Nawrotzki, 2012). At the same time, the rise of intensive parenting (Hays, 1996) created new expectations for parents not just to provide material and emotional support to their children, but also structure children's free time around organized extracurricular activities, keep regular communication with teachers, and advocate on their children's behalf to ensure their smooth navigation of the school system and successful transition to postsecondary opportunities (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2011). Increased social inequality and stalled social mobility over the last 40 years (Piketty, 2014) and reliance on families, especially mothers, to provide the safety net in neoliberal contexts (Calarco, 2024), made parents more anxious about the economic and social futures of their children (Weis et al., 2014) and led to growing investment of family time and money in supporting children's education and learning (Bassok et al., 2016; Kobakhidze et al., 2023).

Teachers, whose job has traditionally centered on working with children on school premises, were now entrusted with engaging parents so that "good schools become even better" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 5). In various countries and regions, legal requirements to establish school councils which include parent members (Chicago Public Schools, n.d.; Government of Ontario, 2000; National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017) and to work with parents from poverty-affected backgrounds (Every

Student Succeeds Act, 2015) helped to redefine the job of teachers and school leaders, who now have to communicate and collaborate with parents more than ever before. There is a growing body of research showing that working with parents is a challenging component of teachers' work (Stelmach et al., 2021) and highlighting the need to ensure teacher readiness for parent engagement (Antony-Newman, 2023; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Mancenido & Pello, 2020). Teachers often report lack of support in their work with parents ranging from minimal or absent emphasis on parent engagement during the initial teacher education to insufficient attention as part of professional development (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Mutton et al., 2018; Saltmarsh et al., 2015). Available initiatives represent a haphazard combination of infrequent parent engagement workshops, occasional focus on parent engagement in teacher education programs, and reference to parent engagement policy documents in jurisdictions where such policies exist (Antony-Newman, 2024).

Due to the patchy nature of the current parent engagement policy context, there is an urgent need to develop a comprehensive parent engagement policy framework that would guide the work of teachers across their career span and help them pursue democratic family–school collaborations in which parents and teachers work together to improve the educational experiences of students. In this article, I propose the integrated parent engagement policy framework for each jurisdiction that would include the following three mandatory elements: (a) parent engagement policy for educators; (b) inclusion of parent engagement components in teacher education programs; and (c) requirements for parent engagement competencies in teacher certification standards. Such a framework will ensure teacher readiness and continuous support for parent engagement from the initial teacher education stage to everyday work in schools. In the subsequent three sections, I will provide examples of existing policy initiatives in all three domains and what still needs to be done to have an integrated parent engagement framework at the policy level.

Parent Engagement Policies: Guide for Action

While educational policymakers first began tapping into the power of parent engagement in the 1960s as part of U.S. President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty when the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) introduced additional funding for parental involvement in schools located in poverty-affected neighbourhoods (Mapp, 2012), parent engagement became one of the key areas for the education policy community in

late 1990s–early 2000s. As mentioned earlier, this period was characterized by the rise of intensive parenting (Hays, 1996) wherein parents, especially from the middle class, began to spend more time and money on their children's education and extracurriculars (Bassok et al., 2016; Kalil et al., 2023). At the same time, the neoliberal turn to accountability in education as a way of governance and redesigning education further in line with the needs of the labor market (Ambrosio, 2013; Connell, 2013; Lauder & Mayhew, 2020) led to increased reliance on marked-based competition and choice (Apple, 2004). Parents were now seen not just as providers of material and emotional support for their children, but active participants in children's education (Feinberg & Lubenski, 2008; Golden et al., 2021) and contributors to school improvement through governance and school-centric activities (Antony-Newman, 2023; Lawson, 2003).

Unsurprisingly, parent engagement policies appeared first in English-speaking countries, which were and still are at the forefront of neoliberal reforms in society and education (Ambrosio, 2013; Connell, 2013; Lauder & Mayhew, 2020). Subsequently, increased levels of social inequality made it necessary for parents and families to be more actively involved in their children's education to avoid downward social mobility (Weis et al., 2014). In this cultural and policy context, several jurisdictions introduced legislation that made school councils mandatory and brought parents into the governance of K–12 education, for example, *Education Act, Ontario regulation 612/00: School councils and parent involvement committees* (Government of Ontario, 2000) or *The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006* (National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017). As a result of such legislation, parent engagement became institutionalized, which was further supported by the development of dedicated parent engagement policies at the national or state/provincial level (Government of Australia, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Scottish Government, 2018). Such frameworks were instrumental in conceptualizing parent engagement at the policy level, creating the discourse of benefits of engaging parents in education and providing examples and guidance on practical implementation of parent engagement initiatives. Afterwards, parent engagement policies were developed at two levels: (a) national/subnational, and (b) school board/district level, with the higher-level policies "trickling down" (Ginsberg & Wimpelberg, 1987) to the level below.

National/Subnational Level

While most English-speaking countries' education systems are federal in nature (Australia, Canada, U.S.) or comprise several distinct education

systems (U.K.), their respective first level of parent engagement policies have been created and adopted at the subnational level. The main issue is that policies at this level were created in some jurisdictions but not in others. In the U.K., Scotland stands out in its policy emphasis on parent engagement and involvement (Education Scotland, 2022; National Parenting Forum of Scotland, 2017; Scottish Government, 2018), with a national parent engagement policy also developed in Wales (Welsh Government, 2016) but not in England, which accounts for 84% of the U.K. population. Several, but not all, Australian states developed comprehensive parent engagement policies, for example, Queensland (Queensland Government, 2020) and South Australia (Government of South Australia, 2022). Out of 13 Canadian provinces and territories, currently only Manitoba and Ontario have parent engagement policies at the provincial level (Government of Manitoba, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). In the U.S., the State Consortium Birth–Grade 12 Family Engagement Frameworks initiative resulted in 13 states developing parent engagement policies in 2017–20 (NAFSCE, n.d.), including very comprehensive policies in Connecticut (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2018), Michigan (Michigan Department of Education, 2020), Mississippi (Mississippi Department of Education, 2020), and Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018).

School Board/District Level

At the middle level, parent engagement policies cover all public schools in a particular district, board, or local council and refer to the first-level parent engagement policy that exists at the national or subnational level (Education Scotland, 2022; Government of Australia, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). One of the few current examples that offer such comprehensive policy coverage is in Scotland, where all 32 local councils are responsible for developing an annual parental involvement and engagement (PIE) strategy and report to the central government regularly (Scottish Government, 2022). PIE strategies vary in scope and range from documents that list brief agenda items to more comprehensive policy documents that introduce key terms, provide examples of parent engagement and involvement initiatives, and include a bibliography of academic and policy sources (Inverclyde Council, 2022). In the U.S. context, only local education agencies (school districts, county offices of education, direct-funded charter schools) that receive additional federal funding under Title I in areas of high poverty are required by law to have parent and family engagement policies (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Mapp, 2012).

As a result, mid-level parent engagement policies are unequally distributed across the country. Nevertheless, there are successful initiatives that encourage second-level parent engagement policy coverage in selected U.S. states. For example, in 2007, Ohio developed a model policy for school boards, districts, and schools to help develop local policies (Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center, 2024b). The state of California requires all districts to develop a policy on parent rights and responsibilities (California School Boards Association, 2006). In Ontario, Canada, there is no mandatory requirement for all school boards to develop parent engagement policies, but the provincial *Parents in Partnership* policy has been around since 2010 and influenced some school boards to develop or significantly update their parent engagement policies. For example, the Toronto District School Board parent engagement policy adopts the language of partnership between parents and schools prominent in the provincial framework policy and cites the document itself (Toronto District School Board, 2022).

Individual schools normally rely on middle-level policies developed at the school board/district level to guide their parent engagement activities. Private schools are not governed by a school board/district or any local authority yet have more of an incentive to develop their own parent engagement policies, especially in the context where they charge fees and would like to communicate to parents that their opinion matters for the school that relies on their financial contributions (Beatrice Tate School, 2012; Holy Spirit Bray Park, n.d.).

Parent engagement policies play an important first step in shaping the discourse that parents matter, their interests should be centered, and school–family partnerships should be democratic (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). Policies that exist now vary on how comprehensive they are in providing educators with concepts, tools, and resources to engage with parents and families. As for the content and message, current policies can be placed along a continuum between their school-centric and family-centric focus, and problem-based and asset-oriented nature (Crozier & Davies, 2007). Crucially, making sure that each jurisdiction has a parent engagement policy at both levels helps to locate parent engagement at the center of teachers' work rather than on the margins.

Policy documents produced at national/subnational, school board/district, or even individual school level "tell" educators to "do" parent engagement, but it is the role of school leadership and teachers to enact these policies (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; Pushor & Amendt, 2018). The enactment of parent engagement policies is shaped by the interplay between teacher beliefs and practices related to engaging parents on the one hand

and social and cultural context of schools on the other. To ensure that all educators are ready to engage with parents in their schools, initial teacher education and professional development are crucial (Antony-Newman, 2023, 2024).

Teacher Education: Preparing Teachers to Engage With Parents

Prior research shows that engaging with parents is an important area of teachers' work, but they often do not receive sufficient preparation or support throughout their careers (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Mutton et al., 2018; Saltmarsh et al., 2015). Teacher education programs are tasked with multiple goals that need to be reached to prepare teacher candidates to be ready to start their careers in the classroom. Making sure newly qualified teachers are ready to engage with parents and families is seen as an important goal, but prior research highlighted two important barriers: crowded curriculum and narrow conceptualization of parent engagement (Antony-Newman, 2024).

The biggest obstacle is a very packed teacher education curriculum, where matters related to school curriculum and classroom instruction take up most of the time (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Lehmann, 2018; Patte, 2011). The opportunities for parent engagement content to be included in teacher education programs depends on the length of such programs, which varies dramatically between nine-month programs in the U.K. (University of Glasgow, n.d.) and two-year programs in many Canadian provinces (University of Toronto, n.d.) to four-year programs in the U.S. (AACTE, 2022). The goal of adding parent engagement content, either as stand-alone courses or specific topics added to general courses, cannot be confined to university-based teacher education only. Fast-growing alternative pathways to the teaching profession offer a range of fast-track routes (e.g., Teach for America), wherein teacher candidates spend as little as five weeks in class before their field experience (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2022). It is extremely unlikely that such programs will have space in their classroom curriculum for parent engagement content, although the practicum experience can and should provide affordances for teacher candidates to get ready for parent engagement when they enter their own classrooms after graduation.

Another barrier for adequate teacher preparation for parent engagement lies in the narrow understanding of parent engagement. All too often teacher educators view parent engagement mainly through a school-centric lens (Lawson, 2003), where engaging with parents means only sending home report cards, informing about school events, and sometimes providing suggestions on extending classroom learning at home (Jones, 2020;

Mehlig & Shumow, 2013; Willemse et al., 2016). In such cases, student teachers only learn about parent involvement in school (Goodall, 2018) rather than a holistic parent engagement that does justice to parental funds of knowledge (Colina Neri et al., 2021).

Currently, parent engagement content in education programs is rarely offered in a systematic fashion. Although some jurisdictions highlight parent engagement as key components of teacher education programs (Government of Ontario, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2021), dedicated parent engagement courses are rarely mandatory, and their presence relies mainly on the initiative of individual faculty members (Antony-Newman, 2024). The Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan is an exemplary case in point. It offers at least four courses focused on parent engagement in their undergraduate, graduate, and certificate programs: Engaging Parents in Teaching and Learning, Parent Engagement in the Early Years, Re/Presenting Families in Schools, and Trends and Issues in Curriculum Research and Development: Practicum in Parent and Family Engagement. All of these courses have been developed and taught throughout the years by Professor Debbie Pushor (University of Saskatchewan, n.d.b). Only the Parent Engagement in the Early Years course in the Early Childhood Education certificate program is mandatory (University of Saskatchewan, n.d.a). The other three courses are offered as electives and are instructor-dependent.

In the Australian context, Saltmarsh et al. (2015) looked at four domains where teacher education programs can introduce parent engagement content: (a) general foundational units that specifically refer to parents/families; (b) stand-alone units in special interest areas; (c) stand-alone units (families, partnerships, professional communications), and (d) practicum. Only two universities offered parent engagement in all four domains, although 12 had stand-alone units devoted explicitly to addressing parent engagement, and four universities featured parent engagement in practicum (Saltmarsh et al., 2015).

An interesting example of blurring the lines between stand-alone units and practicum experience is the course Professional and Family Partnerships developed at the York College of Pennsylvania in the U.S., which is mandatory for all of their early elementary and special education preservice teachers. As part of the college–family partnership model, future teachers combine this university-based course with working with families who attend regular programming at a local nonprofit organization that serves the families of children with special needs (Sutton et al., 2020). Crucially, this field component of the teacher education program also brings benefits for

participating families who receive access to enrichment activities centered around their own concerns of parenting children with special needs.

Although parent engagement content can be added as a cross-curricular theme and does not have to be offered exclusively in stand-alone courses (Antony-Newman, 2023), a significant body of literature highlights insufficient teacher readiness for parent engagement at the start of their careers (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Mutton et al., 2018; Saltmarsh et al., 2015). Another important area for teachers' readiness for parent engagement is teachers' professional learning that happens throughout their career (Campbell et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2024). A big role here is played by teacher standards.

Teacher Standards: What All Teachers Should Know About Parent Engagement

Teacher standards were introduced in the 1980s–90s to codify "what teachers should be able to do and what they should know" (Sachs, 2003, p. 177), ensure consistency of teaching, and facilitate improvement and professional learning (Campbell et al., 2017). Teacher standards are embedded in teacher education programs, guide practice, and represent a "framework for the preparation, professional growth, supervision, and evaluation of all teachers" (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 1). To achieve systematic and sustained parent engagement (Pushor, 2024), teacher standards have to include the components related to teacher readiness for parent engagement. What do we know about existing teacher standards internationally?

Antony-Newman (2023) found that most Canadian provinces and territories have teacher standards that name parents as partners in the education of their children. While some jurisdictions mention parents in passing (Government of New Brunswick, n.d.; Ontario College of Teachers, 2016; Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2017) others have explicit focus on establishing relationships and communicating with parents and families (B.C. Teachers' Council, 2019; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018; Government of Nunavut, 2017). British Columbia and Quebec went further than other provinces and have developed separate standards and competencies for parent engagement (B.C. Teachers' Council, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2021). *Professional Standards for B.C. Educators* is a concise document, but having a separate standard for parent engagement out of nine standards is still an important step forward in sending a message that engaging with parents and families is one of the core areas for teachers (B.C. Teachers Council, 2019). *Reference Framework for Professional Competencies for Teachers,* developed in

Quebec both to inform initial teacher education programs in the province and support continuous professional development, has a dedicated competency that requires teachers to be able to "cooperate with the family and education partners in the community" (Ministry of Education, 2021, p. 70).

In the U.S., the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) analyzed licensure requirements for educators in all 50 states and 6 U.S. territories against the four areas of parent engagement readiness: collaboration and partnership, communication, culture and diversity, and relationships and trust (NAFSCE, 2020). They found that only 30% of U.S. states and territories explicitly address these areas in their licensure requirements, less than half of jurisdictions require relevant parent engagement administrator training, and less than 50% emphasize the need for teachers to establish relationships and trust with families (NAFSCE, 2020). In other words, 17 states and territories have a comprehensive focus on parent engagement in teacher standards, seven jurisdictions do not mention parents and families at all, while the majority focus on some of the four key areas but not on others (NAFSCE, 2020).

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, developed at the federal level (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022), include clear focus on parent and family engagement in *Standard 7: Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers, and the community* and briefly mention parents/families in *Standard 3: Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning* and *Standard 5: Assess, provide feedback, and report on student learning*. All Australian states and territories follow these standards for their local teacher certification purposes.

Teacher standards in New Zealand include the commitment to families and whānau (extended family in Maori culture including three or four generations) as one of the four key commitments that guide teachers in New Zealand, alongside commitment to society, the teaching profession, and learners (Education Council, 2017). Teachers are expected to engage families in their children's learning and show respect to families' heritage, language, identity, and culture. *Standard for Full Registration* in Scotland briefly mentions parents and families as partners alongside colleagues, the wider school community, and partner agencies by establishing "opportunities for parents/carers to participate in decisions about their child's learning" (General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2021, p. 9). *Teachers' Standards* in England document (Department for Education, 2021, p. 1) mentions parents only twice when requiring teachers to "communicate effectively with parents with regard to pupils 'achievements and well-being'" (p. 1) as part of working with parents in the "best interests of their pupils."

Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of this article was to advocate for the introduction of the integrated parent engagement policy framework at the levels of school, teacher education, and teacher standards. Currently, there is no perfect example of a jurisdiction which has a comprehensive parent engagement policy to guide teachers' work in schools, a policy mandate for all teacher education programs to include the parent engagement component, and teacher standards that include parent engagement as a key requirement for practicing teachers. For example, most Australian states have parent engagement policies (Government of South Australia, 2022; Queensland Government, 2020) and teacher standards feature parents (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022), but teacher education lacks consistency in parent engagement focus (Saltmarsh et al., 2015). Scotland has a range of well-developed parent engagement policies on the national and local levels (Education Scotland, 2022; National Parenting Forum of Scotland, 2017; Scottish Government, 2018), but teacher education programs and teacher standards mention parent engagement only in passing (General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2021). Some U.S. jurisdictions have parent engagement policies in place (e.g., Connecticut State Department of Education, 2018; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; Mississippi Department of Education, 2020) and highlight parent engagement in teacher standards (NAFSCE, 2020), but do not offer consistency in teacher education, especially with the proliferation of fast-track alternative routes to teaching (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2022).

In the absence of an integrated parent engagement policy framework, several organizations developed a range of initiatives to support teachers in parent engagement activities. In the U.S. context, the Statewide Family Engagement Centers Program at the U.S. Department of Education provides "financial support to organizations that provide technical assistance and training to State educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) in the implementation and enhancement of systemic and effective family engagement policies, programs, and activities" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para. 1). Many of the funded activities implemented at state level provide parent engagement training and support for educators. NAFSCE is currently working on developing its Family Engagement Preservice Educator Preparation Initiative and has been funding projects across several U.S. states since 2022 that are aimed at fostering innovative approaches to parent engagement in teacher education (NAFSCE, n.d.). They also developed a set of eight core competencies for family engagement

professionals in four domains—(a) reflect, (b) connect, (c) collaborate for learning, and (d) lead alongside families—that is becoming influential in the U.S. context and can serve as an example for other countries (NAFSCE, 2022).

Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center at the Ohio State University aims to "support the development and academic achievement of children by providing tools and trainings to Ohio families and schools for building effective family–school partnerships" (Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center, 2024a, para. 1). Among many activities of the Center, they established a network of partnership schools and provide professional development for family engagement at 96 Ohio schools alongside free online seminars.

Parents International, an independent research, advocacy, and training organization headquartered in the Netherlands but involved in projects related to parent and family engagement throughout the European Union member states also contributes to building teachers readiness for parent engagements. Their resource pack *Empower Educators: Teacher Training Materials to Engage Families with a Migrant Background* (Parents International, 2023) is aimed specifically at teachers who work with immigrant and refugee students who face unique barriers to parent involvement and engagement (Antony-Newman, 2019).

At a more local level, Glasgow Life Family Learning Team in Scotland is funded by the Glasgow City Council "to help close the 'poverty related attainment gap' by building school and nursery staff capacity to develop and deliver a sustainable family learning offer in their establishments" (Glasgow Life Family Learning Team, n.d., para. 2). Working in the early years and primary settings, the organization

> offers resources, training, and coaching activities that will enable schools and nurseries to develop effective parental engagement strategies, improve the range and quality of their family learning programmes, increase parental learning and volunteering opportunities, and develop strong partnerships that support quality and sustainability. (Glasgow Life Family Learning Team, n.d., para. 4)

The team follows the governmental mandate to support teachers in fostering family learning work in local schools and communities (Education Scotland, 2017, 2018).

Crucially, no matter how successful such initiatives are, they cannot compensate for the lack of a comprehensive policy framework that would guide teachers' parent engagement work from the initial teacher education experiences to their ongoing everyday work in school in all jurisdictions.

Current initiatives are only capable of adding elements to the existing patchwork of policies both in geographical and in substantial terms. As a result, to effectively support teachers in engaging parents and families, an integrated parent engagement framework is urgently needed in all jurisdictions. It should include three interrelated components, where no single component can be missing if we are to ensure the sustainability of the entire framework: (a) parent engagement policy for educators; (b) inclusion of parent engagement components in teacher education programs; and (c) requirements for parent engagement competencies in teacher certification standards.

A key element of the proposed framework is its ethos of social justice, inclusion, and belonging that shape the vision of parent and family engagement in education and learning. The positive effects of the integrated parent engagement policy framework will only be realized if, at the level of societal discourse and dominant beliefs in education systems, parents are viewed from the asset-based perspective and the practice of democratic family–school collaborations allows parents and teachers to "walk alongside" each other (Pushor, 2015). Policies send powerful messages about what needs to be done, but it is down to policy actors to make ongoing decisions on how policies will be enacted (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016). An integrated parent engagement policy framework is an important step in ensuring democratic family–school collaborations, but it is up to educators and families to make it a lived reality (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Goodall, 2022; Pushor, 2015).

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Leading for Educational Equity and Community Vitality: A Comprehensive School–Community Framework

Hope G. Casto, Kristie LeBeau, and John W. Sipple

Abstract

Educational and community leaders can use a community aware policy perspective in the quest for educational opportunity, equity, and community vitality. This school–community conceptual framework presents four elements of the school–community relationship that highlight the intersection between the educational and community levels of analysis, as well as the economic and social role that schools play. Rural schools and communities are the focus of this framework; however, it can be applicable in the practice and study of school–community relationships in other settings. It can be used by educational leaders and researchers to surface long-standing tensions, agreements or disagreements about the role of the school, and voices that may often be silenced in local educational decision-making.

Key Words: school–community connections, educational leadership, school role, human capital, social capital, community, development

Introduction

School and community leaders are professionally siloed, working in different fields with distinct training, regulations, and experiences. However, the reality of schools functioning within communities is much more

fluid and interdependent. Rural schools and communities are facing unprecedented challenges (Azano et al., 2022; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021), including learning loss and economic disruption from the pandemic, a need to attend to the call for a national reckoning of racial inequities, and the pressing opioid endemic, among other issues. Addressing these issues in a way that leads to equitable educational opportunity and community vitality are dependent on school and community leaders who focus on the interdependence of the school–community relationship. Local school boards and local municipal authorities are in positions to make decisions that tackle these issues in their schools and communities (Harmon & Schafft, 2009), calling to question what evidence they consult and whose voices they include when making these decisions.

We do not presuppose to know the intricate and proper balance in any given community of educational priorities, budgetary needs, and local workforce, but we posit that a comprehensive assessment of a wide range of dependencies and priorities between the school and the community it serves is useful. We present a school–community framework rooted in previously developed conceptions of educational leadership (Budge, 2006, 2010; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018) and the concept of community-aware educational policy (Casto, McGrath et al., 2016), which foregrounds cross-sector policy formulation, adoption, and implementation for the mutual benefit of families, schools, and communities. To ensure local leadership is responsive to the full community, the use of the framework includes previously unheard or marginalized voices in the assessment of local assets and future decision-making. The framework presents four elements of the school–community relationship that highlight the intersection between the educational and community levels of analysis, as well as the economic and social role that schools play. Rural schools and communities are the focus of the framework in this article; however, the framework is applicable in the practice and study of school–community relationships of other types and in other settings. We define community as the region demarcated by the local school district boundaries, which is most applicable in the multiple states in which we are working with school and community leaders, and we recognize the importance of local context in the development of cross-sector attachments and relationships (Ma, 2021). However, studies conducted in states with countywide school districts or in densely populated urban settings may define the community as an area demarcated by an individual school's catchment area (i.e., attendance zone) rather than a whole district that may contain dozens of schools.

Foundational Concepts

Educational Leadership

As superintendents and administrators attempt to navigate their jobs as both community and school leaders, they are confronted with many difficult decisions to satisfy multiple stakeholders. Individuals and groups of people have strong beliefs about their public schools and the education of their children. Although there can be common ground found around the idea that the learning and achievement of students is the bottom line, there are often conflicting approaches to this common goal. McHenry-Sorber (2014) highlights this conflict through a case study of a rural school district divided over the values of education, budget allocation, and curriculum content. Middle class educators and parents supported the school's goals of social mobility and competition, while working class community members and parents fought for a basic curriculum and focus on extracurriculars (McHenry-Sorber, 2014). This exemplifies the political tensions that underlie school-based decisions and how within-community, class-based differences can lead to differing views of schooling (Brown, 2005; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007).

Accordingly, superintendents must act as both instructional leaders and public stewards (Lochmiller, 2015). However, these are not easy roles to merge, as school–community involvement is sometimes viewed as something that takes time away from school leaders' role as instructional leaders (Hauseman et al., 2017). In addition to the perceived increase in workload, Gieselmann and Ruff (2015) highlight the tension between achieving efficiency while also including all voices. While engaging the public and involving the community in decision-making processes may mutually benefit both the school and the community, it often comes at the cost of a quick and efficient decision made by school leaders (Reece et al., 2023). However, despite this acknowledgement of the effort it takes to include the community in decisions, the importance of having a leader committed to including all voices cannot be discounted (Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2015). Krumm and Curry (2017) underline this point in their study which found that administrators who "initiated and sustained successful partnerships" (p. 113) understood that collaboration amongst stakeholders and a shared sense of responsibility for student outcomes was vital to their leadership efforts. Therefore, partnerships were not viewed as something "added on" (p. 113), but rather as something integral to the operation of the school. Having a public that is supportive of public schools is crucial to effective schools and vital communities, and a superintendent's willingness to create an environment that welcomes that sort of collaboration is essential.

Superintendents foster this collaboration, in part, through knowledge and awareness of the place in which they work. Place-conscious leadership (Budge, 2006; Harmon & Schafft, 2009) calls for the enactment of extralocal professional knowledge attuned to the place in which the school district is located. Increased attention to the variety of rural places, including the heterogeneity of rural populations, differing and changing economic contexts, as well as the political, cultural and economic conflicts between and within communities has led to the expansion of this conception of leadership. Budge (2010) identifies that "critical-place consciousness might [better prepare leaders] to engage in the balancing act between local interests and extralocal policy" (p. 17). McHenry-Sorber and Budge (2018) call for critical place-conscious leadership to be increasingly attentive to the inequities within rural communities, as well as to the role of superintendents' professional socialization in the context of their practice in rural places. The framework presented in this article provides for contextually relevant and community responsive assessment of the appropriate school–community relationship in a given place. School and community leaders can examine existing community power structures and work across sectors for a more genuinely critical and place-conscious enactment of leadership (McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020).

A critical place-conscious leader is responsive to the place, the people in the place, and the existing inequities. Horsford et al. (2019) stress that "leaders should not get out ahead of their communities or make policy for their communities. Rather, they should be networked with authentic community leaders and move toward change *with* their communities" (p. 9). However, this is often not the case. Racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic discrimination runs deep in many rural communities and has led to inequities of who within a community can have a political voice (Lasater, 2019; Wilcox, 2021). Therefore, we note that it is of utmost importance to point out where disparities of opportunity to participate exist in an already established system of local decision making. For example, existing models of local decision making include an elected school board (Wirt & Kirst, 2001), which communities can work to ensure are inclusive of all voices.

Similarly, O'Connor and Daniello (2019) argue that social justice is not often explicitly discussed in the school–community literature, and they stress that a social justice lens must be embraced in order to serve students and communities equitably and effectively. Through this framework, we aim to give power to local decision makers while also recognizing that this power has been abused and unequally distributed in the past. In arguing for local awareness and power, we stress that local decision making needs to

take a new approach and be conducted in a more equitable way. Accordingly, we aim to address the ways that voices are silenced in school–community relationships—particularly in rural communities—and focus on the ways that the framework can be used as a starting point for research and conversations in practice that lead to collaborations across multiple stakeholders.

Community Aware Education Policy

To approach decisions for a school more holistically, school leaders can benefit from having a "community aware" mindset. Community aware education policy operates under the premise that communities and schools are interdependent, and rather than just focusing on the needs of the individual, both immediate needs of individuals and systemic needs of communities need to be addressed simultaneously (Casto, McGrath et al., 2016; Casto & Sipple, 2022). This can be achieved by school and community leaders who can work across siloed and professional realms of expertise where funding and policy are often distinct, disconnected, and even deleterious to each other due to a lack of cross-sector planning. Community aware education policy (Casto, McGrath et al., 2016) cannot be created without attention to community context and assets, and effective community development policy cannot overlook the role of schools. Therefore, rather than just focusing on instrumental (thin) needs of students and institutions, community aware education policy aims to understand and address the underlying and more systemic (thick) needs of children and families in a community (Dean, 2010). This school–community framework urges local leaders and policymakers to ask themselves how public and private sectors can work in interconnected ways to support all community members in addressing both immediate and more fundamental needs (e.g., Reese, 2023; Talmage et al., 2018).

Underlying Assumptions

The framework is premised on public schools as a public good that must attend to the tensions between the individual and collective (e.g., Labaree, 2010; Mathews, 1996)—an institution that benefits the greater community by preparing individuals to be participants in the economy and society in addition to the fiscal and social roles that it plays as an employer, educational institution, and cultural institution (e.g., Kaestle, 1983; Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In an era of school choice, the emphasis on the private gain afforded individuals often gets highlighted in education policy—embracing a market-based approach to education and hence giving

the individual the power to make a decision about where they want to receive their schooling (Ravitch, 2020). Nonetheless, this framework, built on a public goods model of public education in local communities, allows communities to examine the potential collaboration with schools for the betterment of students, the broader community, and society.

In developing this framework, our focus has been on rural communities and the schools which serve these communities. We do this based on experience and expertise, as well as because in rural communities the school is often one of few institutions that can have such an outsized influence on the vitality of the community (e.g., Sipple et al., 2016; Tennyson et al., 2023; Tieken, 2014; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). School–community interactions and dependencies can also be easier to identify, measure, and examine in less populated rural communities than in more urban communities. We suggest this framework is also relevant in nonrural communities, but given the more complex array of agencies and the economic and social impacts in urban and suburban settings, we choose to remain focused on rural communities. We do, however, suggest that in more populated urban areas researchers and community leaders may want to define their local community or place as the catchment area of an individual school (primary or secondary) rather than try to capture all the complexity that may be contained by large suburban or urban school district boundaries. In addition, a framework with attention to rural leaders can help build capacity in rural communities, where school superintendents face specific challenges (Lamkin, 2006). Brown and Argent (2016) argue that the outcomes of these rural-specific challenges depend on the capacity of local institutions and the decisions made by local community leaders.

While previous frameworks for understanding school–community–family engagement conceptualize these three overlapping spheres (e.g., Epstein, 1997), this framework is focused on the role of the school as an institution within a geographic community. The families and caregivers are conceptualized as part of this community. Given the varied social relations in communities that may enhance or hinder a family's connection to the school, including but not limited to social identity, prior experience with the school, length of time in the community, and proximity to the school, it remains an empirical question as to what degree these silenced voices can be surfaced through a data collection process that could then include them in educational decision-making. In future publications, we will share our experiences with mixed method case studies that seek to make heard previously disenfranchised members of local political processes. This framework captures the complexity of the relationships between schools

and communities through four quadrants and multiple measures within each quadrant. In an urban-focused typology of the school–community relationship, Warren (2005) examined the approaches used in these relationships with an eye toward the community development possibilities. Later, Casto, Sipple et al. (2016) combined this attention to community development (or vitality) with a focus on school–community partnerships. In this framework, school–community partnerships are just one aspect of these relationships, and this framework conceptualizes the role of the school in much broader terms. Building on ideas based in place-conscious leadership (Budge, 2006, 2010; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018), community aware education policy (Casto, McGrath et al., 2016; Casto & Sipple, 2022), and the need for attention to social justice in leadership training and practice (Horsford et al., 2019; O'Connor & Daniello, 2019), we offer this framework to assist school and district leaders to more broadly assess and understand the nuance and complexity of a school sitting within its community using an equity-oriented approach.

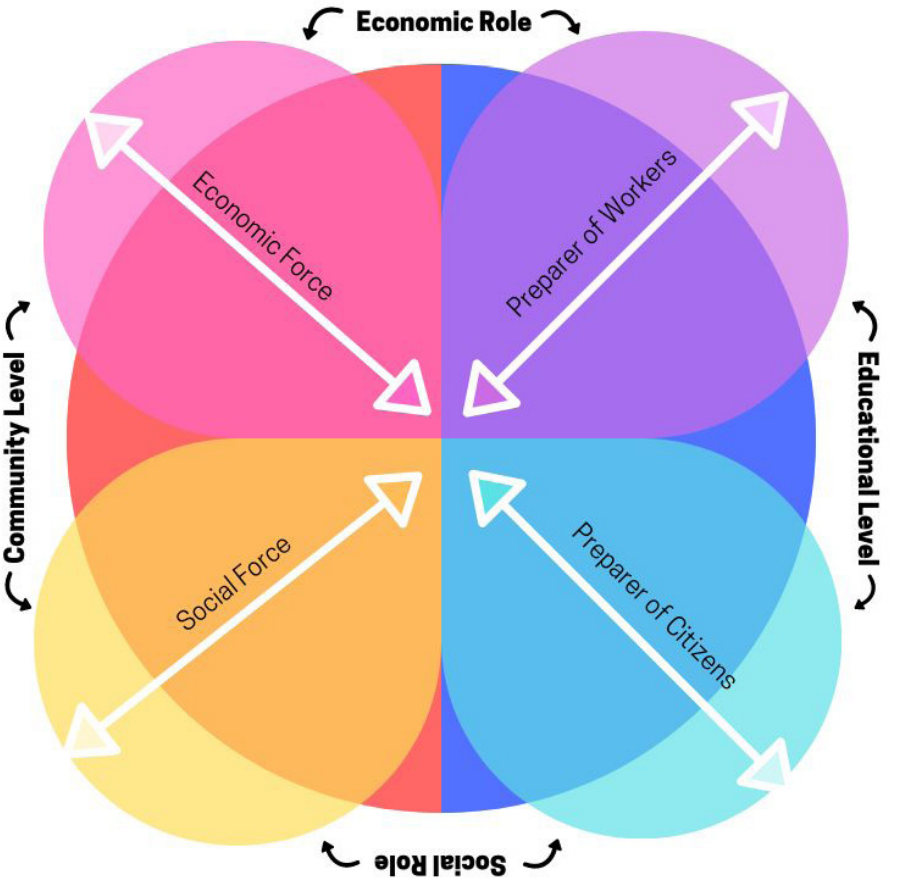
Lastly, this framework is the guiding force for a broader research project including school–community focus groups and a survey distributed throughout each community collecting input and feedback from a variety of stakeholders, including an emphasis on voices not traditionally heard in typical school leader discussions. Following the survey, the data is shared with each community for self-analysis and reflection via a data dashboard that can be shared with the public. The hope is that the discussions surrounding the data available through the dashboard will result in new administrative, budget, partnership, and programmatic decisions to enhance the school programming and community well-being.

School–Community Conceptual Framework

The School–Community Conceptual Framework (Figure 1) consists of two dimensions: level of analysis (school/community) and the role of the school (economic/social). The overlapping spheres are divided into four parts: economic force (community level and economic role), social force (community level and social role), school as preparer of workers (school level and economic role), and school as preparer of citizens (school level and social role). This overlapping nature of the framework represents the spillover effect that these parts can have on each other. Each part of the framework exists on a continuum. Neither end of the continuum denotes a good or bad, right or wrong position for the school in the community, but rather it helps school and community leaders to identify and better

understand how a particular school functions and interacts within a particular community.

Figure 1. School–Community Conceptual Framework



The following sections outline the four quadrants of the framework. Each section lays out an explanation of the continua in a similar order starting with a short description, followed by an explanation of the continuum, a figure of the continuum, a review of the literature, illustrative examples from community-wide conversations we have conducted involving educators and a wide range of community leaders and participants, and finally questions to consider in order to locate a school along each of the four high-level continua. We include examples from our current case study work for illustrative purposes. Future publications will include the complete analyses of these data, including detailed methods sections.

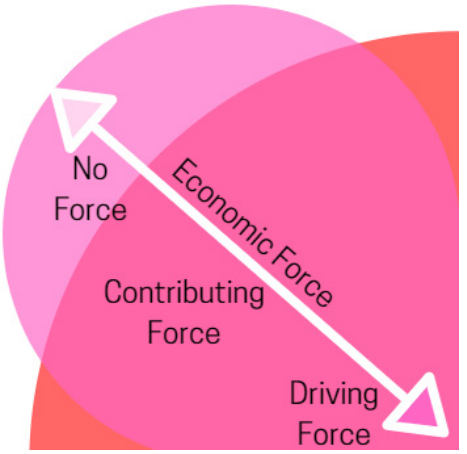
School as Economic Force

Schools have the potential to impact the economy of a community in a number of ways. For instance, a school is not just a place where students learn but is a labor-intensive workplace that employs many people. In addition, a quality school can attract businesses and places of employment, as well as families with children, to an area. We present the school as an economic force as a continuum in this framework to capture the role a school plays in the local economy. This section of the article is the longest of those describing the four quadrants because we argue that most existing literature involving school and community interactions is related to areas more similar to our other three quadrants. The economic force is often omitted or overlooked, and so we feel the need to expand on the relevance.

Explanation of Continuum

Figure 2 displays the range of how a school can act as an economic force. Placement towards the inner end of the continuum indicates that the school is a primary driving economic force within the community. At this end, the school can be viewed as the largest employer and/or the greatest source of attraction for other businesses and employment in the community. Movement towards the middle of the continuum represents a decrease in the importance of the school as a sole economic force within the community, designating the school as a contributing force amongst others. Further movement along the continuum towards the outer end continues to decrease the impact of the school as a force within the community to a point of recognizing the school as having little to no impact on the community's economy in comparison to other institutions.

Figure 2. Economic Force Continuum



The School as an Economic Force: Literature and Examples

As the public school system has developed and expanded over the last 150 years, the combination of local and state taxes has paid for a growing number of community members to be employed in schools in a variety of positions including teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, bus drivers, and food service workers. A relatively small school district today may have a $10 million budget, of which roughly $8 million in salaries (NCES, 2021) which, if educational personnel reside in the community in which they work, stays right in that community to be recirculated through the local economy in the form of housing costs, food, recreation, and other spending.

The school is a supplier of salaried and hourly jobs, which can be measured at the most basic level by capturing the percentage of jobs that a school district provides in relation to the other employment options within a community. For example, in one recent case study, community members could report that the school was the third largest employer in the community, while in another case study community, they reported being fourth or fifth largest. To consider the impact of this economic force, it is helpful to consider where school staff live. Do teachers, administrators, and support staff live in the community in which they are employed? Or is there an economic divide in the community based on salary such that only the highest paid can live in the community? Or in contrast, as we have seen, only the lowest paid live in the community, and the better paid employees choose to live in a different school district, thus draining the local community of the investment it has made in its salaried employees. In one of our case study districts, where the school is the third largest employer, we found the leaders estimated that a third of the staff lived within the community. However, it was mostly the support staff who lived locally, while teachers and administrators lived outside the community. This was explained as the school being a primary employer for those closest to it who could not afford to live in more expensive areas of the county. Through an equity lens, this economic reality of the community affects the degree to which employees in different professional positions at the school feel or are seen as part of the school's community.

Following this example, it is worth considering the inequity that is potentially present in the employment of school workers. After *Brown v. Board of Education* and the large-scale closure of Black schools and integration of White schools across the country, it has been estimated that more than 30,000 Black teaching jobs and more than 2,000 Black principal positions were lost (Goldstein, 2014; Tillman, 2004). More recent analyses additionally indicate this loss may have been as high as the transfer to White persons

of over 100,000 teaching and school leadership positions that had been held by Black educators (Fenwick, 2022). No longer did the makeup of the teachers match the makeup of the students in the schools. The role of the school as a local employer demands a school leader to reflect on the degree to which the workforce within the school represents the broader community that it serves. Similarly, within the school itself, does the staff consist of mostly White, middle to upper class teachers and administrators, while the custodial and transportation staff consists of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) populations as low wage workers? Accordingly, these dimensions are important to consider when examining not only the economic role of the school, but also whether or not the school functions as an equitable economic force.

Another robust examination of the school as an employer would explore the school's role in generating expenditures and jobs in the local economy. This type of analysis can be measured in various ways and is often referred to as the multiplier effect. As such, studies in the field of regional development (e.g., American Independent Business Alliance, n.d.; Civic Economics, 2015; Drucker & Goldstein, 2007; Harris, 1997) have attempted to tease out the direct, indirect, and induced effects of an employer on the local economy. Direct impact refers to the spending necessary by an employer to operate and includes expenditures such as paying employees and paying for utilities. Indirect impact refers to the money spent by the local institution at other businesses and institutions locally. This would include the electrical and plumbing services that the school hires, the hardware store from which the custodians purchase their supplies, any local food suppliers, in addition to others. Lastly, induced impacts refer to the extent to which the money earned by school workers and employees are recirculated into the local economy. Thinking about the extent to which an individual school district impacts the local economy in this way is key to determining the role of the school as an economic force within a community.

Tangentially related to this, and made abundantly clear in the 2020 global pandemic, schools can impact the local economy through the services it provides allowing parents to participate in the workforce (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2020, 2021). For instance, we have heard about childcare deserts (Jessen-Howard et al., 2018; Malik et al., 2016) or at least diminished early care capacity (Sipple et al., 2020) that have made it challenging for parents of young children to return to the paid workforce. Moreover, schools can offer before or after school activities and PreK to serve 4- and possibly 3-year-olds, allowing the parents of these children to join and remain in the labor force (Durham et al., 2019). The beginning and

end of a parent's workday can vary greatly, and those hours do not always align with the hours of the school day, especially if it is a virtual school day. For this reason, it can be difficult to get students to and from school on time, or support a child's remote schooling, while also maintaining a job with demanding hours. In 2021, across Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Missouri, and Texas, approximately 6–11% of parents voluntarily left the workforce due to childcare issues (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2021).

In one of our case study communities, there is a local casino employing many community members, often during nonstandard hours, and creating a demand for childcare outside of the school day. During a focus group in the community a discussion ensued as to whether creating more care options in out-of-school hours is the responsibility of the casino, the school district, or local care providers. As such, offering before or after school activities can help alleviate the stress surrounding incompatible workday and school day hours. Families and caregivers in rural places have specific needs related to care during nonstandard hours (Choi et al., 2009; Henning-Smith & Kozhimannil, 2016). Further, providing child care for young kids who are not yet school age or connecting with community partners who provide such care can also assist parents by providing daytime care for all of their children while they are at work (Warner, 2009). Ensuring an adequate balance of childcare and school-based PreK opportunities, however, requires careful communication between school leaders and local childcare providers. A lack of communication may result in a net reduction in childcare capacity (Sipple et al., 2020).

In addition to the aforementioned economic impacts of a school, the presence of a quality school is associated with attracting other businesses and places of employment to the area (see, e.g., European literature including Kroismayr, 2019; Slee & Miller, 2015), though the causal direction of this relationship is unclear and understudied in the U.S. context. Schools can, metaphorically, serve as a magnet. Businesses looking to locate in a community might consider the quality of the schools in order to be attractive to potential employees with children. But so too can robust employment be a magnet for the presence of schools. While there is evidence that schools cannot be the only employer (for a vital community), where there are many employment opportunities, school closure is unlikely (Slee & Miller, 2015). European research tracking demographic flows in and out of communities reveals that the presence of a school is more strongly tied to reduced out-migration, but not related to community in-migration (Barakat, 2015; Elshof et al., 2015). While broader in scope, it has also been documented that the presence of a school (Lyson, 2002) and increased school proximity to villages (Sipple et al., 2016) is related to enhanced economic indicators.

Further, the presence of a quality school is also associated with attracting families to an area. In a study looking at home buyer trends, 40% of home buyers aged 36 and younger and 35% age 37 to 51 consider the quality of schools when looking for a new home (Lautz et al., 2017). Further, in a survey of realtors, it was reported that quality of schools ranked in the top three most influential factors affecting home purchases (Carnoske et al., 2010). The role a school can play in attracting families is dependent on the presence of available housing, which was reported as lacking in all of the case study communities. The quality of a school district can serve as a source of attraction or as a source of deterrence to a community, depending on the reputation of a school. For example, community members in a focus group in one case study community said that parents send their kids to their district due to its reputation, but due to a lack of housing, the families were not able to relocate with the students. In this case, the school benefits from gaining students who were within another school district's boundaries, but the community does not benefit from gaining families who could not afford to move into the district. It is important for school and community leaders to consider the various ways that their school serves as an attraction or deterrent to migration patterns in the community.

In addition to acknowledging the ways that a school serves as an attraction or deterrent, it is also important to recognize how this can be a way for inequalities to persist. Because school quality is often used as an important factor in home buying, it has been argued that school quality is used as a proxy for racial and ethnic composition of a community (National Fair Housing Alliance, 2006). Discussing the racial composition of a neighborhood is illegal for realtors. However, school quality (determined by test scores and graduation rates) is often tied to racial composition due to gaps in achievement that are reflective of a variety of inequities in opportunities across races (i.e., income gaps; Kamenetz & Yoshinaga, 2016), resulting in it functioning as a proxy and having the effect of maintaining racial divides in the housing market and residential patterns.

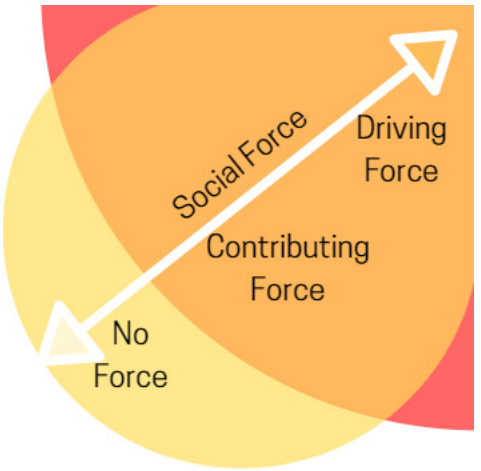
School as Social Force

Schools have the potential to serve as a place where social connections are made and facilities are shared. As a community center, the school building, including its libraries, computer labs, or school-based health centers, could be used after hours for adult education or family purposes. As a social hub, the school has the potential to provide a network of social ties for local people of all generations (Talmage, 2018; Tennyson et al., 2023). Accordingly, we present the school as a social force as a continuum in this framework to capture the role a school plays in the building of social capital.

Explanation of Continuum

Figure 3 displays the range of how the school can be viewed as a social force. Placement towards the inner end of the continuum indicates that the school is a driving social force within the community. This means that the school is seen as a gathering place for the community where social capital is shared. Using the concept of social capital as coined by Hanifan (1916; Putnam, 2000), the school as a gathering place can range from using the building as a community center where multiple events are housed to the school as a place for activity where extracurricular activities bring community members together. Movement towards the middle of the continuum represents a decrease in the importance of the school as the sole gathering place for the community while still recognizing it as a contributor to the social scene within a community. Further movement along the continuum towards the outer end continues to decrease the community's utilization of a school as a community center, whether that is due to other social hubs within the community or the school's choice or perceived need to distance itself from the community.

Figure 3. Social Force Continuum



The School as a Social Force: Literature and Examples

Schools have long served to connect people, particularly in communities where few other institutions draw membership from as large a segment of the population as public schools do (Ma, 2021). Schools serve as a source of community identity: one need only imagine a Friday night high school football game between close rival towns to have a sense of the ways schools can serve as a source of local identity—but it is more nuanced than that

(Tieken, 2014). Schools, as physical locations, also act as meeting places, particularly in areas lacking the resources to provide community centers and in rural places where "rural schools are the heart of villages" (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014, p. 8; see also Talmage et al., 2018). As can be imagined, parents, educators, and those connected to the school have an attachment to the school that draws them to attend school events, but to what extent do people outside of the school's immediate network connect with others at school activities and events? Further, although parents and educators have an attachment to the school through their children or their job, they too enter into a network of adults (other parents, other school staff) with which they might not otherwise interact (Cochran & Niego, 2002; Cox et al., 2021).

School leaders in one of our case study communities reported that family struggles, including especially in this specific community those caused by the opioid epidemic, often create barriers to communication between the school and students' caregivers. Depending on the context, a school can create a social network amongst community members that allows for the exchange of social capital across a range of people (Ma, 2021; Reece et al., 2023). However, in order for the school to fulfill this function to the fullest, it must also consider the range of people who actually feel welcomed in this network. Is the school a welcoming environment to people of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic statuses? The school as a place to link parents is largely a middle-class phenomenon (Horvat et al., 2003). Even the number of years you have lived in the community or having the "wrong" last name can impact how you are perceived and welcomed by others (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Stelmach, 2021). In the same case study community just described, school employees also noted that undocumented immigrant families were less likely to enter into the school's social network. In addition, the school leaders knew that the community had low levels of trust in the education system, and they reasoned that policing and school discipline were central to the mistrust. Identifying and reforming an area that diminishes community trust could help a school to provide a social network to all, thereby creating more equitable access to the social capital within the community.

In communities with limited resources to build separate facilities to provide various services, innovative solutions include using a single structure to house multiple entities and out of which to provide multiple services (e.g., Tennyson et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). For example, one of our case study communities described in a focus group conversation how their efforts to make their sports fields and other facilities available to the com-

munity had been thwarted by the pandemic. Similarly, MacKinnon (2001) uses a case study in Vermont to describe the way a school building can be used toward community development ends: "Public schools meet many community development criteria if the school is open to afterschool use for adults and children. The multiple uses possible include recreation, non-formal schooling, adult education, and social gatherings" (p. 8). This shared use of space makes the school building, which is a community-wide investment, more accessible to the entire community (Reece et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023). Some community members in one of our case study communities reported a tension between the educational and community development roles of the school with questions about to what degree the school should focus on being a daycare or a healthcare facility as opposed to focusing on the educational role of the school. These school and community leaders identified partnerships with community organizations as a way to provide opportunities to families without distracting from the school's educational role, echoing a previous case study focused on identifying a particular school's local and non-local partners and the purposes of those partnerships (Casto, 2016). School personnel commonly feel that all of society's ills are now placed on their shoulders and are wary of additional responsibilities. We argue that careful community discussions using the school–community framework and an equity-oriented mindset can determine school- or community- or private-based assets that can be used to create solutions to the community challenges.

Lastly, in addition to acknowledging the unique ways that a school's role as a social force plays out across different communities, it is also important to acknowledge how this role is impacted due to the current school environment amid fears of school shootings. Schools are increasingly implementing security measures such as controlled access to the school building and requiring staff to wear photo ID badges (Warnick & Kapa, 2019) in an attempt to protect students from gun violence. Amid these changes, it is important to ask the question: how is the current sealing off of the community in order to protect the school impacting the welcoming of the community? Warnick and Kapa (2019) address this concern in their analysis of whether or not target hardening (the increased security of and surveillance of the school building) does more harm than good to the school environment. They find that "the unfavorable outcomes associated with target hardening are further correlated with lower levels of community involvement and a weaker sense of trust within schools" (Warnick & Kapa, 2019, p. 27). The school staff in one of our case study communities described how caregivers are "grilled with questions" upon arriving at the school's front office,

which detracts from a feeling of being welcomed into the school community. Moreover, the pandemic has further enhanced the separation of insiders and outsiders at the schoolhouse gate. For this reason, school leaders must take all these aspects of the school environment into account when making decisions surrounding school safety and the accessibility of a school to its community, as well as allowing students and staff into the community for additional place-based learning within the broader community.

As opposed to the first two continua ranging based on force, the next two continua (school as preparer of workers/preparer of citizens) range based on the school's attention to local and extralocal engagement and opportunities for students.

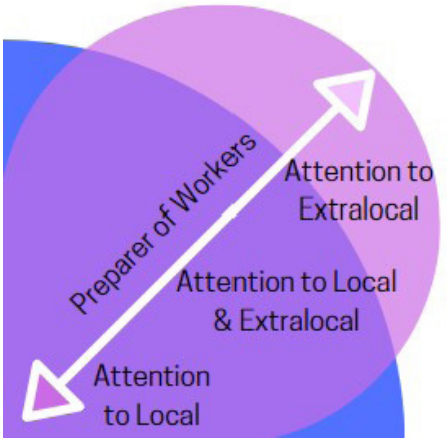
School as Preparer of Workers

The development of human capital is a central function of schools. Most directly, schools provide curricular and extracurricular opportunities that prepare students for gainful employment, locally or globally. This schooling may be driven by local teacher knowledge, state curriculum standards, state testing, local economic needs, or state and national interests. While preparing the workforce may be the most obvious function of schools, we must closely examine what is taught and why it is taught as the content and experience have profound impacts on the trajectory of children becoming adults and the generational impact on each community.

Explanation of Continuum

Figure 4 displays the range of how a school prepares workers. Placement towards the inner end of the continuum indicates a focus on preparing students for the local workforce. At this end, the school can be seen as educating students about future employment opportunities available in the local community and providing students with opportunities to receive training or have internships with local employers. Movement towards the middle of the continuum represents a combination of attention to both the local and extralocal workforce needs—providing students with the tools that give them the opportunity to make the choice between college or a job as a worker in the local economy or in the global economy. Further out along the continuum indicates the implementation of curriculum and programs that focus solely on preparing students for the job market that typically lies beyond the local community.

Figure 4. School as Preparer of Workers Continuum



The School as a Preparer of Workers: Literature and Examples

Throughout the 20th century, schools have been the main focus of human capital development and as a preparer of workers (Becker, 1993). The key tension now is between preparing students to leave their local community for college and work elsewhere, versus preparing them to work locally (Corbett, 2007; Rury, 2020). This tension plays out in tracking systems, teacher assignments, budget priorities, engaged learning opportunities, and the types of relationships and dependencies seen between schools and local businesses, trades, and the postsecondary schools (Rury, 2020; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). These tensions between local or global, community-connected or insulated from community need and opportunity, are at the heart of the tension between schools as agents of local community vitality versus agents for the "adjustment to general society" (Sims, cited in Schafft & Youngblood, 2010, p. 275).

Nowhere are these tensions more dramatic than in rural communities. More populated urban and suburban communities have greater and perpetual in-migration due to institutions that attract people, families, and businesses. More sparsely populated rural towns and villages (many of whom have experienced loss of industrial production and people through globalization, out-migration, and lack of in-migration), however, can be teetering on the brink of extinction (Brown & Schafft, 2018). Maintaining population and workplace productivity is linked to attracting outsiders or appropriately preparing local students with an affinity toward their local community and an appropriate workplace opportunity. The school is a central player in this. While neither end of the continuum connotes success or failure on the school's part (e.g., Jennings, 2000), perhaps the most

realized version of this is a high-quality education meeting college and career-ready standards that prepares students for the global economy using tools of place-based pedagogy, which are attentive to the needs and realities of the children's home community (Avery & Kassam, 2011; Avery & Sipple, 2016). One of the case study communities stated that this was one of their goals—to provide students with all the skills necessary to have the *choice* to do what they want after graduation, whether that be to enter college or the workforce.

At the core of "school as preparer of workers" is the set of related concepts of human, social, and cultural capital. Through some combination of community and school resources (i.e., money, people, priorities), schools actively develop skills and knowledge in their students (Becker, 1993; Mincer, 1974). Human capital, the skills and knowledge of an individual, is directly influenced by schools and the experiences children have while growing up. This influence, however, is shaped in scope and level by opportunity, identity, school resource, and community interaction and influence. In one example from our case study research, nearly all participants in one community agreed that better preparing students for work locally is critical to helping local businesses thrive and maintaining local populations; however, it was less clear to them how to do it. The regional educational shared service centers were mentioned by several focus group participants as the main path toward quality and relevant vocational training; however, others spoke about how the students view these vocational programs with disregard and almost embarrassment if they were to participate. In comparison, in another case study community the focus group members discussed the strategies they employ to get local business owners and employees into their classrooms as early as elementary school to exemplify to students at an early age how they can turn the things they are passionate about into a career in their local community. Ideally, students are prepared by their local school and community for workforce participation and leadership to "live in community" (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 286) no matter where that may be (Corbett, 2007).

An important caveat to this pressure to develop human capital for the state and nation's workplace needs is the important process by which schools historically began to differentiate which opportunities were given to which students. Today, we see this differentiation of inputs (resources invested in one's education) and outputs (postsecondary role for which one is prepared) captured by Carr and Kefalas (2009) in their book, *Hollowing out the Middle*. Schools group students, these authors argue, to be Achievers, Stayers, Seekers, or Returners. Suggesting that rural America's greatest

export is not milk or wheat, but rather young people, the authors shine a light on differential preparation for the future across the student body. Educators identify Achievers as those students deemed worthy of an investment of time, expertise, lab equipment, and college preparation, imbuing them with human and social capital to enable them to succeed in a world away from their local region. They are then pushed off to college and life success. Educators, by default more than design according to Carr and Kefalas (2009), also "prepare" Stayers by not providing them with resources and expertise, leaving them to make a living in their own home community or region. Participants in many of the case study communities where we have conducted focus groups acknowledged these different groups of students. In one of our cases, a school administrator directly acknowledged the fear of brain drain and stressed that they aim to present some of their best and brightest students with options for how they can make a good living within their home community with the key idea that they provide those students with the skills to make the choice for themselves. In another community conversation that we facilitated, the participants discussed how they identify students who are not interested in college and work to build their skills so that they will become "workforce ready" by the time they graduate.

School professionals making decisions for students and their families can be fraught with embedded bias towards different races, genders, and social classes (Delpit, 1988; Oakes et al., 2006). Letting the students decide their own academic track can also be laden with immature interests and comfort levels with certain teachers, subjects, and social groups (Grant, 1984; Rubin & Noguera, 2004). School professionals, in conversation with community and family, can develop more inclusive and equitable practices leading to genuine choice in school opportunities and outcomes. In preparing students and graduates to "live in community" (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 286), whether it be in the local community or around the world, school leaders hold tremendous responsibility for curriculum, tracking, and programming that balances individual success and community vitality.

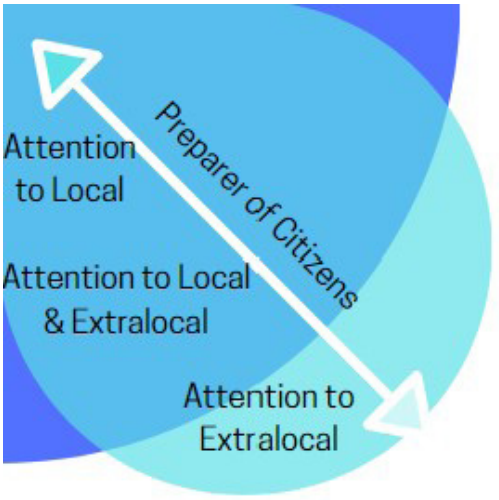
School as Preparer of Citizens

Schools also serve as a location for students to learn to work with peers and teachers, as well as to exist in the community of the classroom and the school. Students learn what it means to be a member of the school, the local community, as well as the nation and world. These lessons can also include the broader concept of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy and a global, multicultural society.

Explanation of Continuum

Figure 5 displays the range of how the school is a preparer of citizens. Placement towards the inner end of the continuum indicates that a school encourages their students to be engaged in civic activities locally. At this end, the school can be viewed as having programs and policies in place that immerse their students in the local civic environment through volunteer work, community engagement, and involvement with local government, among others. Movement towards the middle of the continuum represents a combination of a focus on preparing students for both their duties as citizens of their local community and the world. Further movement along the continuum towards the outer end indicates a heavy focus on the students as global citizens, preparing them largely for their duties as a citizen outside of their individual community.

Figure 5. School as Preparer of Citizens Continuum



The School as a Preparer of Citizens: Literature and Examples

Citizenship education may feel like a loaded term in some communities more than others, depending on the local impact of the current political discourse surrounding immigration. While the importance of this type of education does not vary, it may be that school leaders in some places find it more appropriate to use varied terminology like community membership rather than citizenship. The essence of community membership can also be expanded by acknowledging the local history of the land and of indigenous peoples in the region. School leaders will also want to attend to the varied daily lived experiences that students bring to school as being deeply

influential on their perception of democratic citizenship education (Rubin, 2007). Banks (2001, 2008) has called for a reconceptualization of citizenship education to ensure the assimilationist ideology is fully replaced with a model that does not isolate students from their home cultures and languages. Schools need a form of citizenship education that "recognizes the right and need for students to maintain commitments to their cultural communities, to a transnational community, and to the nation-state in which they are legal citizens" (Banks, 2008, p. 134). In these ways, citizenship education can work to acknowledge students' concurrent membership in local, cultural, and global communities.

Research in rural communities suggests that, not only in regard to workforce preparation but also in preparation for community life, there can be an orientation toward the global or extralocal (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Tieken, 2014). For example, Carr and Kefalas (2009) describe the (often false) choice teachers create, and students feel, of being (successful) leavers or (unsuccessful) stayers. This dichotomy presents students not only with a sense of being less successful if they stay in their own community, but also does not position them as experts of their own place or potential community leaders. Similarly, Corbett's (2007) earlier study reports a similar false positioning of the academically successful students as being those who seek futures beyond their home communities, thereby prioritizing preparing them for community life and citizenship at the national/global level. To prepare active and engaged citizens of their community, many community members in the focus groups we have facilitated articulated a big-picture strategy of the importance of a supportive and stimulating environment created by supported families, housing organizations, work opportunities and role models, PreK, and the schools. Additionally, in one particular district where we held a focus group, the participants described a specific strategy in which they brought courthouse officials into the district once a year to teach students about voting and help students who are 18 or older register to vote.

There is a view of civic education that focuses on discrete skills; however, a reconceptualized form of democratic citizenship education also involves the development of a civic identity, which is commonly done through involvement in the local community (Rubin, 2007). Local community involvement can take the form of community service or be more embedded in the academic core of the school through service learning or place-based pedagogies. Place-based education provides examples of how skills and knowledge developed in a local place can allow students to see themselves as successful community members in their own places; however, it does

not preclude their success in other places, since the skills are transferable from place to place and from the local to the global. As Gruenwald (2003) notes: "Place-based pedagogies are needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit" (p. 3). This enhancement of local communities is the goal of place-based pedagogies (Smith, 2002) and echoes Dewey's notion of the school as a "miniature community, an embryonic society" (Boydston, 1976, p. 12). Anderson and Gurnee (2016) report that creation of the relationships and partnerships required for place-based practices is evidence of the democratic process in and of itself; in addition, these connections derived among the school and local entities position students as participating and integrated citizens in their local community. For some, these local connections have been more common in rural places out of necessity; nonetheless, these practices can be viewed as a "virtue that needs preserving rather than just a practice to be tolerated" (Jennings et al., 2005, p. 44).

Although place-based education can allow students to develop skills of active citizenship, make connections to their locality, and develop their civic identity, in many communities this may occur in a relatively racially and ethnically homogenous context. Development as a global citizen also involves working with diverse teams, which some rural schools have accomplished through international exchange programs (Casto et al., 2012). With paired goals of opportunities for students' global citizenship development and enhanced community vitality, Casto et al. (2012) describe a school that created a program for international students to enroll in the school and live in the community for a year. The school increased its dwindling enrollment, thereby achieving economies of scale for the sustainability of the school, and also diversified the student body in an otherwise racially and ethnically homogenous school.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Examining the school as an economic force, social force, preparer of workers, and preparer of citizens allows us to map out the complex roles a school plays in a community. With this framework, school and community leaders can examine and measure their own local relationships in conversation with a broad range of stakeholders, locate their school on each continuum, and make equitable, locally relevant policy decisions. Similarly, researchers can use this framework to build on our understanding of the school–community relationship, especially in grounded work with

communities. The use of this framework will, we argue, lead toward a substantially greater understanding of the range of ways in which schools and communities depend on and influence each other, including the centrality (or not) of schools in the vitality of a community. Moreover, researchers using this framework will be less likely to adopt a polarized or binary lens for understanding local communities and their schools.

Our future work using this framework involves empirical investigation through community case studies starting with focus groups of school and community leaders followed by communitywide surveys. Conversations and surveys provide school leaders the opportunity to collect a variety of perspectives, especially those perspectives that are not usually heard. For example, there are growing numbers of rural English learners, and "linguistic diversity is fact and fabric of the United States," (Coady, 2022, p. 248), but many districts face challenges in supporting communication with non-English-speaking families (Coady, 2020). Families in nondominant community groups can often feel marginalized by schools, but in order to welcome these families into the decision-making process, creating an environment in which bilingual families' opinions are collected and valued is necessary (McCauley et al., 2023). Utilizing multiple tools to support engagement (e.g., surveys, conferences, phone calls, family events) are cited as useful ways to increase communication, along with an intentional strategy to drive efforts for engaging multilingual families (McCauley et al., 2023). Once a community has engaged in the focus group conversations and the survey, they are provided with a data dashboard allowing them to examine their local data. In this way, school and community leaders have a new way to view and understand their community, which in turn can enhance community aware decision-making.

Given the variety of community contexts, there are myriad ways for schools and communities to interact; however, this framework allows leaders across these sectors to arrive at mutually beneficial community aware policies and practices (Casto, McGrath et al., 2016; Casto & Sipple, 2022). Accordingly, once a community can better understand the fiscal, social, and educational roles of the school, leaders can find areas in need of improvement in addition to strengths on which to capitalize. School administrators who work collaboratively with their community (Harmon & Schafft, 2009) can tap into the unique range of resources within their community to ensure the best policy decisions are made (Wang et al., 2023). This collaborative and community-based work is particularly relevant as communities work to reassess and rebuild in light of the pandemic and the reckoning with racial injustice.

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The Way H-O-M-E: Service Learning to Address the Early Education Teacher Shortage

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Abstract

Community partnerships are essential for vitality in neighborhoods. A growing demand exists for training programs to attract and prepare a highly qualified workforce to serve young children and their families. Personnel across different stages of their career can help address our teacher shortages. Service learning is a useful strategy in communities that can be used to address the needs of humanity and community when it comes to the needs of and services for young children and their families. The purpose of this conceptual article is to propose strategies for ameliorating the teacher shortage. Service learning is embedded in the H-O-M-E model to create authentic opportunities for innovation that will be described in this article.

Key Words: teacher shortage, service learning, experiential education, early childhood education, community partnerships, collaboration

Introduction

The shortage of early childhood educators is a crisis for society in the United States. Community partnerships are essential collaborations in neighborhoods to provide needed services for children and their families, including the need for highly qualified early childhood personnel.

Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers eligible for services are increasing in number (Jeon et al., 2022; NAEYC, 2021), while qualified early childhood educators (to broadly include general, related specialties, and specialists like early interventionists and early childhood special educators) to serve children are decreasing in number (Onchwari, 2010; Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). Workforce shortages became alarmingly worse during the global COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF 2020; United Nations Children's Fund, 2020), and more than 80% of childcare centers reported a teacher shortage (NAEYC, 2021). Teacher shortages persist after the pandemic, and in some parts of the United States, it is worse after the pandemic (Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen & Springer, 2023). This data supports the growing demand for training programs to attract and prepare a workforce to serve young children (Dougherty, 2014).

Having enough highly qualified early childhood professionals impacts the overall national workforce as parents cannot work without childcare; with this in mind, both family caregivers and employers depend on the early childhood workforce (Heckman, 2011; Heilala et al., 2022). Teacher shortages are a national challenge (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019; Holcomb-McCoy, 2023; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). Early childhood preservice professionals need training and technical assistance, as well as professional development once they are established in the workforce (Collier et al., 2015; Sutton, Lewis, & Beauchat, 2020). Service learning may offer an innovative solution.

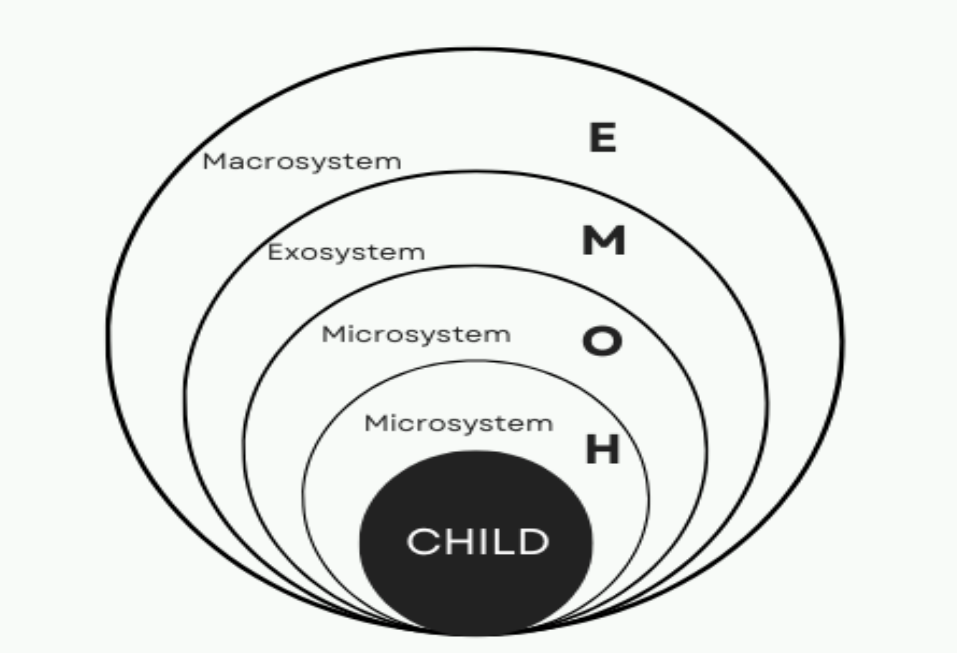
A helping activity, service learning is meant to address the needs of humanity and communities. As a type of experiential education, service learning involves authentic activities within a community to obtain a deeper level of understanding and skills (Caspe & Hernandez, 2021; Lake & Jones, 2012; Mapp et al., 2022), as well as a connection to the community in which teacher candidates will be working (Chiva-Bartoll & Fernandez-Rio, 2022). Hands-on activities in the real world are a way to strengthen the early childhood workforce and support individuals as they acculturate to a professional community and identity (Hands, 2014; Winterbottom & Lake, 2016). While service learning is similar to the concept of community service, it differs in the fact that students are asked to reflect on the experience and consider ways to better support the community throughout the experience as well as once it is completed (Karayan & Gathercoal, 2005). To create opportunities for professional acculturation, synchronous and asynchronous experiential learning activities are presented in Table 1 with preservice and in-service implications.

Table 1. Synchronous and Asynchronous Experiential Learning Activities for Preservice and In-Service Acculturation

Professional Acculturation		
Experiential Learning	**Activities for Preservice Professional(s)**	**Activities for In-service Professional(s)**
Synchronous	Podcast Fieldwork Job shadow Mentorship Unique field placements Self-directed placement identification	Coaching in vivo Mentoring in vivo Supervising in vivo
Asynchronous	Podcast Coursework Mentorship Unique field placements Self-directed placement identification	Coaching with telecollaboration Mentoring with telecollaboration Podcasting Supervising with telecollaboration

Service learning creates authentic opportunities for innovation in the early childhood field. When individuals apply learning in meaningful ways, they can develop deeper understanding and ways of knowing. The purpose of this conceptual article is to propose strategies for ameliorating the early childhood teacher shortage in the United States. We share a service learning approach that is embedded in a model that uses the acronym H-O-M-E to **h**arvest service learning solutions, **o**rchestrate partnerships, **m**ultiply participation, and **e**valuate. We have created this H-O-M-E model based on the ecological systems theory that takes into account the multiple factors that influence development and growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986). The ecological systems theory illustrates multiple factors that influence development. The ecological theory relates to the H-O-M-E to show how there are indirect and direct variables that influence workforce development, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) With the H-O-M-E Model



H-O-M-E Model

The H-O-M-E model addresses national shortages of early childhood educators in the workforce with service learning aimed to develop collaborative community partnerships, hands-on experiences of considerable depth and breadth, and teaching and evaluating data-based empirical practices. The H-O-M-E model can be used to attract and prepare teachers with service learning. Table 2 shows the H-O-M-E considerations for enhancing the early childhood workforce by strengthening personnel preparation programs with experiential learning.

Table 2. The H-O-M-E Model for Enhancing Early Childhood Workforce by Strengthening Preparation Programs With Experiential Learning

The H-O-M-E Model	
H	Harvest solutions with community partners.
O	Orchestrate ongoing partnerships.
M	Multiply existing population with recruitment and retention.
E	Evaluate service learning for institution of higher education, neighborhoods, and community.

Four groups of focus for the H-O-M-E model for recruitment and personnel preparation are (a) high school students, (b) college students, (c) in-service professionals already in the workforce, and (d) retired professionals who have left the workforce. In the next section, we will discuss an approach for using experiential learning to strengthen the workforce pipeline with H-O-M-E strategies. We use H-O-M-E as the foundation for each of the four elements (i.e., harvest, orchestrate, multiply, and evaluate).

Harvest Solutions With Community Partners for Service Learning

To implement the H-O-M-E model, **H**arvest solutions to problems by assessing community needs and training preservice and in-service early childhood educators in an entrepreneurial and innovation mindset using problem-based learning. A needs assessment within the community can better help stakeholders understand what the community wants from professionals working with their children and better support the educational needs of the community. The needs assessment should include an approach that is context-focused, engages stakeholders, and analyzes data using a collaborative approach to determine the educational needs of the community (Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018).

The following participant categories should be considered when addressing personnel preparation for early childhood workforce recruitment and retention: (a) high school students, (b) college students, (c) in-service professionals already in the workforce, and (d) retired professionals who have left the workforce. With all four groups, develop service learning projects tailored to individual needs at the local level. Increase awareness, knowledge, and engagement among families and caregivers about the importance of high-quality innovative early childhood education by asking them about their perspectives on the issues, for example, what they think is important in early childhood teacher development.

Preservice – High School

Harvesting community solutions can have implications for high school students. High school students in a variety of classes (e.g., debate, civics, human development, etc.) can create service learning projects to better understand and brainstorm solutions to childcare and education issues our neighborhoods face. Participatory action learning can support development, as well as strive for solutions to community issues (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Examples of service learning that might be appropriate for high school students include meeting with local lawmakers about ways to address the teacher shortage, hosting a community debate on topics related to

teacher training and support, and volunteering in a local childcare center to understand the role of early childhood educators.

Preservice – College

Identifying solutions to challenges in the community, such as the early childhood teacher shortage, can support the learning of college students preparing to become early childhood teachers. Service learning projects can be infused into personnel preparation programs to inspire college students to develop a growth mindset (Dweck, 2013; Gates, 2015) and search for solutions to problems facing the community. College students can serve a role in innovation and transformation of workforce through hands-on activities. For example, college students can help to harvest solutions by helping to conduct surveys and focus groups in the community, host a world café, serve on advisory boards, share what they are learning to in-service professionals and the community, provide input into community-based think tanks and town halls, and more. Participatory action learning can support development as well as strive for solutions to community issues (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Learning about the profession they may want to be part of someday can help preservice candidates develop understanding. For example, being immersed in the professional environment with people who have chosen this career may help preservice educators develop tacit knowledge that they could not otherwise learn from reading a book.

Preservice participants benefit from hands-on experiences (Sutton, Lewis, & Beauchat, 2020). Experiential learning that takes place in a synchronous, or live fashion, for preservice professionals may include participating in: podcasts, fieldwork, job shadowing, mentorship, unique field placements, and self-directed placement identification. Experiential learning that takes place in asynchronous, or not at the same time for all participants, for preservice professionals may include: podcasts, online coursework, mentorship, unique field placements, and self-directed placement identification.

In-Service Teachers

Gathering ideas from the community for solutions is critical. Brainstorming with community can have implications for in-service professionals who are already in the early childhood workforce. Current in-service professionals can use service learning to continue growth and contribute to creating solutions to challenges faced in the communities in which they live and work. Some types of service learning may include, but are not limited to, serving with committees, communities of practice, think tanks,

or various boards to share their expertise. They listen to ideas from the community, as well as sharing their own. In-service teachers can play a role in actively recruiting high school, community college, and university students, especially students who have not yet declared a major. It may be difficult for in-service teachers to make the time to go off site for recruitment, but with the support of their administrators, in-service teachers can welcome preservice teachers into their classrooms and serve as a mentor and cooperating professionals to preservice people doing fieldwork/practica or student teaching. In-service teachers can explore professional questions that are rooted in their day-to-day experiences. Participatory action research can create opportunities for current in-service professionals to help create solutions for challenges including workforce shortages (Duijs et al., 2021; Zuber-Skerritt, 2018).

In-service participants also benefit from hands-on experiences. Experiential learning that takes place in a synchronous, or live fashion, for in-service professionals may include: coaching in vivo, mentoring in vivo, and supervising in vivo. Experiential learning that takes place in asynchronous, or not at the same time for all participants, for in-service professionals may include: coaching with telecollaboration, mentoring with telecollaboration, podcasting, and supervising with telecollaboration.

Retired Professionals

Retired professionals who have left the workforce can also support service learning. Similar to the in-service professionals, retired professionals can be an asset to the community given their expertise and experience. Participatory action research is a way for professionals who are retired to help contribute to solutions to community issues (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018) by offering insights from their own experiences in the field, suggesting ways to attract and retain future teachers. They could also help conduct surveys and focus groups of families and community members. Their contribution to supporting the community can be a significant benefit to transforming lives. The way H-O-M-E model begins with the importance of *Harvesting* ideas within our neighborhoods and communities.

Orchestrate Ongoing Partnerships for Service Learning

Collaboration across entities can be a challenge but is needed to continue to grow community prosperity (Anderson, 2016). To implement the H-O-M-E model, **o**rchestrate partnerships with community-based organizations for service learning. Asset mapping can be used to build community and provide pathways for engagement and service learning (Beck et al., 2022). An asset map shows the direct and indirect links among all the components

in a system which can offer supports and resources. It can be a map drawn on paper or an electronic map created to show hot spots that serve as potentially resource-rich areas. Build knowledge, awareness, and engagement with community members and agencies to provide sustainable and replicable activities and solutions for high quality early childhood education and care for children (Collier et al., 2015). A variety of placement options and locations can come from diverse organizations to include the education, health, philanthropy, faith-based, and social service sectors.

Preservice – High School

Orchestrating school and community partnerships can have implications for high school students. High school students can participate in experiential education with community partners through service learning. Their involvement in the community can give them a chance to determine if becoming a professional in the education field is a good fit for them. In high school, they are learning about many different career options. Guidance counselors and high school teachers can support high school students in their exploration of career options in their neighborhoods and communities by partnering with business and organization leaders, including those facilitating early education.

Preservice – College

Being an ambassador in the community through service learning can be a role for college students from the university. For example, young children need qualified professionals to address their social–emotional development (Lohmann et al., 2022). A partnership between the local community and the institution of higher education (e.g., university, community college, trade school, etc.) could be helpful. This might involve a collaboration where faculty from the college provide workshops to the local community (e.g., at the YMCA, parent co-op, library, etc.) hosting college students who will in turn use the tools from the training in their direct services provided to children and families to address children's development (Sutton et al., 2020).

In-Service Teachers

Orchestrating community partnerships can have implications for in-service professionals already in the workforce. Parental and professional collaboration (Barnes et al., 2016) is a partnership that holds strength to ties in the community since parents and family members live and often work in the local community. Engaging families with teachers could also help with job satisfaction (Mapp et al., 2022) which in turn might boost retention of teachers. Rewarding partnerships between teachers and parents/families are mutually beneficial relationships that could lead to positive outcomes.

Building sustainable partnerships could be a long-term goal for in-service professionals. Service learning around partnerships can be useful to in-service professionals and could potentially help with retaining teachers in the profession. Current teachers who receive service learning visits may be encouraged in their work.

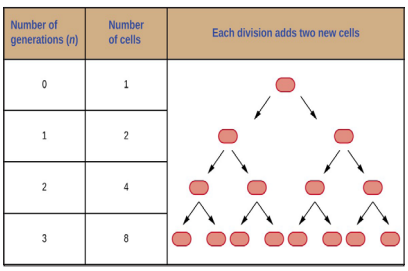
Retired Professionals

Orchestrating community partnerships can have implications for retired professionals who have left the workforce. Volunteering in the local community can be a way for professionals who have retired to continue to be an ambassador for education. Their role in service learning through community partnerships is crucial to the vitality of a community. Retired persons could organize service learning with activities like the following: (a) connecting early care centers and volunteers, (b) mentoring and/or coaching practicing teachers, and (c) spending time making phone calls to help high schools and/or early care centers connect to community partners. The way H-O-M-E model conveys the importance of *Orchestrating* partnerships within our neighborhoods and communities.

Multiply Existing Population With Recruitment and Retention Initiatives and Innovations

To implement the H-O-M-E model, **m**ultiply workforce in numbers by implementing service learning opportunities. Institutions of higher education (e.g., colleges) can seek funding for personnel preparation using the H-O-M-E model. Developing training and professional development curricula that includes service learning for early childhood professionals will lead to career credentials including innovation and entrepreneurship concepts, techniques, and methods. Curricula can be shared using a train-the-trainer model and replicated in communities seeking to recruit and retain teachers. Figure 2 illustrates how recruitment and retention can have a multiplier effect in communities when a network of stakeholders collaborate to create innovative initiatives to address workforce challenges.

Figure 2. Multiplier Effect



Preservice – High School

Multiplying the population of the early childhood workforce can have implications for high school students. Reaching out and creating a strong outreach program to high school students is a way to recruit the next generation of our education workforce. High school teachers can design curriculum to introduce the education profession to high school students through case studies and hands-on learning in the community (Gunn et al, 2015; Ice et al., 2015). High schoolers who have completed the service learning program could talk with younger students/classes to encourage them to sign up for the same experience. Some high schools also provide hands-on service opporutnities through having a childcare center for teenage parents on site in which future teachers can gain practice teaching young children while their parents attend classes; this model has positive impacts for both the teenage parents and the future teachers (Shain, 2024; Williams & Sadler, 2001).

Preservice – College

Multiplying the population of the early childhood workforce can have implications for college students. Service learning for college students is a way to recruit and/or retain our education workforce. Preservice programs need to support empirically based instructional technologies like service learning. Quality programs are charged with a two-fold mission: (1) teach students to provide empirically based practices, and (2) collect data on their own effectiveness with training personnel to be effective early childhood teachers (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019; Holcomb-McCoy, 2023; Oyen & Schweinle, 2020).

Training programs should be innovative places where students are learning cutting edge, research-based practices. The identities of early childhood professionals start when they are preservice teachers as they become acculturated to the profession (Anderson-Lain, 2017). College professors can design curriculum to introduce the education profession to college students through case studies and hands-on learning in the community (Rakap et al., 2017). Support for college students through service learning can be achieved in many ways which could include: mentorships, supervision in fieldwork, help with transportation to service learning placement/field work, scholarships for service learning, stipends, and more.

In-Service Teachers

Multiplying the population of the early childhood workforce can have implications for in-service professionals already in the workforce. Creating a strong outreach program for in-service professionals is a way to retain

our education workforce by ensuring adequate staffing, including available substitutes, as well as providing extra assistants and/or mentors. Building leadership capacity with service learning will help to strengthen retention, as well as recruitment to leadership positions for in-service professionals (Caspe & Hernandez, 2021; Talan et al., 2014; Zeng et al., 2021). In-service professionals can also engage in collaborative inquiry to support initiatives and innovation in workforce development (Schnellert & Butler, 2014; Sheridan & Wheeler, 2017).

Retired Professionals

Retired professionals who have left the workforce, are former teachers, and/or are people from other sectors (e.g., health, social services, government, nonprofits, for-profits, etc.) can have implications for multiplying the population of the early childhood workforce. Reaching out to professionals who have retired is a way to strengthen our education workforce. Many people who have retired are looking for temporary (part-time) and/or permanent (full-time) work in their retirement years. For example, they may want to become a substitute teacher, volunteer in the schools, mentor families/children (e.g., "grandparent program") or teachers, and serve their community in ways that appeal to them and share their expertise with others in their neighborhood. For example, in a village in Reggio Emilia, Italy there is a group of grandmothers that enjoy gardening and bring fresh flowers to their local school every week. The Nonne (grandmothers in Italian) also help the teachers in the outdoor classroom with the children's garden and nature-based curriculum. The way H-O-M-E model shows the importance of *Multiplying* our workforce within our neighborhoods and communities.

Evaluate Service Learning

To continue to implement the H-O-M-E model, **e**valuate how well community and neighborhood needs are being met by the H-O-M-E model. Coordinate and evaluate early childhood education training and technical assistance to ensure high quality education for young children with and without disabilities. Measurement of service learning efforts is also needed for evaluation with an eye toward continuous improvement (Ehrlich et al., 2019; Shore et al., 2021).

Preservice – High School

Evaluation of service learning activities can involve high school students. Ongoing program evaluation can monitor effectiveness. High school students can participate in evaluation by responding to satisfaction surveys and focus group interviews to evaluate their service learning experiences. They could also help conduct community surveys (Ice et al., 2015).

Preservice – College

Evaluation of service learning activities can also involve college students. Institutions of higher education (e.g., community colleges) typically have an evaluation system built into their personnel preparation program(s). Decisions made based on the interpretations made from analysis of the data will be important for ongoing continuous improvement of their service learning efforts (Sheridan et al., 2009).

In-Service Teachers

Evaluation of service learning activities can involve in-service professionals already in the workforce. If professionals are hosting college and/or high school students, they can evaluate the students and their service learning participation. In-service professionals can also examine their own preparation for the workforce, including how to handle stress (Jeon et al., 2022; Onchwari, 2010) and balance work demands with resources (Heilala et al., 2022). Evaluation efforts should be followed up with an action plan to address goal development.

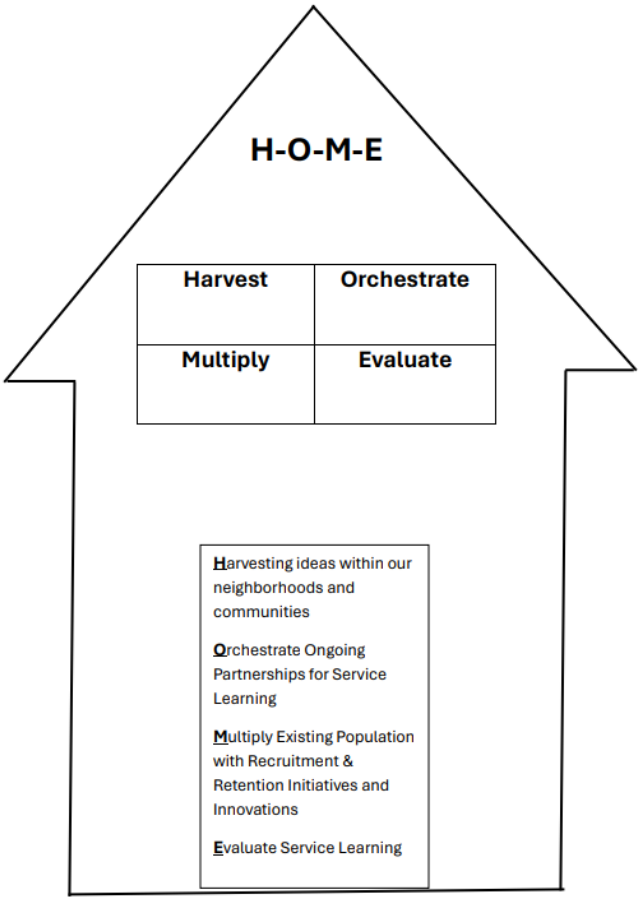
Retired Professionals

Evaluation of service learning activities can involve retired professionals who have left the workforce. A variety of roles could be established for participants who would like to be involved with evaluating the effectiveness of service learning. Evaluation roles may include but are not limited to helping to collect data, interpretation of data and analysis, supporting the development of meaningful goals derived from evaluation, and monitoring the progress of service learning initiatives to strengthen the workforce. The way H-O-M-E model shares the importance of *Evaluating* service learning within our neighborhoods and communities. Figure 3 depicts all four pieces coming together.

Summary

Children, families, neighborhoods, and communities deserve an educated and well-trained early childhood workforce (Bakken et al., 2017; Caspe & Hernandez, 2021; Macy, 2023; Mapp et al., 2022). There is a demand for training programs to attract and prepare a workforce to serve young children (Badgett, 2016; Elango et al., 2015). Highly qualified early childhood personnel are needed to serve young children and their families in inclusive environments (Mui et al., 2015; Wood, 2015).

Figure 3. H-O-M-E Model



The ecological systems theory is the foundation for the H-O-M-E model showing various considerations that influence growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986). Service learning is embedded in the H-O-M-E model to create authentic opportunities for innovation. We shared a service learning approach called H-O-M-E (as shown in Figure 2) to represent how we can: **h**arvest service learning solutions, **o**rchestrate partnerships, **m**ultiply participation, and **e**valuate.

H-O-M-E is foundational for creating community-based relationships. Hands-on field experiences should be available that showcase a wide range of early childhood practices. Data-based programs make replication and improvement possible. Figure 3 shows the way H-O-M-E model. High-quality early education and care can have long-term benefits for children (Gilliam, 2009). Engaging parents during early years can promote positive child

well-being, development, health, and education. Preservice and in-service programs that embody collaborative, data-based, service learning experiences can help early childhood professionals find their way home to a rewarding career (Gilliam, 2009; Laser et al., 2024; Sutton et al., 2020).

For vitality and prosperity, community partnerships in neighborhoods are essential. Training programs must recruit and prepare a highly qualified workforce to serve young children and their families. To help address our teacher shortages, we illustrated how people of different stages of their career can serve communities. We presented a service learning strategy in communities that can be used to address the needs of humanity and community when it comes to the needs of and services for young children and their families. The purpose of this conceptual article was to propose strategies for ameliorating the teacher shortage. Embedded in the H-O-M-E model was the use of service learning to create authentic opportunities for innovation to occur and promote prosperity within communities.

Next Steps

The H-O-M-E model involves multiple layers of an education system. Variability may exist at different levels of the system (Macy, 2023). Adopting, implementing, and doing research on the H-O-M-E model would be recommended to address the educator shortage.

Community Adoption of H-O-M-E

Each community is unique. When a community adopts the H-O-M-E model they can create an action plan which has timelines and indicates who is responsible for each part of the plan. A strategy that could be helpful would be to map community-based resources already in place to help determine where there are gaps within the current system. Existing databases could be useful to make decisions (Macy, 2023; Nguyen, 2021). For example, census data could help in understanding community characteristics. Community-based early childhood resources are critical to attracting and retaining a workforce (Lake & Jones, 2012; Nguyen & Springer, 2023). There are important early childhood education initiatives across a state education system, but early childhood educators may be isolated, siloed, and disconnected from stakeholders and peer educators in surrounding communities that would need to be considered when adopting this model in a community.

Additionally, it would be important to connect and create a network of communities and early childhood educators across a state to share best practices and expertise that strengthen community-based resources (Sher-

idan et al., 2009; Talan et al., 2014). Outreach can increase awareness with partner organizations, stakeholders, and community-based early childhood educators with a regional focus as part of the adoption of H-O-M-E model.

Build bridges to localized islands of early childcare. Early childhood providers serve children and families from within and around a community yet can be siloed and isolated (Holcomb-McCoy, 2023; Macy, 2023; Shore et al., 2021). A lack of communication limits coordination and impact as a critical community asset enabling the workforce (Macy, 2023). With the H-O-M-E model, communities and employers will benefit from stronger local and regional partnerships sustaining community-based early childcare for their workforce.

Implement H-O-M-E

A needs assessment could be used to understand how best to implement the H-O-M-E model. Part of the implementation process could focus on stakeholders who need to be part of the implementation process (Macy, 2023). To adopt H-O-M-E, people from diverse disciplines and training can come together. People with and without a stake in the model should be part of the adoption and implementation activities; for example, parents would have a stake in the H-O-M-E model because they have children who could participate.

An essential component in implementing the model would be to develop a content hub for curriculum and professional development to nourish, support, and retain early childhood educators in these communities through problem-based learning; courses leading to career credentials, creative thinking, and entrepreneurship; and evaluation and technical assistance for serving children at risk or with delay or disability. Growth and retention of early childcare providers and employees are expected outcomes. In-person and online, the H-O-M-E model will grow, develop, nourish, and retain community-based early childhood educators, reducing turnover and instability. Improved skills and capabilities of community-based early childhood educators will serve children and families more effectively.

Build an Evidence Base for H-O-M-E

One of the next steps for H-O-M-E is to conduct research on the approach the community adopts and implements. Nearby university partners could help lead the research done to evaluate the effectiveness of the model. Comparative studies could be done to examine how the model functions in diverse settings like urban, suburban, and rural areas. Different types of research methods could be used to learn more about the H-O-M-E model.

For example, program evaluation is a research methodology that could be useful for determining outcomes of the H-O-M-E model, as well as surveys and focus groups of participants.

Shared best practices through outreach can be analyzed (Heilala et al., 2022; Macy, 2023; Winterbottom & Lake, 2016; Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Early childhood educators are invested in their children and families, often seeing themselves as service providers not small businesses, yet they are both. A network of stakeholders and early childhood educator peers could share best practices around service learning, learn together, and provide support and networking for substitutes, questions, and shared needs of their children, families, and community (Gilliam, 2009; Macy, 2023).

Children deserve highly qualified educators. Families deserve effective schools and educators. Communities deserve an early childhood workforce to serve people. There is no place like H-O-M-E where early childhood professionals have experiential learning opportunities to grow their careers.

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"Build That Relationship": Supporting Preservice Teachers' Engagement With Families

Rose Sebastian and Judy Paulick

Abstract

Getting to the strong home–school partnership students and families deserve requires teachers who are prepared to engage with caregivers human-to-human, not just teacher-to-caregiver. In this study, we analyzed survey responses, coaching transcripts, and pre- and post-coaching transcripts from 19 preservice teachers' (PSTs) simulated parent–teacher conferences to understand how PSTs respond to sensitive disclosures and how their responses shift following coaching. We found that without support, even well-intentioned novices may respond to disclosures of family challenges in potentially relationship-harming ways. During coaching, PSTs expressed concerns about whether and how to respond to disclosures and how to balance being responsive with respecting the family's privacy and facilitating a productive meeting. When PSTs were able to discuss their concerns during coaching, their responses to the disclosure shifted, with more engagement and empathetic statements. We conclude with concrete ideas and insights from our research on how teacher educators and policymakers can prepare novices for partnerships.

Key Words: parent–teacher conferences, teacher preparation, family engagement, mixed-reality simulations, difficult conversations, building relationships, preservice teachers, practices, coaching

Introduction

Students and their families deserve teachers who are prepared to form the strong connections between home and school that have been shown to benefit students academically and behaviorally (Ma et al., 2016; Wilder, 2014). When teachers and families have open communication, mutual respect, and strong relationships, students do better (Epstein, 2018; Ma et al., 2016). In recognition of the importance of strong relationships between families and teachers, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) mandated the involvement of caregivers in schools, defining involvement as "the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities" (ESSA, 2015, §1010.4(d); note: like Graham-Clay, 2024, we understand the terms caregiver, parent, and family to include all adults who might interact with a teacher about a child's progress at school). The type of communication uplifted in ESSA is also the type of communication caregivers describe as building their trust in teachers and schools (Adams & Christenson, 2000). That meaningful, two-way communication, however, is often missing for families, especially Black and immigrant families, who too often feel shut out of schools, judged by staff, or silenced in meetings with teachers (D'Haem & Griswold, 2017; Matthiesen, 2016; Wagner, 2021; Wanat, 2010).

One of the most common opportunities for two-way communication between caregivers and teachers are schools' annual or semi-annual parent–teacher conferences. During these "essential conversation[s]" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. xxiii), skillful teachers replace the "sting of enmity" with "empathy" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 243), forging tighter connections between home and school. These teachers are often experts who have spent years building their craft, sometimes one mistake at a time (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). Novice teachers often enter the classroom with little conference experience and limited training on building relationships with students' families (D'Haem & Griswold, 2017; Graham-Clay, 2024; Walker & Legg, 2018). Some novices find conferences daunting or even scary, likening them to being "on the edge of a knife" (Tveit, 2018, p. 240). Preservice teachers (PSTs) often frame their caring about families as an innate disposition rather than something enacted by engaging in dialogue and responding sensitively (Goldstein & Lake, 2000). Trust and caring between teachers and caregivers, however, is often built incrementally through interactions, like when a teacher compliments the student to their caregiver, greets them, or allies with the caregiver to persuade or reassure the student during a conference (Bilton et al., 2017; Goldstein & Lake,

2000; Pillet-Shore, 2012; Walker & Legg, 2018). These are skills that can be taught and, when PSTs are offered training in domains like communicating with families or perspective taking, they show growth on paper-and-pencil assessments (Gerich et al., 2017; Smith & Sheridan, 2019).

To build PSTs' conferencing skills, some teacher educators have begun offering PSTs more practice and feedback opportunities through low-stakes simulations. Because these opportunities are newer, we are still learning how PSTs respond to feedback in simulations and what questions they have about issues they encounter during practice. Our goal in this study was to learn more about how PSTs respond to sensitive disclosures during simulated conferences and how their responses are shaped by feedback, with the ultimate goal of learning how we can better support PSTs in building a partnership toolbox for family engagement.

Theoretical Framework

At the heart of family engagement is the relationship and the trust between the teacher and the caregivers (Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Trust is what allows caregivers to believe teachers are working to support their child and are partners in their child's education (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Relational trust is built in everyday interactions between teachers and families as the teachers show competence, engage in respectful interactions, prove that they can be trusted, and show caregivers that they are valued and cared for as individuals (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Trust and relationships are also inherently complex; to be successful, teachers need an entire "portfolio of ways" (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 26) to respond to caregivers and build partnerships.

Part of that portfolio is learning to listen to caregivers and to engage in meaningful, two-way communication (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Doing that can require "undiluted attention" and "empathetic listening" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 105). Listening with empathy, according to Lawrence-Lightfoot (2004), does not mean sentimentality, but instead "seeing the world from the other person's vantage point" (p. 243). Empathy in conversations includes verbally or nonverbally acknowledging the feelings of others and taking others' perspectives (Bouton, 2016).

Every time a caregiver shares information in a conference, teachers choose how to respond. There is no one right way to respond. Instead, there are many ways teachers can respond that show empathy, engagement, or a desire to collaborate (Khasnabis et al., 2018; Walker & Legg, 2018). Teachers have to make judgment calls on how to respond—nuanced and complicated calls that, we believe, are easier if teachers have a toolkit of

responses to draw on. Our belief in the importance of relational trust and the complex skills required to build it in moment-to-moment interactions underpin this study.

Balancing Empathy and Time in Conferences

In parent–teacher conferences, which can be as brief as five minutes, teachers are juggling competing priorities (Lemmer, 2012). They are supposed to build rapport, elicit information, manage the flow, problem solve, and respond to challenges that arise during the meeting without going over on time (Lemmer, 2012; Walker & Legg, 2018). One of the most significant balancing acts that teachers face is in getting through the agenda of the meeting while still being empathetic (Gerich et al., 2017; Walker & Legg, 2018). This balancing act is so challenging that even experienced teachers can struggle with responding to unexpected or personal disclosures in conferences (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). While novices can, at times, engage with or build on disclosures in conferences, they often instead ignore even positive or school-related disclosures and struggle to find the balance between moving through their agendas and showing empathy (Khasnabis et al., 2018; Walker & Legg, 2018). Another balance that can be challenging for PSTs is between sharing information and inviting the caregiver to share information (Khasnabis et al., 2018; Walker & Legg, 2018). Our knowledge, however, comes primarily from observations of PSTs or PSTs' paper-and-pencil responses to questions. We still know little about the types of questions that PSTs have about responding to disclosures or finding their balance in conferences.

Providing PSTs With Skill-Building Practice Opportunities in Family Engagement

Parent–teacher conferences are brief, high-stakes, and infrequent; as a result, many preservice teachers are not able to practice parent–teacher conferences during their field placements (D'Haem & Griswold, 2017; De Bruine et al., 2014; Epstein, 2018). In response, some teacher educators have looked to approximations of practice to provide PSTs with more practice opportunities (Dotger et al., 2008, 2011; Walker & Legg, 2018). Approximations of practice are low-risk, low-complexity opportunities for PSTs to try on small parts of complex skills, like facilitating conferences (Grossman et al., 2009). These approximations have included having PSTs run simulated conferences with highly trained live actors who act as a standardized caregiver similar to a standardized patient in medicine (Dotger et al., 2008, 2011). In addition to live actors, some teacher educators have begun using

digitally mediated simulations with animated avatars to provide PSTs with low-stakes, repeated practice opportunities (Luke & Vaughn, 2022).

During simulated conferences, PSTs are able to practice clinically or instructionally important scenarios ranging from meeting with a caregiver who does not trust the teacher to look out for her son to speaking with a caregiver who is frustrated about the content the teacher is covering in class (Dotger et al., 2008, 2011; Walker & Legg, 2018). The teacher educator is able to dictate what the caregiver discloses and how they respond to the PSTs, calibrating the difficulty level of practice while providing shared experiences and repeated practice opportunities for the PSTs (Dotger et al., 2008; Luke & Vaughn, 2022). What is still not clear, however, is how or if PSTs grow in their skills from simulated practice opportunities.

Building PSTs' Skills Through Feedback

Helping PSTs master conferencing skills often requires more than just practice. Many PSTs also benefit from feedback on their skills (Gerich et al., 2017; Smith & Sheridan, 2019). One of the most impactful ways to provide teachers with feedback is through individualized coaching (Kraft et al., 2018). Individualized coaching often begins with the coach watching the novice teach (Kraft et al., 2018). Then the coach provides feedback, including examples of what the novice did well, specific guidance on where they could improve, opportunities for guided practice, and models by the coach of what the target teaching practice should or could look like (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010).

While coaching can be delivered over long time periods, it can also be provided in short sessions, including between two rounds of simulated practice (Cohen et al., 2020; Kraft et al., 2018). These short sessions of coaching have been shown to improve how PSTs respond to simulated, off-task students (Cohen et al., 2020). With in-service teachers, individualized coaching by trained professionals has been shown to help build teachers' family engagement and conferencing skills (Smith & Sheridan, 2019), but less research has been done on how coaching shapes PSTs' responses in practice conferences. On paper-and-pencil measures, PSTs' self-confidence, attitudes about family engagement, and knowledge all improve with feedback from peers, training, class discussions, and opportunities to respond to case studies (Brown et al., 2014; Gerich et al., 2017). Less is known about how PSTs' responses shift or how such shifts map onto the feedback they received.

Research Purpose and Questions

In our research, we studied what happens when PSTs are given individualized feedback on how they responded to a sensitive disclosure during a digitally mediated, simulated conference. Our goals were to understand how PSTs' responses to the disclosure evolved following coaching and how PSTs' responses mapped onto their goals for the conference and what happened in coaching. Specifically, we set out to understand these two questions:

1. How do preservice teachers respond to personal disclosures by a caregiver in a simulated parent–teacher conference before and after coaching?
2. How do their responses map onto their goals for their conferences, their coaching conversations, and their comments on coaching after their simulations?

Methods

To understand both PSTs' responses to a personal disclosure and the patterns in their responses, goals, and coaching experiences, we drew on qualitative data from 19 PSTs. Each of the PSTs answered questions about their goals for a simulated conference and then participated in two rounds of a conference, with coaching in between and a reflection afterwards. For this study, we drew on PSTs' responses to pre- and post-survey questions as well as their session and coaching transcripts. By drawing on multiple sources of data for each PST across time, we were able to gain insight into the PSTs' thinking and actions and how those shifted or did not shift, given practice and feedback.

Participants

While more than 19 PSTs participated in the simulation, the 19 in this study were the ones who both had coaching sessions where the father's personal disclosure was at least briefly discussed and who consented to participate in this IRB-approved study. Of the 19, 11 were enrolled in an elementary credential program and eight in a secondary program at Oak University (all names are pseudonyms), a traditional teacher preparation program in the Southeastern United States. The PSTs were predominantly female (89.5%), White (63.2%; other participants included 10.5% Latino/a, 5.2% Black, 5.2% Asian American, and 15.8% Other), and from English-speaking homes (73.7%). While less diverse than students in United States schools, the PSTs in this study were slightly more diverse than American teachers who, in 2017, were 89% female at the elementary level

and 80% White (Ingersoll et al., 2021). The PSTs' ages ranged from under 20 to over 30, although 68.4% were between 21 and 23. A slight majority (52%) described the high school they had attended as middle class.

The Simulation

All of the PSTs participated in two rounds over Zoom of a simulated parent–teacher conference using the Mursion platform. In Mursion simulations, a live actor remotely controls cartoon avatars. PSTs see and interact with a cartoon character in an animated classroom, but that character is being controlled by a puppeteer who can respond to the PST in real time. The two puppeteers in this study, a White man and a White woman, participated in over five hours of training for the scenario, learning the backstory of the father avatar, who was a college educated technology worker, and participating in practice simulations to learn some scripted lines and build consistency. The avatar was racially ambiguous and male, which presents ethical complexities and is a limitation of simulation work.

Prior to the simulation, PSTs were given background information on a fictional student in their third or ninth grade class (depending on their program of study) whose family they had interacted with previously over the phone. They were told that the purpose of the conference was to: "Create and maintain a positive rapport with Katie's father," and to "Begin a family conference that will culminate in a plan to support Katie's social interactions." Towards the end of every seven-minute conference, the father disclosed problems at his workplace. He began the disclosure by saying, "There's a weight on my shoulders," and later added, "There are challenges at work." In many conferences, the father specified that the company was doing layoffs.

During the first round of simulations, PSTs had an opportunity to respond to this and other lines by the father and then received five minutes of individualized coaching from one of four highly trained doctoral students. During coaching, PSTs had an opportunity to share their perspective on the conference, and then the coaches shared positive and growth-oriented feedback. Coaches focused on what they saw as the PST's key need, whether that was responding to the caregiver questioning their expertise as a teacher or responding to the caregiver's work-related disclosure. Coaches also included time to respond to concerns shared by PSTs and to connect the focal skill to other aspects of the conference. For example, a coach might focus on why it was important to gather information from the caregiver and then give the father's work disclosure as an example of an opportunity to gather information. In those situations, PSTs often had limited time

to engage with the coach about the caregiver's disclosure. After coaching, PSTs repeated the simulation and completed a post-survey.

Data

The data in this study includes both of the PSTs' responses to the father's personal disclosure, transcripts of PSTs' coaching sessions, and PSTs' pre- and post-survey responses. The simulations and coaching sessions were recorded and digitally transcribed. Each transcript was manually cleaned and segmented so that only portions of the transcripts related to the father's disclosure were included for analysis. We also analyzed PSTs' pre-survey responses to four open-ended questions: In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a strong family conference? How will you begin the conference? How will you build and maintain rapport with the family member? List two goals for the family conference. Finally, we analyzed PSTs' responses to two post-survey questions: What was the most useful aspect of the coaching you received today? How, if at all, did the coaching today change your approach to the scenario?

Data Analysis

We engaged in multiple rounds of coding, first generating inductive codes within each data source and then looking for patterns across the data (Miles et al., 2014). During initial coding, we used in-vivo codes to help us stay close to the data (Miles et al., 2014). Each data source was coded at the whole excerpt level and could receive multiple codes. For example, a PST's response to the question on characteristics of a strong conference of, "I think that they are positive, organized, and move towards a more concrete plan for the future," was coded as *moving towards a plan* and *positive tone*. In the second round of coding, we looked for patterns within each data source, testing each code against data for that source and allowing new codes to emerge (Miles et al., 2014). For example, the code *positive tone* for characteristics of a positive conference became broader, part of a code named *climate* as we grouped related codes together.

The patterns we identified varied by data source. When we looked at session transcripts, for example, we noted that some PSTs ignored what the caregiver said, going right back to the student, while others affirmed the father as a caregiver, and others were explicitly empathetic, often saying, "I'm sorry." Similarly, when we looked at coaching transcripts, we noted that some PSTs had shared questions and concerns about the disclosures while others did not. When we analyzed post-survey responses, we noticed that some PSTs gave detailed responses on how coaching helped them

while others gave broad or generic responses like, "The encouragement!" In pre-survey responses, we noted how many of the PSTs focused on building a relationship with the caregiver. Each of these patterns reflected what was happening in that particular data source.

After finishing pattern coding within each data source, we began to look for themes across data sources, focusing on the experiences and responses of each PST. First, we created vignettes for each of the 19 PSTs. Each vignette included summaries and excerpts from the PST's pre- and post-coaching responses to the disclosure and their coaching session, as well as from their conference goals and coaching reflection. The vignettes helped us synthesize data from all five data sources for each PST. For example, for one PST the vignette included:

> [PST] had a goal of, "build a good relationship." Coach brought work up, and the PST said, "I usually go into that detail," but that "I figured we're on a tight schedule...." The coach responded about the balance in conferences "between being really productive, but also setting a really warm climate."

The vignettes helped us make sense of how PSTs' goals related to their responses to the disclosure, and their discussions in coaching to their later reflections and disclosure responses.

To better understand emerging themes around the relationship between PSTs' coaching experiences, their reflections, and their responses to the disclosure, we created a matrix with the full data set for each PST (Miles et al., 2014). We color coded the matrix, with PSTs whose responses shifted following coaching shaded one color and those whose responses did not shaded another. We then color coded coaching transcript excerpts as well to create visual patterns that would help us make sense of the data for each PST across all sources. As we looked at the full data set for each PST and our color coding, we explored our emergent themes on the relationship between coaching discussions and post-coaching responses, as well as patterns from the second round of coding in the variation in types of responses to the disclosure and the similarity in conference goals across PSTs. We continued to write analytic memos throughout data analysis to further explore the themes and patterns.

As themes emerged, we tested each against the data, looking for disconfirming evidence and revising the themes as needed, using the five data sources to triangulate our findings. To build credibility, we created a research database, triangulated multiple sources of evidence, and shared drafts of findings with colleagues, iterating, revising, and sharing with colleagues again as we received feedback (Yin, 2018).

Researcher Reflexivity

As qualitative researchers, we cannot be written out of the research process. Who we are shapes what questions we ask and what we see in the data. We are current and former teachers who, based on our research and our time teaching, believe that family engagement is a learned skill and that strong partnerships between families and schools are essential to students' success. We also believe that the foundation of any relationship is trust and that trust is built through repeated interactions. These personal beliefs shaped our decision to work on parent–teacher conferences as well as what we were predisposed to notice during data analysis. While we took care to stay close to the data, to confer with expert colleagues, and to attend to our own biases, our own "assumptions, interest, and theoretical commitments" (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 167) inevitably informed our conceptual framework and shaped what we found in the data.

Findings

Overall, in their first practice sessions, PSTs varied in how they responded to the caregiver's work-related disclosure. Many answered empathetically but didn't follow up; others ignored what the caregiver shared or responded in ways likely to harm their relationship with a real caregiver. Regardless of how they responded to the disclosure, many PSTs had concerns that they shared during coaching about how, or if, they should respond to the caregiver's disclosure. When PSTs had time in coaching to engage with their coach on responding to disclosures, they often shifted in their responses, engaging more fully with the disclosure during their second practice session. When PSTs had less time in coaching to discuss the disclosure, they often continued to respond in potentially harmful ways. To understand how PSTs responded to the caregiver across the two simulations—and how their responses mapped onto their survey responses and coaching conversations—we share findings from three groups of PSTs: those who continued to have difficulties responding to the caregiver after coaching; those whose responses shifted following coaching; and those who started and stayed empathetic in their responses.

"I Don't Know. I Don't Know": PSTs Who Needed More Support

The most common goal that preservice teachers set for the conference was to build a relationship with the caregiver. For four PSTs, however, their responses to the caregiver's disclosure across both practice rounds was unlikely to strengthen that relationship. While most PSTs in this study had

coaching sessions focused on the disclosure, a few PSTs had coaching sessions focused on other skills, sessions where the disclosure was only briefly discussed. After those coaching sessions, PSTs continued to experience challenges in responding to the father. Leeanne is one of those PSTs. Prior to the simulation, Leeanne had written that one of her goals was to "maintain a positive relationship with [the student's] dad." She had also written that she wanted to, "Start by continuing to establish a good relationship with her dad, getting to know him on a more personal level." When the father shared about work, however, Leeanne struggled to respond, saying, "So are you...it seems like you know your daughter well. You know what she likes."

During Leeanne's coaching session, the coach primarily focused on how Leeanne responded to the father's sharing of his worries about his daughter. At the end, the coach connected possible responses to the caregiver sharing his worries about his child to possible responses to the caregiver sharing a workplace challenge, saying, "When he says something like...'I'm afraid of being laid off,' what you can do is just simply say, 'I'm sorry to hear that,' or 'Would you like to share more?'" Then the coach gave Leeanne a very brief chance to practice: "Just really quickly because we're just about out of time. 'I've got a huge weight on my shoulders. I'm worried about losing my job.'...How might you respond?" Leeanne responded, "I don't know. I don't know." Time for coaching was up, however, so the coach was not able to respond. Then, during the second round when the father disclosed that he might be getting laid off, Leeanne responded, "And I understand that after school might be difficult with your schedule, so that's why I wanted to check in," demonstrating that she was still unsure how to respond. In her post-survey, Leeanne only shared broad comments about coaching, like that it was, "Very beneficial in my approach to the meeting."

Megan also was not able to share questions or concerns about the disclosure with her coach. Prior to the conference, she had written that one of her goals was to "build rapport with [the student's] father." During the first session, however, when the father disclosed his challenges, Megan responded, "It's been difficult for me personally...because she doesn't talk as much to know what she is interested in." Megan's coaching session focused on the importance of gathering information from the caregiver, which the coach briefly connected to the disclosure saying, "He...started to share some of the...personal stuff....That would be a space for you to maybe get some more information from him." The coach then asked a question about how Megan could gather information from the caregiver at a different moment of the conference, not leaving Megan time to respond to the disclosure advice. During the second simulation, when the father shared about work,

Megan responded, "I'm just trying to think of ways to get her to share and to be more...I guess, less reserved in the class," demonstrating little change from the first simulation. In her post-survey responses, Megan shared how coaching helped her in the focal area that they had worked on and in, "Having feedback immediately to put into place." Like Leanne and other PSTs whose coaching focused on other skills, Megan did not get to share concerns or engage in coaching focused on the disclosure and went into the second round still unprepared to respond to the caregiver's disclosure.

"Build That Relationship": PSTs Whose Responses Became More Empathetic

In contrast, a second group of nine preservice teachers ended their coaching session more sure how to respond to the caregiver. During the first practice round, these PSTs had often either ignored the disclosure or said something that might harm the teacher–caregiver relationship, such as by saying, "Well, you know, life happens, and sometimes it throws curveballs, but we just need to keep on going," or, "So I will not ask you to have too much of a burden with regards to [your daughter]." Many of these PSTs had stated before the conference that their goals were to "form a positive relationship with [the student's] father," or "keep a positive relationship;" goals that many were not realizing in their initial responses. These PSTs all had time during coaching to engage with their coaches on how to respond to personal disclosures during conferences. Then, following coaching, when the father disclosed his work challenges, these PSTs responded with statements such as, "Just so you know, I'm always here, available via phone and email if you ever need something," and, "I'm very sorry to hear that. I'm sure that's definitely...a tough thing to go through."

Clara, an elementary PST, is an example of a PST whose response shifted following coaching. During the first simulation, she replied to the father's disclosure by saying, "Well, I think that the best thing that we should do is...let [your child] know how much we care for her and support her...if we're both there for her, she won't even realize any of this negative energy." During coaching, Clara brought up the disclosure, telling the coach that, "I feel like the hardest part for me was when he was talking about losing his job—how much are you supposed to ask about that?" Her coach told her,

> But yeah, the part about him losing a job—it's absolutely okay to acknowledge that, like, "I'm really sorry to hear that." And you can ask follow-up questions. It's tricky, because you're in this parent–teacher dynamic, but you're both humans.

Clara then clarified, "I like the follow up questions, because sometimes I don't know how much to ask." Her coach responded, "I think if someone is willing to offer a piece of information...say like, 'Okay, I hear what you're saying,' and follow up... it's just sort of that...'I want to acknowledge you as a human.'" During her second round of practice, Clara responded to the caregiver's disclosure by saying,

> I'm so sorry to hear that...Well, just know that we're here for you. We're here for [your daughter]. So if there's anything that I or the school can do to help you guys in any way, don't hesitate to reach out.

After practice, Clara wrote that the coaching she received helped her "focus on [the caregiver]," and "approach the father's personal life in a respectful manner."

Like Clara, Kim, another elementary PST, also shared that she was unsure whether she should have engaged with the disclosure. Kim's coach is the one who brought up the disclosure, telling her, "Despite the fact that... you're there for [the student], a lot of parents, they also...need you to be there for them...and to build that relationship." Kim then asked, "So...I should have engaged with that conversation?" When the coach affirmed, Kim followed up, asking, "But what are you supposed to—am I supposed to propose a solution for [the student]?" The coach then clarified, "Yes, you should absolutely develop a plan for [the child]....But you can...develop a plan while making the parent feel like you care and you're supportive of them." During the second round, when the caregiver shared about his work challenges, Kim responded with a follow up question and told him, "You always have support here." In her post-survey, Kim wrote that the coaching helped her, by "Telling me to validate the parent's experience and to treat the conference with as much care as I would a student conference."

Other PSTs as well had questions for their coaches about how and if to respond to the caregiver's disclosure. One asked her coach, "[He] said something...like, work can be really challenging, isn't it? And then do I...I didn't know if I should, how I should comment or...respond to [that]." Another PST told his coach, "I wasn't quite sure what to do when the caregivers start talking about...their job." Like Kim and Clara, these PSTs had time to discuss their concerns and had stronger responses to the disclosure during the second round of practice. PSTs in this group wrote that the coaching helped them realize that "I don't need to always bring it back to the child, and that I can acknowledge how the caregiver is feeling and listen to them more," and that "Just getting a reminder to be considerate of the parent's concerns in addition to showing compassion for their situation"

was helpful. Given guidance on how and why to respond, these PSTs' responses to the disclosure shifted and became more empathetic.

"What You Said Was Completely Valid": PSTs Who Started and Stayed Empathetic

A final group of six preservice teachers responded empathetically to the caregiver during both rounds of the simulation. Many of these PSTs, however, still brought up the disclosure during coaching, with concerns about how to respond, how to transition back to the student, and when it was prying. One secondary PST responded to the disclosure by telling the caregiver, "I'm sorry to hear that," and affirming his strength as a caregiver. When coaching started, the PST brought up the disclosure, asking the coach, "When the dad said, 'I will lose my job next week.' [How] should I react?" The coach affirmed her initial empathetic response, saying, "I think what you said was completely valid," and then gave some additional language she could use. Another secondary PST brought up concerns about how to transition back from the disclosure to the meeting. She had also been empathetic to the caregiver, telling him that she was "sorry to hear that," and understood "how that could be really stressful," but when the coach asked how the simulation went, she replied,

> At that moment, it was like, there was this conversation going on about this guy's job, and trying to be...empathetic, but also recognizing that we have to wrap it up was weird...because I wasn't really sure how to get back to the conversation about [the student]...and so that part...was the most challenging.

Her coach affirmed her initial response to the disclosure, saying, "You want to continue to do that, to express the empathy and the compassion for the parent." Her coach also suggested some language she could use to transition back to the student and to wrap up the meeting, language that the PST took on in the second round when she brought up the "stress" the caregiver was likely experiencing because of work and connected it to the classroom.

Other PSTs expressed concerns about how much to "pry" during the meeting. After her coach told her, "When they tell you things like 'Oh, I'm having a hard time, work's not going well,' they want you to ask, 'What's wrong...Do you want to talk about that?...I'm really sorry to hear that,'" an elementary PST responded, "That makes sense. Yeah. I didn't want to be weird, to...pry." One of the other PSTs had a similar concern, telling her coach, "Yeah, that's what I was wondering, because I was like, 'Oh, it's, if it's a conference about [the student], I don't want to...ask too much about

him'....You don't want to be too intrusive, but okay." Both PSTs had responded empathetically to the father's disclosure but had not followed up and were unsure where the line was on being "intrusive." After being generally coached on asking the caregiver more questions, a third PST brought up on her own that, following the disclosure, "[The father] probably could have... given me some more insight into what was going on at home and...with his job situation...I probably should have let him talk more."

These PSTs then went back into the simulator and continued to respond empathetically to the caregiver and wrote comments on the post-survey about coaching giving them "ideas" and "insight," and helping them "know…how to deal with parent sharing about their own life problems," and "[make] smoother transitions." All of these PSTs had strong initial responses to the caregiver's disclosures, but they still had questions about whether or how they should respond—questions that the coaches were able to address.

Discussion

Relational trust is often built through small interactions between teachers and caregivers (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). As teachers demonstrate respect, competence, trustworthiness, and their valuing of the caregiver as an individual, trust grows (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). During time-constrained, agenda-focused conferences, teachers have to balance building relational trust with managing the flow of the meeting (Lemmer, 2012; Walker & Legg, 2018). Finding the balance takes skill and access to a portfolio of relationship-building strategies (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004; Lemmer, 2012; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). In this study, our goal was to find ways to better support preservice teachers in developing their own portfolio of strategies. To do this, we studied how PSTs responded to a personal disclosure by a simulated caregiver before and after coaching, and how those responses mapped onto PSTs' coaching conversations and conference goals.

We found, first, that PSTs responded to the caregiver's disclosure of challenges at his workplace in a wide range of ways, ways that did not always match the goals they had set for the conference. As other researchers have found, some PSTs in our study acknowledged what the caregiver shared (Khasnabis et al., 2018; Walker & Legg, 2018). Many of those PSTs then followed up, offered support, or just stated that it sounded challenging. Other PSTS, however, responded in ways likely to harm a relationship with a real caregiver, something that has been true in other studies as well (Khasnabis

et al., 2018; Walker & Legg, 2018). These PSTs often ignored what the caregiver shared or responded in potentially problematic ways, responses that mirror what too often happens in real conferences where caregivers can feel silenced, judged, or unheard (Matthiesen, 2016; Wagner, 2021; Wanat, 2010). Many of these PSTs had listed relationship building as a goal, but there was a disconnect between their dispositional beliefs about relationships and the actions they took in the conference when the caregiver shared about work, a gap that has been hinted at in earlier work as well (Goldstein & Lake, 2000).

The PSTs then received five minutes of coaching, coaching that, based on best practices (e.g., Kraft et al., 2018; Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010), included individualized feedback and concrete guidance. Our second finding is that, following disclosure-focused coaching, PSTs whose initial responses had been potentially problematic shifted to responses that acknowledged the disclosure, followed up, or offered support. While coaching and case studies have been shown to shift PSTs' survey responses about conferences (Brown et al., 2014; Gerich et al., 2017), our study is one of the first to show that coaching can help shape how PSTs respond to simulated caregivers and build their portfolio of family-engagement strategies. The influence of PSTs' coaching conversations was most clear in their absence. When coaches and PSTs only had time to glancingly touch on the disclosure, PSTs went back into the simulator and stayed with their initial type of response. If they had ignored the disclosure or responded in potentially problematic ways, they continued in the same vein. As others have found, practice alone was not enough to build PSTs' portfolio of responses—they need guidance as well (Cohen et al., 2020).

Our third finding is that the questions PSTs asked their coaches reflected the challenge of the task they were set. PSTs had questions about how much to pry, about how to pivot back to the agenda of the meeting, and about what was appropriate in a response. Even veteran teachers can be thrown by unexpected disclosures and unplanned conversations (Graham-Clay, 2024; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). In conferences, teachers have to balance relationship building with sharing information, gathering information, and problem solving (Lemmer, 2012; Walker & Legg, 2018)—and do all that within the context of a professional relationship. The advice that the coaches gave during the feedback sessions reflects only one way to respond to a disclosure like the one in the simulation, not a perfect way because the task was too complex for there to be one simple answer.

Real world conferences are far more complex, with many more challenging moments. To build their skills, PSTs need opportunities to practice,

to experience the challenges, and to receive feedback (Cohen et al., 2020; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Walker & Legg, 2018). Many PSTs only have limited opportunities to learn about, experience, and practice parent–teacher conferences (De Bruine et al., 2014; D'Haem & Griswold, 2017; Epstein, 2018). We believe that the questions the PSTs in this study asked and the conversations they were able to have, even if brief, highlight why opportunities to practice conferences are so important. Facilitating a conference well takes inordinate skill, skill PSTs need a chance to begin to develop (D'Haem & Griswold, 2017; Walker & Legg, 2018).

Implications

Our findings have implications both for teacher educators and for teachers. For teacher educators, our findings highlight why conferences are so important to practice and show the skill building that PSTs can begin to engage in when given feedback and opportunities to practice. Our study drew on mixed-reality simulations, an expensive and, at times, challenging technology. Conference practice, however, can be much less complicated. Other studies have drawn on live, standardized actors, classroom role plays, and case studies (De Bruine et al., 2014; Dotger et al., 2008; Gerich et al., 2017; Walker & Legg, 2018). Each has been shown to have positive impacts on PSTs' knowledge and dispositions (Gerich et al., 2017; Smith & Sheridan, 2019). Just as there is no one perfect way to respond to a disclosure in a conference, there is no one perfect way to engage in skill building. Our study also drew on highly trained coaches who were able to work individually with PSTs. Other studies have drawn instead on instructor feedback and peer debriefings; these too can support skill building (Gerich et al., 2017; Walker & Legg, 2018). Our findings illustrate the importance of practice opportunities and guidance, not the need for a particular format for that practice or feedback.

The broader issue that our findings raise for teacher educators is that relationship building in a conference is challenging. The questions that our PSTs asked about how to respond are real and important. It is likely that, to build skills and a portfolio of responses, PSTs will need multiple opportunities to practice, multiple opportunities to discuss the challenges, and multiple opportunities to begin to discern when might be a moment to engage more and when might be a moment to pivot back to an agenda.

Our findings also have implications for teachers and schools. Our goal is not to force teachers to respond in a particular way in a conference but to illuminate the range of skills teachers need to draw on in responding. Few teachers enter the profession able to handle every family partnership

challenge. Building a portfolio of relationship-building responses and understanding the nuances of when each might be appropriate takes time and work. As Mapp and Bergman (2019) recommend in their Dual-Capacity Building Framework, teachers need time to work with colleagues, opportunities to practice with families, and administrative support to build their portfolio and their skills. Just as students and families deserve teachers who are prepared to form strong connections, our teachers deserve leaders who will support them in learning to form those connections.

Limitations

While our work has important implications for teacher education, it also has significant limitations. First, the caregiver in this study was simulated, so we cannot know how a real caregiver would have reacted to the PSTs' varying responses to his personal disclosures. In addition, we cannot know how these same PSTs would have reacted to a real caregiver or how coaching would have influenced their responses. Further, the technology itself is ethically complex, with puppeteers role playing individuals with differing identities than their own, a complexity that needs to be acknowledged in this work. We need more research on real conferences to understand how teachers respond to personal disclosures by caregivers, how real caregivers react to candidates' responses, and how coaching shapes PSTs' responses. Second, our findings are limited by the homogeneity of our sample and the lack of participant interviews. Third, the conference and coaching focused on many skills, not just the disclosure, and it is unclear how that impacted what we found. Finally, it is unclear if or how PSTs' learning would transfer to real conferences. Overall, we need more research on how PSTs respond to disclosures and unexpected moments in real conferences and how coaching shapes their skills to know how we can best support future generations of teachers.

Conclusion

Students' success depends, in large part, on whether schools and families can work together. Our research has revealed a roadblock in the way of strong partnerships: novices might have the best of intentions for forming partnerships, but without training and support, they can commit potentially relationship-harming missteps. We need to help novice teachers build a portfolio of relationship-building strategies, strategies they can draw on to navigate complex moments in family engagement. We need to provide them with feedback and opportunities to practice their skills so that they are ready to be the partners our students and families deserve. Creating the

strong home–school partnerships our students need begins with investing in and supporting our teachers.

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Family–School Relations and Trust in an Intercultural Context: Schools in Barcelona

Mina Prokic

Abstract

This article attempts to broaden our understanding of the ways in which schools foster the trust of families from an immigrant background. In schools with diverse student bodies, different ideas about the behavior, responsibilities, and roles of students' families and expectations of the involvement between schools and families, especially ones of immigrant origin, can foster mistrust. Moreover, research in Spain has indicated the problematic nature of the relationships that can develop between immigrant families and the schools their children attend, as well as lack of social cohesion between immigrant and native-born families within high diversity schools. In this article, I explore the main discourses, practices, and initiatives of schools and education professionals in Spain in terms of family–school relations and trust. Based on fieldwork carried out in five public primary schools in the city of Barcelona and in-depth interviews with education professionals and Family Association representatives, I explore two elements. First, I describe participants' perceptions of immigrant family–school relations, and second, I show the practices through which education professionals attempt to create a trustful school climate and positive relations with immigrant families, as well as the obstacles they encounter in this process. Additionally, I explore various practices that have unintended consequences resulting in misunderstandings between immigrant families and schools, thus creating impediments for forming trustful relations.

Key Words: school trust, school community, family involvement, family–school relations, education professionals, Barcelona, Spain, Catalonia

Introduction

Trust is becoming an increasingly key concept in recent discussions in the educational research literature and is seen as an important predictor of good family–school relations (Herrera et al., 2020). In a trusting environment, there is more cooperation between parents and schools, which is beneficial for students and leads to schools improving. However, in schools with significant levels of immigration, trust might be harder to build and sustain because of the diverging norms and expectations of behavior among different cultures, nationalities, and religions (Carey, 2017; Demireva et al., 2014; Laurence & Bentley, 2015). Different ideas about the roles of families and varying expectations of the involvement between schools and families, especially immigrant ones, can cause mistrust (Ferguson, 2008). In schools where there are families from different backgrounds, including generationally local families and ones from various immigrant groups, each tends to see family–school relations from a different perspective.

Moreover, research in Spain has reported the problematic relationships that can develop between immigrant families and educators, as well as a lack of cohesion and trustful relations among immigrant and local families (Carrasco et al. 2009; Garreta-Bochaca, 2008, 2009; Garreta-Bochaca et al., 2018; Paniagua, 2017; Terrén & Carrasco, 2007). In order to remedy this, researchers have underlined the benefits of building strong, trustful relationships with families (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lorenzo et al., 2017). This can be achieved through regular communication, transparency, and collaboration on student goals and progress (Archambault et al., 2018; Danielsen & Bendixsen, 2019). By developing a trustful school environment, schools can integrate immigrant children better and foster positive relationships with parents, something which is especially important in the case of immigrant families who can be in a position of disadvantage in their relationships with the school (Banks & Banks, 2009). Yet, there is still research to be carried out on the best practices and policies to encourage trust and parent involvement (Strier & Katz, 2015). Schools increasing trust in a setting where there is a large degree of diversity is a key challenge (Hussar & Bailey, 2014), especially since the number of immigrant children in schools is steadily increasing in Spain (Hellgren & Gabrielli, 2021). Furthermore, in Spain, as in the rest of Europe and in the U.S., immigration has also been met with fear and hostility from many in society. This is something which has been used by political parties to issue antiimmigrant propaganda, especially towards racialized minorities (Hadj Abdou, 2020; Magazzini, 2021). The resulting political and social backlash against

immigrants can complicate immigrant children's educations (Jacobsen & Piekut, 2022) and hamper building trust with these communities.

Consequently, this article attempts to broaden our understanding of the ways in which educational professionals regard family trust in a context with increasing numbers of immigrant families from different backgrounds and examines the practices that schools are implementing to foster families' trust in this intercultural context. To achieve this, I explore the institutional view of immigrant families' involvement and trust in public primary schools. Accordingly, based on extensive fieldwork in five schools and in-depth interviews with education professionals and Family Association coordinators, I describe, first, their views on immigrant family–school relations and the conflicts they perceive in them. I then show the practices that education professionals are implementing in order to create a trustful school climate and higher immigrant family engagement, as well as the obstacles they encounter in this process.

Theoretical Framework

School Trust

Sociologists conceive trust as relational: something that is achieved through social experiences that develop through socialization and interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions (Carey, 2017; Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1993). In schools, trust is characterized by a strong school community based on cooperation and cohesion, in which adults have a common vision, shared responsibilities, and form a network of supportive relations (Holland, 2015; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). School communities are made up of various groups such as administrators, teachers, parents, and students that are highly interdependent. Trust in schools is marked by the everyday social exchanges and interpersonal relationships that are built at the individual level between members of these school groups (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

The main indicators of school trust are openness, competence, benevolence, reliability, honesty, and respect (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth et al., 2011). Openness is the extent to which information is shared and actions and plans are transparent; benevolence is the belief that the person that is trusted will protect the trustee and act with their interests at heart; competence is having sufficient skills and expertise; reliability refers to the extent that one person can rely upon another and be confident that their own needs will be met; honesty is the integrity of the person trusted; respect is recognizing the other person's value and expertise and taking their

views into consideration. Therefore, trust in schools will depend on the extent to which the different school groups abide by these characteristics; if one of them is not fulfilled, there can be repercussions on the relationship of trust (Schneider et al., 2014).

Another important aspect of trust that affects the type of relations that are created between different school groups is the internal context of the school, that is, its culture and climate. The school culture is represented through the shared goals, norms, values, and expectations of behavior that predominate in the school (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2006). The climate of the school is based on the collective perception of its members of the enduring quality of the school in terms of its atmosphere, quality of relationships, and the image it projects to the outside (Maxwell et al., 2017). The climate is the essence of the school, and it promotes the members such as teachers, parents, and students to feel that they belong and are part of the school (Angus et al., 2009). Trust in a school is formed through having a favorable and dynamic school climate and culture.

In addition, the different school groups share the responsibility for forming a culture of trust in schools by complying with their expected roles and behaviors (Hertel, 2016; Van Maele et al., 2014). If teachers, administrators, and parents behave according to their mutual expectations and roles, their actions foster reciprocity and trust. When one school group neglects their responsibilities and ceases to fulfill them, trust is diminished.

The school administration's role is to manage the school's regulations and policies. The teachers' role is to collaborate with parents, discuss students' progress, and incentivize students' learning (Hatch, 2006). The role of parents and their responsibilities regarding the school involve communicating with teachers, providing a healthy home atmosphere for studying, supporting the child's academic achievement and behavior, and reinforcing the school's values at home (Hatch, 2006). When parents and the school staff understand each other and there are regular and quality interactions in place about children's learning habits, academic progress, attitudes to learning, and contact with other children, there is an environment of trust that students also benefit from (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017; Redding et al., 2004).

The School's Role in Building Trust Through Fostering Family–School Relations and Parental Involvement

One important responsibility that schools have towards parents is to enhance family–school relations, while a key responsibility of parents regarding schools is to become involved in school activities as well as

supporting their children's learning at home (Jeynes, 2012). A solid school community, effective parental involvement, and being part of voluntary associations reinforces social cohesion and creates the conditions necessary to foster trustful family–school relations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Houri et al., 2019; Karakus & Savas, 2012). Trust is essential for parents' involvement in schools, while mistrust can be an impediment to effective family–school relations, especially in poor inner-city schools with diverse student bodies (Lawson, 2003; Strier & Katz, 2015).

In order to strengthen family–school trust, schools need to ensure effective communication and interaction with parents, as this is important for aligning the educational practices of parents and teachers and obtaining higher parental involvement (Driessen et al, 2004; Shiffman, 2019). Furthermore, family–school relationships depend on what the schools have to offer to the families, and if this is matched with opportunities for participation as well as reflecting the interests of the families (Bertran, 2005; Quiñones et al., 2019). A school climate in which the parents' participation and communication with the school is minimal can lead to parents and teachers acting separately in a noncohesive manner (Conus & Fahrni, 2017).

Therefore, parental values and involvement should be acknowledged and reinforced by the school. There are six main types of parental involvement as laid down by Epstein (1995, 2001): helping parents provide a positive home environment; communicating about the child's academic progress; volunteering in school activities; supporting learning at home; involving parents in decision-making processes, for example through school boards and councils; and collaborating with the wider community and services. Parents' involvement at home, such as maintaining high expectations as well as supporting learning at home, have a significant effect on student success (Jeynes, 2012).

Family–School Relations and Trust in an Intercultural Context

In an intercultural school context, where native families and old and new immigrants come together, relationships are based on sharing values, beliefs, norms, and practices between individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Zapata-Barrero, 2019). Schools, however, are not always culturally sensitive to immigrant families' needs when trying to involve them and to build trust with them. Schools might not take into account the demands of immigrant families and their particular childrearing practices in activities that aim to involve parents (Dotger & Bennett, 2010; Trumbull et al., 2001), resulting in treating families differently depending on their race, minority status, social class, and language background (Lewis & Diamond,

2015; Lunn & Kornrich, 2018; Turney & Kao, 2009). Many schools do not know how to engage parents from low-income and immigrant backgrounds. A lack of communication and misconceptions about each other and about the role that the school and the families have are key issues in family–school relations (Conus & Fahrni, 2017; Ferguson, 2008; Garreta-Bochaca, 2008).

Misunderstandings may also exist at the school about if and how immigrant families are involved in their children's schooling, as well as mistaken beliefs about their cultural and religious practices. Diverging values regarding education and varying ideas about how children should be raised might exist between immigrant families and the school (Carrasco et al., 2009; Dessel, 2010). Issues concerning diversity, such as religious instruction and celebration of religious holidays, mother tongue instruction, or other cultural demands can sometimes become sources of conflict in schools (Zilliacus, 2009). All of this can result in lower school trust (Carrasco et al., 2009; Hoy, 2011). Thus, family trust in an intercultural context will depend on a school's ability to manage and resolve disagreements and tensions.

Schools undoubtedly need to take the family's socioeconomic and cultural background into consideration in order to form trustful family–school relations (Hertel, 2016; Sacher, 2016). Furthermore, immigrant parents are often underrepresented in Family Associations and other school decision-making bodies because of their limited knowledge of the language, lack of resources, and different needs and preoccupations, not because they lack interest in the education of their children (Antunez, 2000; Danielsen & Bendixsen, 2019; Trumbull et al., 2001; Yol, 2019). It is typically native parents that are most involved in school activities and that make their voices more heard in the decision-making bodies (Martín Criado & Gómez Bueno, 2017; Doucet, 2011; Posey-Maddox, 2014); they have an advantage because their home culture is very similar to the school's norms and values.

Education professionals, since they have more agency than parents and have been assigned a decision-making role, can try to remove the barriers in the involvement of immigrant parents and to strengthen their relationships with the school through improving their capabilities and resources (Moles, 1993). To attain high levels of family–school trust, the school staff needs to encourage communication with parents, ensuring an atmosphere of respect, cooperation, and a mutual understanding of what children need.

In Spain, although notable research has been carried out on family–school relations (Garreta-Bochaca et al., 2018; Paniagua, 2017), there are no studies that address what schools do to form a trustful relationship with immigrant families. As education professionals have a significant role in influencing family trust (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017;

Tschannen-Moran, 2014), this study is an attempt to understand how education professionals view relations with immigrant families and how schools try to build trust with them.

Context

Catalonia (where the study is based), like the rest of Spain, has experienced a rapid increase in their immigrant population over the last 20 years and also an increase in the number of family members of the settled immigrants arriving to live with them (Hernández-Hernández & Sancho-Gil, 2018). Regarding the education of immigrant children in Catalonia, their presence in schools has increased from 3% to 18.3% in the last 20 years (Domingo & Bayona, 2016). The largest immigrant groups in schools are from Africa (40.9%), Latin America (24.4%), and Asia (14%), (Domingo & Bayona, 2016). The majority of these immigrant children are in public schools and are overrepresented in certain neighborhoods (Onsès-Segarra et al., 2023).

Regarding parental involvement, the main ways in which parents become involved in their children's schools in Catalonia is through Family Associations, school councils, parent–teacher meetings, and attending parents' days in which they can talk with the teachers. The school council is a formal body that is composed of representatives of the entire educational community, while the Family Associations are informal spaces for channeling parents' voices, promoting their participation, and strengthening the school community. Each Family Association is composed of a group of parents who pay a small yearly fee and sign up for the activities run by the Family Association, with some of them becoming coordinators and volunteering to manage the association and organize the extracurricular activities[1] and services.

The Plan for Language and Social Cohesion (*Pla per a la Llengua i Cohesió Social*) was established in 2004 as a new tool for attending to diversity and for assuring the academic success as well as the social inclusion of immigrant children while preserving Catalan as the main language of instruction in a multilingual context (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2009). Within this plan, schools with very high levels of immigration, labeled "high complexity" schools, receive more resources from the Education Consortium in terms of extra teachers, lower student–teacher ratios, and an extra teaching hour; depending on their needs, they might also be assigned social workers, psychologists, and intercultural mediators. The cultural and religious demands of immigrant families, such as the celebration of religious holidays,

as well as special dietary requirements and classes on their religion, are legally provided for in the agreements between the Muslim, Jewish, and Protestant communities and the Catholic state (Zapata-Barrero & Witte, 2007). Nevertheless, in practice, there is a lack of clear implementation of these demands, and each school decides to what extent they accommodate religious rights (Garreta-Bochaca et al., 2018).

Methodology

In order to understand how educational professionals perceive family trust in an intercultural context and the practices that schools implement to strengthen trust with immigrant families, this article employs a qualitative methodology. Qualitative methods allow more room for the interviewee to expand on the topic and to identify personal opinions, as well as for the interviewer to comprehend perceptions which reflect an individual's unique way of understanding and viewing phenomena (McDonald, 2011). Using a combination of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and observations, I was able to delve more deeply into what school trust represents for educational professionals, to trace the different conditions and factors that can have an influence on this trust, and to observe the different practices that are put in place to build trustful relations with immigrant families (Mishra & Mishra, 2013).

The data in this article are based on extensive fieldwork carried out in five public primary schools in Barcelona over the two school years spanning from 2016 to 2018. The city districts where the study was performed were Ciutat Vella and Sants-Montjuïc, where the predominant nationalities in the schools reflect the city average, mostly immigration from Asia and Maghreb, although in Ciutat Vella, an important percentage of the student body is made up of children from EU countries, and in Sants-Montjuïc, of children from South America.[2] Although all districts across Barcelona experience segregation in terms of the origin of the students who attend the schools, the two districts included in the fieldwork have the highest level of segregation between schools with high numbers of immigrants and those without (Síndic de Greuges de Catalunya, 2016).

The schools were chosen according to the following criteria: the presence of immigrant children, the school program, and how active the Family Association was (active or not very active), as well as the reputation of the school in its neighborhood (shown in the following table). I first connected with parents in parks and in public libraries. I contacted parents that have children in public primary schools, including families with varying

Table 1. School Organizational Field Notes

Schools	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
Immigrant (%)	61%	83%	51%	25%	6%
Nationalities	Latin America (3.77), Maghreb (13.91%), Rest of Africa (0.29%), EU (6.67%), Asia (35.36%), North America (0.58%)	Latin America (4.78), Maghreb (11.7%), Rest of Africa (0.19%), EU (11.13%), Rest of Europe (0.38%), Asia (50.94%), North America (0.19%)	Latin America (16.31%), Maghreb (6.04%), EU (11.18%), Rest of Europe (0.91%), Asia (16.92%)	Latin America (7.16%), Maghreb (5.01%), Rest of Africa (1.43%), EU (3.58%), Rest of Europe (0.24%), Asia (7.64%)	Latin America (1.68%), Maghreb (0.42%), EU (1.68%), Rest of Europe (0.84%), Asia (0.84%)
FA Coordinators	English (1), French (1), Spanish (1)	Spanish (2), Filipino (1), Pakistani (1)	Municipality employee, Spanish (2), Brazilian (1), Moroccan (1)	Spanish parents (4)	Spanish parents (4)
FA	Very active	Active	Not very active	Not very active	Moderately active
School Program: Mention of Cultural Diversity	-Diversity is beneficial	-Promote knowledge about the customs of the countries where the students come from -Understand, respect, and integrate the different cultures and ethnicities that coexist in the school	-Cultural and social diversity is one of the main values of the school.	-Teaching respect for cultural diversity. - Knowing and respecting others' origins, beliefs and customs.	N/A
School Activities to Enhance Trust	-Workshops for mothers and fathers -Children's workshop -Parent–teacher meetings	-Interview with the tutor of their children in each level -Parent–teacher meetings.	-Open days. -Families going to museums	- Initial FAs, meetings -Voluntary work -Parent–teacher meetings	-Activities for families -Open days for the families

Note. Data from the Department of Evaluation of Education and data gathered by the author during participant-observations. FA=Family Association.

socioeconomic status, and I conducted pilot interviews with them to learn their opinions about the reputations of the schools and the functioning of the Family Association. Based on these initial interviews and through snowball sampling, I identified my key informants and the schools where I could carry out my research.

The data were collected primarily by means of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, participant-observation and school document analysis. I conducted interviews with the school principals (5), teachers (6), Family Association coordinators (12), and education inspectors[3] from the Education Consortium[4] (3). These participants were chosen for the following reasons: school principals and teachers work directly with the families, the Family Association coordinators are involved in extracurricular activities with all families, and education inspectors represent the views of educational institutions and can give an insider view of the school. These informants can help us understand not only the ways in which trust can be built but also the barriers encountered and the institutional support that is offered and/or lacking (see Appendix for the prompts).

The participants were granted confidentiality, informed consent, and anonymity; their participation was entirely voluntary and based on the British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice. I made a verbatim account of each voice-recorded interview, and extensive notes were taken for the interviewees that did not want to be voice-recorded. Additionally, I kept notes throughout the fieldwork of the formal and informal meetings I attended, and I noted the observations I made during the interviews. Later on, all information was translated from Spanish/Catalan to English.

The semi-structured interviews were complemented with participant-observation in the parent–teacher and Family Association meetings and at the main school events in order to contextualize the individual and collective experiences of the main respondents and to develop an impression of the school climate and culture (Lawson, 2003). I carried out participant observation at these meetings in order to see to what extent immigrant and native parents participate in school activities, build cohesive relations, and feel part of the school community. In informal meetings such as those held by the Family Associations that take place after school hours, I reported the interactions between the families of different backgrounds; how inviting, respectful, and open the Family Association coordinators were to immigrant families; what language these coordinators spoke to them in (Spanish or Catalan); if there was any discriminatory behavior; and the main activities that were held for families and for enhancing family trust. I also attended formal meetings, namely the parent–teacher meetings throughout the year,

where I noted if there were translators or cultural mediators, if the teachers were open to immigrant families' concerns, if they gave them support if needed, and how they managed conflicts if they arose. Overall, I noted how school staff and Family Association coordinators handled cultural and religious demands and how they talked about diversity and cultural differences. Additionally, I looked at the school's documented information such as their programs, website content, and any written materials they produce in order to better comprehend the educational project and mission of the school and how it addresses diversity and family–school relations.

In the interviews, I asked questions that were mainly about immigrant parent involvement and family–school relations, views on diversity, and the tools and projects that are used in order to create a trustful school climate, as well as the barriers that they have encountered in their work. In order to analyze my data I used thematic analysis, following the main guidelines developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Codes were related to each other, according to causal conditions, action/interaction, and context in order to create the main themes for analysis, which were then reviewed and compared against the dataset (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). When a clear pattern and interrelationship emerged with respect to the meaning given to family–school trust by the interviewees, the results were framed theoretically (Glasser & Strauss, 1967).

Positionality

Since the researcher is the instrument of the data collection, I paid attention to how much my biases, preconceived ideas, and theoretical perspective influenced the data analysis. One way of dealing with this was by writing detailed notes on the fieldwork and the observations I made during the interviews, while trying to ensure that my views did not interfere. Later on, during the data analysis, I went back to the field notes and checked for possible biases. I tried to use my own biases in a productive way by questioning my own statements (Schensul et al., 1999).

During the fieldwork, I tried not to influence the families or the school staff in their behavior, routines, and interactions with other families from different ethnic backgrounds. However, in conducting in-depth interviews and making the educators and families feel more at ease with me, I did try to develop a rapport with the parents. This took a considerable amount of time and only happened after I visited the school several times, went to the Family Association and parent–teacher meetings, actively took part in the extracurricular activities and events, and spent time with them in the school yard. Therefore, my role can be described as participant-observer,

since the participants were aware of my observation role, yet I was also engaging in activities (Merriam, 1998).

My position regarding the families and their community shifted constantly between being an insider and an outsider. Firstly, not being a parent at the time automatically made me an outsider, but being a woman brought me closer to the participants since they were mostly mothers. In the case of the immigrant families, as a fellow immigrant, I connected more easily with them, and they felt comfortable sharing their complaints about the treatment they had received from the native population and what they disliked about the Spanish education system. At the same time, as I did not belong to the same immigrant community as the participants, I was an outsider.

The fact that I was not a mother also had an influence in that the families and the school staff regarded me as an outsider. This led the school staff to be more willing to share their concerns about intercultural relations at the schools, even though they did try to portray their schools in the best possible light. Oftentimes, the native families and the school staff sought advice from me about how to deal with diversity and how to encourage immigrant parents to participate in school activities. Meanwhile, the immigrant families sought guidance about how to succeed in having their religious and cultural customs represented in the school and to make their voices better heard. This gave me a certain duty to contribute to the community and not let the study become a one-way process in which the researcher merely obtains information from the participants (Milner, 2007). During the fieldwork, I did try to help the families with the concerns they had, and I also shared my findings with the school staff and key informants after the fieldwork had ended.

Principal Findings

The findings indicate that the school staff, when talking about diversity, are mostly worried about immigration from Asia and Maghreb, specifically Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Morocco. Other non-European families, such as those from Latin America, are seen as finding it easier to adapt to the norms and requirements of the local education system, since they share the same language and religion as the locals. Nevertheless, concerning their participation in the school and educational values, they are regarded by the educators in the same light as the other immigrant groups.

Considering the major issues brought up by the education professionals and Family Association coordinators about the relationships and levels of trust of these immigrant families with the school, I have classified the

data around these predominant themes: immigrant family involvement in school activities, community and social cohesion between families, the educational values and cultural and religious demands of immigrant families, and school practices that respond to diversity and enhance trust, as well as the barriers encountered by education professionals.

Immigrant Family Involvement in School Activities

As noted in other studies (Vera et al., 2012), the school principals and teachers claim that immigrant families' trust in teachers' performance and in the institution lead them to be less involved in open days or at school meetings. "In these countries [Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India], since they completely trust that the teacher is educating their children, when you tell them to come to the classroom it is harder for them to come, since the teacher is the boss" (Teacher, School A).

The lower participation rate of non-European immigrant families in the Family Association is a major concern in schools with high diversity. From the interviews and school programs it was clear that the school staff and Family Association coordinators, mostly from native or European families, embrace the values of diversity and inclusion by trying to involve these families. However, they do not know the best approach to make the Family Association more inviting for them. The Family Association coordinators constantly reiterate that they make considerable efforts to involve immigrant families, who are portrayed as inactive. This, coupled with lack of time, makes them feel overwhelmed by the tasks they have to carry out as coordinators.

Although the school and the Family Association coordinators lament the lack of presence of parents of non-European origin, not all forms of participation are welcomed, as we can see in the following extract: "They [the Moroccan families] have to propose things and take action to get what they want. Because they're always complaining, but they're not very constructive" (Family Association coordinator, School A).

The more involved European parents, despite calling out the lack of immigrant family participation, at the same time unintentionally shut out parents who are trying to approach the Family Association. The school does let immigrant families know about the existence of the Family Association and leaves notices on the school bulletin board in different languages to make information available for immigrant families. However, from my observations of Family Associations in high diversity schools, I also saw a great deal of uninviting behavior, such as not speaking in a language that everyone can understand (Spanish rather than Catalan), not explaining the

rules of participation, not inviting immigrant parents to speak up, or undermining their suggestions.

In all schools, it is the native and European parents who dictate the pace and degree of families' involvement, the nature of the extracurricular activities, and the cultural differences that are acceptable. The "correct" form of parental involvement is represented by the local and European families, while the non-European families' parenting styles are portrayed as inferior, characterized by inactivity vis à vis the school. This lack of interest in the school is seen as rooted in their culture:

> It's their culture. The locals, if they have a question, they ask. They [non-European immigrant families] are not used to that. They come to leave the child and come to pick them up. I do not know if they are not interested, not used to it, don't need to, or they don't know they can do it. In the Spanish and European community, they do ask questions. I don't know if it's trust, the culture, or knowledge. They wouldn't ask why you are doing this school trip and not another one. (Municipality employee, School C)

Overall, there is an overreliance on Spanish and European families to lead the Family Association, as the school staff's expectations of parental involvement are lower for immigrant parents. As we can see in the following extract, the principal from a high diversity school expects that a new Catalan family is likely to participate: "Since a Catalan family is going to sign up for school, they may help more [with the Family Association]" (School principal, School C).

The immigrant families' low attendance at school activities and meetings is attributed mostly to the nonparticipatory culture and the lesser role of parents in the education systems in the countries of origin:

> The idea that a Pakistani family has [about schooling] is to drop their child at school and go, and the father agrees and never protests but does nothing else. It's the culture....In Morocco, the father does not go to the school at all. It's hard to organize a Family Association; the families do not know that the Family Association exists. (Inspector, Consortium of Education)

> "They [parents from Pakistan and Bangladesh] are not used to parents participating. There are many countries where they drop their children at school, and you can do what you want with them. They [the parents] don't care, and they don't know what to do, and they leave it to you. In their countries it's like that." (Teacher, School B)

Even though the school staff does not reproach the immigrant families for their lower levels of attendance at these activities and meetings, they do regard it as a lack of interest in the work of the school. The school staff claims that the low participation is also linked to these families' traditional gender roles, where the father is the one that comes to meetings for serious issues concerning their children's education.

Regarding the mothers, the fact that they are not working and at the same time not participating is seen as a result of their culture and social norms:

> I work part time, and a lot of European parents work part or full time while the Pakistani women don't. Having said that, when I was trying to organize a meeting for the Pakistani party, it was difficult to get them to meet. I mean "you don't work, let's meet."...It must be because their culture is so different. Sometimes I don't think the women are very proactive. (Family Association coordinator 2, School A)

Apart from this, religious practices came up frequently when talking about the Pakistani and Moroccan families, as their community practices are regarded as getting in the way of school involvement. The Family Association coordinators complained that when some activities were organized, the families' priorities were to take their children to the mosque, which made it difficult to coordinate the schedule with them:

> The time for the activity was from 11:30 to 13:30 because the playground was open at that time. The Moroccans and Pakistanis are at the mosque [at that time]. But they are also at the mosque in the afternoon. (Family Association coordinator, School A)

Similarly, the school staff explain that there are different interests among the Muslim families in terms of extracurricular activities. The school staff perceive them as being less willing to enroll their children in creative activities, such as music and dance, because it goes against their religion.

Community and Social Cohesion Between Families

The educators at schools with more immigrants believe that there is less of a sense of community and cohesion among non-European families at schools with high diversity and weak relations among families of different immigrant groups. The Family Association coordinators point out the differences in the relations among the European and non-European families. They praise the strong network made up of immigrant families of European origin, characterized by solid relationships based on constant contact and reliance on one another. However, this is not the case with

non-European parents, with whom relations are perceived as more distant or almost non-existent. The relations that immigrant families have within their own community, such as going to their community celebrations or to the mosque, are not taken into consideration by the school.

In high diversity schools, it is believed that there is a stronger community in ones where native families prevail, and there is a perception that their Family Associations are more active in those schools: "There is no community in this school" (Family Association coordinator 1, School A), and:

> There is more cohesion in P3[5] in Catalan schools; because of the culture, they organize themselves and the trips they take by themselves. Here [in a high diversity school] the parents do not take the initiative. Here they rarely meet outside the school. (Teacher, School A)

This might not be necessarily true, as I have encountered the same concerns when talking to school principals who do not perceive much cohesion among families in schools with large local populations and where the activity and involvement of the families in the Family Associations are also low.

Even though the Family Associations usually have weaker organizational structures where there is more immigration (Paniagua, 2017), in the schools covered in my research, more activities and projects are organized by the ones in the schools with higher diversity. During the participant-observation at these schools' Family Associations, I observed that the staff and the Family Association coordinators, who are usually Spanish or from other European countries, are more committed and put in more effort to involve immigrant families, even if they are not sure about how this should be done. Meanwhile, in schools with lower levels of diversity, the staff and the Family Association coordinators tend to be less engaged and to lack mutual collaboration, and there are no special policies to counteract this. Schools D and E, even though they are composed of mostly native parents, ran few extracurricular activities and had low attendance from parents in the Family Association. Therefore, the schools with higher diversity end up organizing more activities, initiatives, and events, and the school and families tend to be more engaged overall than in schools with lower levels of immigration and whose Family Associations are not very active. This dynamic of school involvement creates the foundation for a trustful climate in diverse schools (Forsyth et al., 2011; Hoover-Dempsey, 2005; Houri et al., 2019).

The Cultural and Religious Demands of Immigrant Families

During the interviews at all schools examined in the fieldwork, the administration and education professionals expressed the opinion that

religion should be kept outside the public realm, of which the school is part. The Catholic religion is part of the official program, and therefore all schools are obliged to provide it, but the students can choose an opt-out class. No participating school offers Muslim or Protestant religious classes, even though they are legally provided for.[6] As the administration is against the idea of having classes related to any one religion in the official curriculum, no school principal has explained to immigrant families that they could potentially request a religion class.

Another issue related to religion, and a possible source of friction between the families and the school, is the largest immigrant communities' celebration of religious holidays:

> There are problems with schools that have a lot of immigration; the majority Muslim community asks for religious events to be celebrated in schools, like Ramadan....Here in Catalonia what happens is that the students don't go to school on that day [of a certain holiday].... Perhaps the school should reach an agreement with them. (Education inspector, Consortium of Education)

Additionally, the question of religion has come up mostly in discussions about the dietary needs of the Muslim families and the provision of halal food, as it has religious connotations. In two of the five schools in my research, the administration was hesitant to implement this dining option. For instance, in School A, it was only after several immigrant families complained to the city district that the administration started offering a halal option on the cafeteria menu. As the education inspector explained: "Introducing the halal menu was tricky; there was some controversy" (Inspector 1, Consortium of Education).

In a low diversity school, there was a notion that immigrant families needed to adapt to the requirements of the Catalan school system and that no religious exemptions should be made. Ultimately, the school staff praised the immigrant families that did not make demands outside the established norms:

> If a girl has to do physical education, then she does it. If you have to eat botifarra[7] you do it; one thing is if you say, I do not eat pork, fantastic, but why do we have to have halal?...I don't know; the Chinese don't make any demands. They come, they do their thing, and they leave....We wanted them to integrate so much that we forgot that the school is secular. (School principal, School E)

In schools with high diversity, the administration is more flexible in terms of what they view as proper integration. The general discourse is that

immigrant families should take their time and should not be obliged to assimilate completely to the requirements of the host education system nor be pushed against their will to engage in activities that are contrary to their religious and cultural beliefs.

Overall, the implementation of religious accommodations is unresolved in the Catalan education system. The school staff does not always inform immigrant families about their rights and which cultural and religious claims they can pursue. The implementation of the demands depends on the extent to which the families are persistent in their requests. In a context where each school decides upon if and how religious claims should be accommodated, the school administration and local families can easily oppose them being implemented.

Educational Values

There is a general view expressed by the school staff that non-European families are not as concerned with the education of their children as other families, and that their educational values are different from the school's. The school staff interpret the lesser involvement of immigrant parents in activities as a lack of interest that negatively affects the academic achievement of their children.

The school staff also regard the high mobility of immigrant families as causing problems in the educational achievement of these pupils. Teachers believe that immigrant families have other priorities, and the education of their children is not the most important one. Their cultural and education values are portrayed as being inadequate, as we can see in the following examples:

> They should understand that school is important. For them, school is important, but the family is even more important. Western culture is not like that. We can't do anything about this. (Teacher, School A)

> They are not involved. There are cultural differences that have a lot of impact. The parents don't care. (Teacher, School B)

Likewise, teachers have stated that immigrant parents are not able to support the children at home and to offer them a suitable home environment. Here are two responses to the prompt, "Are they [immigrant families] involved in their [children's] education?"

> It is very difficult to generalize; in some cases they do, but in other cases it is very hard to get them to collaborate and take responsibility for the education of their children. Children at this age need guidance at home so that they can help organize their academic tasks and

> do their homework, and even though these families care about them, they do not have the necessary resources to help their children. So these families express their frustration. (Teacher, School D)

> There is the issue that they [immigrant families] do not know how to help them with their studies. (Teacher, School B)

There is a vision that the children of immigrant families need to be educated according to local values, and that the parents need guidance to understand what is best for their children. Similarly, there is a tendency among school staff and education inspectors to have a low expectation of the immigrant families' abilities to provide the appropriate tutoring and support required for the children, or at least what they understand to be appropriate. The school staff hold the opinion that these families do not spend quality time with their children, something which would help them in their educational achievement.

> The majority of these mothers do not work, but they are not there with the children; it is a different thing for them. These mothers think that spending time with the children is having them around. To me it means playing with the kids, participating, going to places together. They do not have the level....It is cultural. (Inspector 2, Education Consortium)

The families' educational expectations for their children are thought to be lower than those of the native population, since they have lower educational levels themselves. The education inspectors and teachers believe that this is even more acute with girls, since families have different standards for the future of boys and girls: "There are gender differences....They pay more attention to the boys. I've seen it there [in the school]. You should just see how the boys act and how the girls act" (Teacher, School B).

The education inspectors explained that the divergent values between the school and these families should be mitigated by introducing them to the principles and norms of the Spanish education system: "In the school they [educators] need to work with the mothers and work with them to bring them closer to our understanding" (Inspector 2, Education Consortium).

The families are portrayed as culturally distant, not straying from their own customs that alienate them from the host society, as opposed to European immigrants, whose habits are closer to the schooling system. According to education professionals, the linguistic, social, and family models that the Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Moroccan families adhere to impede their "proper" integration. The main problems that were pointed out about

these families are differences in gender norms, non-working mothers who stay in their homes with no contact with the outside world, as well as their general mentalities. Because of this, these families are seen as an inadequate influence for their children.

School Practices

Increasing the Involvement of Immigrant Families

Schools with high levels of diversity have developed several initiatives to involve immigrant families. One of these initiatives, mentioned several times during the interviews, includes improving the communication strategies to reach immigrant families specifically. In most schools, the main events are usually communicated through the WhatsApp group of the Family Association, school message boards, websites, blogs, notifications in the children's school diary, and at an initial class meeting at the school. Activities are announced in the languages of the largest communities present in the school.

Nevertheless, even though the school administration believes that it provides abundant information, communication with the families is not necessarily effective. For instance, during fieldwork in School A and while talking with immigrant families after school hours, it came up that these families that the Family Association coordinators would like to involve are not included in the Family Association WhatsApp group or are not aware when the Family Association meets. The coordinators or the school staff are unclear about why such miscommunication might happen. As the school administration and Family Association coordinators stated, individual phone calls, emails, and other direct contact with the families are underused because they are time-consuming. However, in my observations, and coinciding with the findings of other school ethnographies (Garreta-Bochaca, 2009), those strategies would appear to be the most effective. This is the case in School B, which creates working groups with each main immigrant community and explains how the school works, thus increasing the participation of families in the meetings.

The data from participant-observations of parent–teacher and Family Association meetings shows that using translators and cultural mediators for the main meetings and activities helps increase the participation rate of the immigrant families. However, this practice is more problematic when there is a mix of nationalities, as it slows down the pace of the meetings and is only possible in schools with one predominant immigrant nationality.

Considering the gendered nature of school–family relationships in all schools with a considerable percentage of Asian and North African families,

the staff try to contact and engage with the mothers, as they spend more time with their children and are easier to reach than the fathers. One way of reaching out to the mothers is through offering them language classes taught by students from the school or by retired teachers. Another way is by giving a voice to immigrant families in the main participative bodies. For example, School A encourages families from the main nationalities to be represented in the school council, resulting in greater engagement. In addition, School C manages to involve families in the school's artistic projects. The families come to the class to see their children's artwork and then do an artistic project together or go around the school to see the various art pieces made by students.

It is in the two schools with less immigration that the administration does not know how to make the school meetings and activities more participatory and open and does not implement any special policies to specifically target immigrant families, as they also do not see it as an issue they need to address. Conversely, most initiatives take place in schools where immigration rates are higher, precisely because there is usually less participation in formal meetings.

Involvement in Family Associations

While carrying out the fieldwork in informal school meetings it was observed that high-diversity schools put considerable effort into involving immigrant families. One of these schools is School B, in which the Family Association coordinators tried to increase the involvement of parents from Pakistan and Bangladesh by providing a translator to communicate better with them. With the help of the translator, the Pakistani and Bangladeshi families expressed their needs and concerns regarding the school to the Family Association coordinators and school principal. Stemming from this, the school began to provide Urdu and Islam classes as extracurricular activities for the children and Spanish and Catalan classes for the mothers, as well as a lunch option in accordance with these families' dietary needs.

In School A, which has a very active Family Association that provides over 20 extracurricular activities, there were misunderstandings between the Family Association coordinators and immigrant families about the appropriate degree of parent involvement. The Family Association coordinators reiterated that immigrant families needed to participate more. Despite this, the coordinators were successful in managing to encourage immigrant families to join in by involving them in specific actions and in already decided projects, rather than invoking family involvement in general.

At this school, the Family Association organized a joint project involving two years of artistic and educational activities with a school in Pakistan. The Family Association coordinators took special care to involve the Pakistani families and to approach them directly. At first, problems in communication, as well as cultural differences, had to be overcome in order to reach the Pakistani mothers. The main organizer of this project, a mother from England, explained that she had to insist and persuade the Pakistani mothers to participate:

> It has taken me 5, 6 weeks to get the Pakistanis moms involved in the party, and I have to speak to them very slowly in Spanish. Their level of Spanish is very low, some of them do not speak English, I don't speak Urdu. It has been really difficult to get their help and input to help with the party this Saturday. The party is for everybody. We are celebrating the link between School A and the school in Pakistan....I send them voicemails because they cannot read or speak Spanish. Maybe two will come, and the others won't come. It's just like getting blood out of a stone. It's more of a cultural thing. (Family Association coordinator 2, School A)

The Family Association coordinator managed to establish a trustful relationship with the Pakistani families over time by involving a person who was influential in the community who brought together the others. After these new projects and initiatives were implemented, the Family Association coordinators were sure that they had managed to make the Family Association more inclusive for everyone. However, they emphasized that it was the Family Association coordinators who put in the effort, while the immigrant families were passive.

> None of the active organizers is Moroccan or Pakistani. They organized the Pakistani party, but it was the English mother who was the main organizer. This is the objective of the FA for this year. For the moment, we have made some progress so that they feel included, but they have still not taken the next step, which is to participate. (Family Association coordinator, School A)

Nevertheless, the project's events that were celebrated at the school were attended mainly by the Pakistani community and the Family Association coordinators, while the other nationalities did not participate. As with the mother-tongue language classes, they were attended solely by the children of immigrants and did not appeal to the local and European families. These extracurricular activities did manage to involve the Pakistani families more, but they did not foster intercultural relations.

Another example of a practice directed towards immigrant families is the case of School C, which has high levels of diversity and received support from the local government to found and organize a Family Association. A professional came to the school once a month and met with the parents to explain how the Family Association functioned. The engagement with the professional was successful, and she managed to establish the organizational structure of the Family Association by sending individual letters in the native language of the families, talking directly to parents, and encouraging them to become involved. Over the course of one school year, the Family Association was founded, and 53 families began to attend the activities.

The professional managed to bridge the gap between the school and the families by encouraging parents to share their ideas and concerns. An open and welcoming school climate was created so that parents felt they were needed at the school. Nevertheless, she felt that immigrant families had previously delegated responsibilities entirely to the school because of their lack of concern regarding involvement in their children's education:

> [Parents of] Different cultures do not see the importance of the talks. They want to leave the educational responsibility to the center. It's enough for them. They already trust the school. It's not important to them. They think "I've done my job by dropping my child at school, and I'm going home." Now they see the importance of extracurricular activities. (Municipality employee, School C)

The professional disregarded other ways in which immigrant families were involved in their children's education, at home or through their community. She only regarded parent involvement as them being involved in the Family Association, and she did not manage to see that their childrearing practices had anything to do with school. Her main mission was to bring the families closer to the local culture and way of life while the representation of the immigrants' culture was confined to the interculturality events that took place once a year.

Discussion and Conclusions

As we have seen from the data, and coinciding with previous research (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011), educators perceive that in high diversity schools, there are low levels of school trust. Although educators consider that there is a peaceful environment in these schools, they also perceive a deteriorated school culture (referring to norms and values) and a deteriorated school climate (in terms of quality of relations). Schools with high levels of immigration are not seen as having a

strong school community based on cooperation and cohesion, in which adults share a common vision, shared responsibilities, and a network of supportive relations, which are the principal characteristics of schools with high trust (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Van Maele et al., 2014). Moreover, teachers perceive immigrant parents as being neither involved enough in their children's education, nor providing appropriate home environments, nor transmitting the school's values at home. Therefore, the role of immigrant families towards the school is seen as deficient (Hatch, 2006).

For the interviewed education professionals, a trustful school environment is when families are very present, when they are involved in school activities, and transmit the values of the school at home. According to these education professionals, immigrant families just drop off their children at school and do not form a bond with the school community, since they have complete trust in the school's functioning. Apart from this, the school staff believe that immigrant families have different educational values compared to the western ones—values that do not align with the school's educational policies—and that they have certain cultural and religious demands that are incompatible with the school's requirements. Moreover, the cultural and religious practices of immigrant families and their parenting styles are seen as a source of intercultural conflict in schools. All of this has a negative impact on trust, as trust is more easily formed when there is understanding between parents and the school staff about the norms and values of education (Adams et al., 2009; Adams & Christenson, 2000). Thus, the indicators of trust that are affected negatively because of diversity are competence, as immigrant families are not seen as having the necessary skills, expertise, and reliability, as it is believed that they do not to provide a healthy home environment, and openness, as they do not communicate effectively enough with the school nor do they share information. However, they are portrayed as respectful towards the school.

The lack of communication and the misconceptions that the school and the families have about each other and the role that they should play creates barriers to building harmonious family–school relations (Conus & Fahrni, 2017; Garreta-Bochaca, 2008; Ferguson, 2008; Santos Guerra & Moreno, 2016; Tebben, 2017). The school staff appear to misunderstand if and how immigrant families are involved in their children's schooling and about their motivations, practices, and beliefs (Carrasco et al., 2009) making it harder for trustful relations to be formed (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth et al., 2011; Van Maele et al., 2014).

Culture and religion are seen as the primary reasons for their lack of involvement, while language, work schedules, lack of resources and knowledge

of the education system, and other barriers are seen as secondary reasons for their non-participation (Danielsen & Bendixsen, 2019; Yol, 2019). During the participant-observation in the fieldwork, immigrant families primarily referred to economic constraints for their reluctance to take part in creative activities, as well as a preference for their children to attend activities that might be more beneficial for their future. This aligns with their opinion that the school is already too lenient and that it should not be a place for play-related activities (Pamies Rovira, 2006). For families from non-Western countries of origin, leisure and artistic activities are considered to pertain to the sphere of entertainment and are not regarded as pedagogical. For these immigrant families, leisure is not linked to formal education, as it is for local families; it is seen as a Western concept (Bertran, 2005).

Therefore, the school staff's misguided assumptions and lack of knowledge of how much culture and religion influences immigrant families' decisions lead to misunderstandings between the families and the schools. The lack of information about immigrant families and their countries of origin contributes to perpetuating stereotypes about their lack of capacities and non-participatory education systems and leads to them to become further stigmatized (Pamies Rovira, 2006; Soutullo et al., 2016). These assumptions are produced without the school staff and professionals having any direct experience or real knowledge about the culture and school system in the immigrant families' countries of origin. They tend to disregard the class differences, private and public education systems, and rural and urban contexts that exist in these countries (Ríos-Rojas, 2014). This results in the school staff not understanding the reasons for these families not enrolling their children in extracurricular activities and impedes them making these activities more appealing to them (Conus & Fahrni, 2017; Garreta-Bochaca, 2008).

Furthermore, the demands of non-European parents are regarded as serving solely the interests of their own community, and their participation seems to be inadequate and overbearing (Daniel & Bendixsen, 2019). Consequently, despite the goodwill that the staff and Family Association coordinators invest in involving immigrant families, they try to confine them to the mainstream norms of parent involvement that have already been established by the more active parents, usually middle-class European families, and the school itself (Kohl et al., 2000). The school staff develops paternalistic or supportive relationships towards immigrant families depending on their socioeconomic status and place of origin (Bertran, 2005), and together with European families, they impose their own norms of family involvement (Paniagua, 2017). This leads to fewer opportunities for immigrant families' voices to be heard or for developing new ways of

participating that are more in line with the immigrant families' needs and interests (Bertran, 2005; Doucet, 2011; Quiñones et al., 2019). All of this contributes to less immigrant family involvement, less effective parental involvement strategies, and fewer opportunities for trustful relations to develop (Houri et al., 2019).

The culture of the parents (Olivos et al., 2011) and their involvement strategies (Banks & Banks, 2009; Martín Criado & Gómez Bueno, 2017; Olivos et al., 2011; Posey-Maddox, 2014) are regarded as deficient, and as needing to be compensated for rather than presenting any benefits. In addition, the lack of a clear integration policy and proper implementation of religious and cultural demands can create conflicts and tensions between immigrants and the schools (Garreta-Bochaca et al., 2022), as they might not be aware of the demands they can make to the school. This was the case when immigrant families demanded a halal meal option and met with resistance from other families and from the school, and also in the case of religious instruction in class, which families were not aware they could request.

Students' low academic achievement or any difficulties they experience at school are attributed to their home and family (Herrera et al., 2020). This is especially the case of Muslim families, since their religion is stigmatized and is seen as incompatible with succeeding in the Spanish education system. Therefore, the institutional view is that their integration in the schools should be achieved through assimilation, as they are not prepared for the requirements of the education system. However, data from my participant-observation indicate that immigrant families express high expectations of education for both their male and female children.

The schools' strategies to improve communication and parental involvement in schools did contribute to a higher presence of immigrant families in school activities, and it improved these families' communication with the school. In addition, the use of mediators did help bridge the gap between schools and immigrant families (Durham et al., 2019). In Schools A and B the mediators were used for initial school meetings to translate and inform immigrant families (mostly from Pakistan) about the school regulations. While in School B, the use of translators in the Family Association meetings helped immigrant families find their voice and explain what they expected from the school. In contrast, in School C a mediator was used for establishing the Family Association and increasing immigrant family involvement. However, the professional acquired the same stance as the school regarding immigrant families and transmitted the established school model of family involvement to them. Due to her insufficient knowledge about the cultures of the families and their parenting styles, she

viewed their way of bringing up their children as deficient. As for School B, the translator helped the Family Association coordinators and educators to get to know the needs and interests of the immigrant families. Therefore, for more sustainable initiatives, there is a need for professionals who are truly neutral actors to work with the school staff and the families and who can relate to both groups simultaneously. Accordingly, these professionals need to be familiar with the culture of the communities and the different ways parents from them are involved in their children's lives so that they can also present the families' views to the school. Similarly, professionals need to link school-based and home-based activities and support the learning that the families offer at home (Epstein, 2001).

For trust to be formed, parents should perceive an opportunity to be involved in their children's education and to influence school decisions (Adams et al., 2009; Adams & Christenson, 2000). The schools in my research did improve their communication and participation strategies; however, they did not fully manage to take into account immigrant families' needs, imposing the school's vision of parental involvement instead. Inadequate school policies, coupled with insufficient teacher training to work in intercultural contexts and lack of self-criticism by the educational institutions, hinders the integration of immigrant families into the school system (Santos Guerra & Moreno, 2016). The dominant forms of socialization and school practices pose barriers for incorporating the needs of immigrant families (Shiffman, 2019). By imposing an orthodox model of school participation and parenting, the school emphasizes the differences in the parenting styles of immigrant families, which (in their view) must be adjusted to the school dynamics (Paniagua-Rodríguez & Bereményi, 2019). In this way the responsibility falls on immigrant families, who are required to accept the school culture (Hellgren & Gabrielli, 2021; Paniagua-Rodríguez & Bereményi, 2019) rather than the school being responsible for bringing the culture of the school closer to immigrant families. This results in the distancing of immigrant families from schools, making trustful relations harder to establish (Driessen et al., 2004; Shiffman, 2019). Schools occupy a privileged position and should be the ones to reinvent and rethink parent–school relations and involvement, thus increasing family–school trust (Tschannen-Moran 2014).

The trust that teachers place in parents and their communication and interactions with them are important for establishing family–school relations and determining the quality and tone that these relationships will have (Shiffman, 2019; Tschannen-Moran 2014). Thus, educators need to take immigrant families' values and home practices into account in order

to establish more trustful relations with them and match the interests of the families to the schools (Epstein, 2001; Jeynes, 2012; Quiñones et al., 2019). From the schools in my research, the data reveal that considering immigrant families' cultural and religious demands, their community activities, and instruction in their mother tongue—all making family involvement in school more culturally relevant for them—does increase immigrant families' interest and participation. Schools need to move away from what they consider to be the "right" way to participate and to be more understanding of the opportunities offered to families to participate and the ways of participating that work for them. The school should prioritize relationships with families by acknowledging the ways in which families are present and engaged in the education of their children, rather than their attendance at formal and informal meetings (Herrera et al., 2020). To increase trust schools need to engage immigrant families by providing a strong community, accepting their different needs, and sharing responsibility and power with them (Brault et al., 2014; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Roy, 2018; Sibley & Brabeck, 2017; Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015).

Identifying and resolving the misunderstandings and misconceptions between schools and families about the ways of participating is key to building more cooperative relations between them (Tebben, 2017). Moreover, clarity about mutual expectations and the roles of teachers, administrators, and parents results in better mutual understanding and more trustful relations between them (Carrasco et al., 2009). If one group neglects its responsibilities, trust can become diminished (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth et al., 2011; Van Maele et al., 2014). Therefore, the existence of clear roles and policies leads to a more trustful school environment.

Additionally, schools need to be aware of the unconscious dominance that local and other European families have over immigrant families from other regions and how that creates tensions among them. Catalan schools should try to be responsive to the needs of both groups (Danielsen & Bendixsen, 2019), as they currently prioritize the needs of middle-class European families. Furthermore, educators and Family Association coordinators perceive that schools with less diversity have stronger communities where solid links and relationships are formed among the educators, families, and students, and where everyone shares a common vision of schooling that results in a trustful environment with strong social network links (Coleman, 1990; Van Maele et al., 2014). However, these are all perceptions rather than objective views of the real situation in schools, since in high diversity schools I have observed local families putting considerable effort into building a strong community together with educators, which resulted in

plenty of activities and cohesion. The high degree of dedication and involvement of the educators and families there appeared to be forming the basis for trustful relations (Smylie et al., 2016).

Similarly to what often happens in family–school relations in North America, educators in Spain reflect the norms of dominant, middle-class families (Antony-Newman, 2019; Lareau, 2011). Educators in the U.S. express similar assumptions about immigrant families' reasons for non-involvement and lower levels of attendance, even though they do not have the necessary knowledge of these families' cultures and their countries of origin. As numerous pieces of research from the U.S. (Herrera et al., 2020; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Lareau, 2011; Leo et al., 2019) and Spain (Carrasco et al., 2011; Martín Criado & Gómez Bueno, 2017; Paniagua-Rodríguez & Beremányi, 2019; Santos Guerra & Moreno, 2016) have demonstrated, educators need a better understanding of the cultural and educational values of immigrant families. My findings also reflect research from the U.S. in funds of knowledge theory (Gonzalez et al., 2005), in which school teaching and norms are based on immigrant family knowledge; in addition, a change is made to the language of "deficiency" and the potential of students and families is used to understand how they can contribute to the school and its community (Gay, 2013; Herrera et al., 2020). This can help educators develop new practices that are more culturally relevant for immigrant families (Szech, 2021). Educators need to reflect on their practices and expectations on family–school relations in order to build trust with immigrant families. Finally, the school needs to standardize parent involvement, align family–school relations with immigrant families' interests and needs, clarify the parents' role towards the school (Reynolds et al., 2015), communicate directly with families, and accommodate their cultural and religious requirements.

Endnotes

[1]Extracurricular activities include afterschool sports and cultural, science, and technology activities.

[2]Department of Statistics, Municipality of Barcelona, 2018.

[3]Education inspectors carry out the inspection of the educational system in all schools, with the aim of ensuring the implementation of regulations and guaranteeing the exercise of rights. For these purposes, the supervision and evaluation of educational centers and services and recommendations given to them is entrusted to the Education Inspectorate.

[4]The Education Consortium is a co-management and decentralization instrument, within a framework of institutional collaboration; it represents the will of the Generalitat of Catalonia and Barcelona City Council to work together to improve services in schools and among citizens through a single educational network.

[5]Although it is not mandatory, in Spain most children between 3 and 6 years old attend

the second cycle of early childhood education in primary schools. P3 is the year for three-year-olds.

[6]The Constitution establishes in article 27.3 that "the public powers guarantee the right that assists the parents so that their children receive the religious and moral education that is in accordance with their own convictions." Additionally, the cooperation agreements between the Spanish state and the Jewish, Protestant, and Muslim communities guarantees specific religious education in public and private primary and secondary schools. In Catalonia at the moment there is no school that offers these classes because of a disagreement with the Spanish state about who should be financing them.

[7]A traditional Catalan pork sausage.

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Appendix: Interview Guide for the Participants of the Study

Teachers

- How many immigrant children do you have in the classes?
- What tools do you use in class with immigrant children?
- Do you have enough support from the school and the institutions to manage diversity in class?
- Any problems / challenges that you want to comment about?
- What do you think of the relationships between immigrant and native children?
- What do you think about the relationship between immigrant and native parents?
- Do parents of immigrant children come to meetings?
- Are they involved in their education?
- Have you noticed some differences between different nationalities regarding the education of their children?
- Do you think immigrant parents participate in school and have confidence in the school?
- What do you think could be done to make parents of immigrants more involved in school?
- How do you create a trustful relationship with immigrant families?
- What positive tools have you implemented to improve the interaction of natives and immigrants?
- What tools would you like to implement but you have not been able to (the reasons, which will almost certainly be a lack of resources: time, money, qualified personnel)?
- Have you done training to deal with diversity?
- Do you feel properly trained to deal with diversity or do you think that having the possibility of receiving specialized training would improve the situation?
- Have you had problems (related to diversity)?
- Are there any problems you were not able to resolve, or on the contrary, problems that you have been able to resolve?
- Could you give a diagnosis of the situation: that is, how are the intercultural relations in the classroom or in the school, what challenges have been overcome and which have yet to be overcome and how could they be overcome?

School Principal

- Can you comment on the school project and how does it deal with immigration?
- How do you feel about the integration of immigrant couples in the different activities of the school (Family Association, school council, etc.)?
- How do you create a trustful relationship with immigrant families?
- What positive tools have you implemented to improve the interaction of natives and immigrants?
- What tools would you like to implement but you have not been able to (the reasons, which will almost certainly be a lack of resources: time, money, qualified personnel)?
- Have you done training to deal with diversity?
- Do you feel properly trained to deal with diversity or do you think that having the possibility of receiving specialized training would improve the situation?
- Have you had problems (related to diversity)?
- Are there any problems you were not bale to resolve, or on the contrary, problems that you have been able to resolve?
- Could you give a diagnosis of the situation: that is, how are the intercultural relations in the classroom or in the school, what challenges have been overcome and which have yet to be overcome and how could they be overcome?

Education Inspectors

- Could you give a diagnosis of the situation: that is, how are the intercultural relations in the classroom or in the school, what challenges have been overcome and which have yet to be overcome and how could they be overcome?
- What are the main policies implemented concerning immigrant families in schools? Do you think they are sufficient? What would be your recommendations?

Family Association Coordinators

- How does your Family Association work?
- Which are the families most involved in the Family Association?
- How many immigrant families participate?
- How do you reach out to immigrant families?
- What activities have you implemented to improve the interaction of natives and immigrants?
- What activities would you like to implement but you have not been able to (the reasons, which will almost certainly be a lack of resources: time, money)?
- Have you had problems (related to diversity)?
- Are there any problems you were not able to resolve, or on the contrary, problems that you have been able to resolve?
- Could you give a diagnosis of the situation: that is, how are the intercultural relations in the Family Association, what challenges have been overcome and which have yet to be overcome and how could they be overcome?

Understanding Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Community and Care

Cacey L. Wells and Ryan Hoffpauir

Abstract

Our research in this qualitative study focused on preservice teachers' perceptions of understanding classroom community and how care ethics play a role in crafting classroom environments. We sampled 20 preservice teachers in order to better understand how they understand care and community prior to entering the classroom. Our findings suggest that participating university students valued a holistic view of their future students; they felt that safety was a major factor, as well as focusing on collaboration. Lastly, an overarching theme we found to be an important factor in each of these major themes was spontaneity as it relates to teachers taking time out of their schedules to meet students' needs.

Key Words: community, care, classrooms, preservice teachers, qualitative methods, holistic caring, safety, collaboration, spontaneity

Introduction

Classroom environments are full of complexities that include interpersonal relationships, physical spaces, and relationships with academic content. Communities within classrooms begin to form by tying these elements together. More particularly, classrooms can be seen as communities in that they involve complex, interpersonal relationships between peers as

well as between peers and their teacher (Freire, 2000; Uslu & Gizir, 2017). Preservice teacher preparation programs housed in universities tend to focus on the importance of exploring these relationships and offer innovative practices to create positive learning environments along with healthy classroom communities. However, new teachers often revert to antiquated methods based on their past experiences that contradict their personal beliefs about teaching and are antithetical to the methods taught in teacher preparation programs (Idol, 2002; Martin, 2009). Further, preservice teachers (PSTs) tend to worry about classroom management strategies and look for one-size-fits-all solutions rather than being confident in cultivating spaces built on relationships and care. Knowing that navigating classroom environments can be of concern for PSTs, we hoped to better understand their beliefs about two primary aspects of these environments: care and community.

This research was conducted with PSTs to better understand how they perceive care and community within the context of teaching and learning. Many PSTs have limited experiences in classrooms and often have fears associated with cultivating healthy classroom environments. Our research evolved from seeing disconnects between how PSTs engaged with social constructivist ideals about teaching and learning and how they often embraced behaviorist pedagogies while in their field experiences. We wondered how our PSTs think about their future classrooms in terms of care and community and if it was consistent with how they are taught in their education methods courses. Two factors consistently appear in literature regarding how PSTs intend to relate to students. They tend to want to create inclusive spaces (Niles, 2005), and they want students to know that they care about them (Dalton & Watson, 1997; Noddings, 2013). According to Noddings (1992, 2012), healthy, caring relationships between students and teachers are essential to establishing supportive classroom communities and are built on an ethic of care. As students and teachers interpret the world around them, they do so through the lenses of their lived experiences. Classroom environments have the ability to affect the identity of students and teachers while impacting the health of the classroom environment (Houser et al., 2017). With these ideas in mind, our research aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How do PSTs perceive classroom communities of care?
2. What factors have influenced (either positively or negatively) their perceptions of caring classroom communities?

Theoretical Framework

Community

McMillan and Chavis (1986) established four primary components involved in the establishment of communities: *belonging, influence, fulfillment of needs,* and *connection*. In general, people need to feel like they belong to a group in order to be part of a community. Thus, communities are formed when people bond together in "special ways" through the formation of shared ideas and values (Sergiovanni, 1994). In the context of schools, membership tends to involve specific school-experience factors. Wallace et al. (2012) found that students ought to have both generalized and specific connections to their teacher (or teachers). As teachers cultivate classroom communities that consist of "high expectations and strong support for all students," they help students feel like they belong in their classrooms by giving students opportunities to feel like they are contributing members of the community (Dugas, 2017; NCTM, 2000, p. 12). The status that students have in terms of their classroom membership may vary, and many teachers dictate how members behave within the space (Brodhagen, 1995; Wells & Reeder, 2022).

The second component to forming a community involves the influence community members have within the group. McMillan and Chavis (1986) state that community members need to feel like they are an important part of the community and that the community needs to find the individual valuable. Because of this, teachers who are intentional in creating healthy classroom communities often cultivate shared classroom spaces that accept and value students' thoughts, perspectives, and ideas (Sergiovanni, 1994). Community influence is impacted by the ideologies that govern teachers' motives (Schiro, 2013). For instance, in learner-centered classrooms, influence often occurs in collaborative learning contexts. Newman et al. (1995) call this practice *disciplined inquiry,* wherein students engage with one another in substantive conversations through the use of meaningful questions. This tends to create a cyclical form of influence (praxis) where individuals influence their peers and peers influence individual students (Freire, 2000; Jones, 2012). As hooks explains, "To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin…to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences" (1994, p. 130).

For members to fully belong, their needs must be fulfilled. Basic needs such as food, water, and shelter are common to everyone, but higher level needs vary between individuals (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). There typically

exists a common thread that binds individuals together in the community. In classroom communities, students tend to have needs fulfilled through meaningful, authentic work (Newmann et al., 1995), building relationships with their peers and teachers, and having an influence within the classroom itself. As classroom communities form, students who have opportunities to contribute to the construction of classroom expectations, norms, and procedures often shape the learning environment in ways that fulfill their collective needs (Baker-Eveleth et al., 2011; Wells & Reeder, 2022). Even when tangible resources at schools are inaccessible, classroom communities allow students to act "as resources to each other exchanging information, making sense of situations, sharing new tricks and new ideas" (Wenger, 1998, p. 47).

Finally, members within the community need to have a shared emotional connection to the group. In other words, there should be a sense of emotional support within the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This seems to be closely associated with belonging that follows three primary aspects. This includes relationships and experiences specific to schools, student–teacher relationships, and how students feel about school, in general (Allen et al., 2018). These aspects ensure that students are emotionally invested in the community and contribute in ways that allow them to obtain fulfillment from the group (Brodhagen, 1995). This also allows teachers to share ownership of the classroom space. Students in the learning community are able to have more autonomy and take on more responsibility with their personal learning (Freire, 2000; Greene & Mitcham, 2012). Hamedani and Darling-Hammond (2015) have indicated that social–emotional support in schools leads to several positive outcomes essential to students' success in and out of school, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, interdependence, social responsibility, perspective-taking, multicultural literacy, and community engagement.

Ethic of Care

As communities take shape, it is often the case that care ethics bind the aforementioned components of community together. Noddings (2012) states that care ethics include opportunities for students and teachers to integrate "care, attention, empathy, response, reciprocity, and receptivity" into their classroom practices (p. 52). These are more than fleeting feelings but rather suggest a moral way of life. We would argue that this moral way of life can manifest itself in classrooms through caring relationships that are formed between students and teachers. As teachers care for their students, they demonstrate empathy for their students' lived experiences. This

has been found to be one of the crucial elements of effective teaching in classrooms for several decades (Black & Phillips, 1982; Tettegah & Anderson, 2007).

Further, preservice teacher preparation programs consist of primarily White, female teacher candidates (Hodgkinson, 2002). It may be appropriate, then, when Gilligan (1982) describes care ethics in terms of a feminine voice, considering the predominant teacher population in public schools. In contrast, masculine voices tend to form from a justice perspective that focuses more on rules and abstractions. The feminine voice, however, emphasizes relationships, emotions, and personal responsibility (Gilligan, 1982).

Finally, Noddings (2013) extends these ideas of feminine voice, empathy, and care by emphasizing that relationships in classrooms are also built on responsibility rather than top-down approaches focused on regulating behavior. Regarding care ethics and PSTs, Rabin and Smith (2013) emphasized understanding the beliefs and conceptualizations PSTs have of care ethics. In essence, care within classroom communities seems to hinge on trusting relationships between students and teachers. This is, in essence, what binds classroom communities together through care (Noddings, 1984).

Care and community are not only essential within the larger fabric of society, but these ideas manifest themselves within the beliefs of PSTs. Eisenbach (2016) began exploring how PSTs perceive care and community in classrooms. She spoke with students about how they perceived care from past experiences with teachers which resulted in three themes: awareness, support, and growth. By awareness, she showed that to demonstrate care, a teacher must first "know the whole person" (Eisenbach, 2016, p. 224). By doing so, teachers could take action after recognizing needs observed in students. She showed that student growth related more to how teachers helped students positively change over time. To understand this better, we hoped to learn more about PSTs experiences with concepts of community and care.

Methods

In this qualitative case study, we considered multiple perspectives to gain insight and understanding about participants' lived experiences and perceptions of care and community in classrooms. Our case was situated within a "bounded system" consisting of 20 PSTs enrolled in methods courses in traditional teacher preparation programs at two rural universities in the southeastern United States (Merriam, 2009). Our intention was to gain insight into participants' past, present, and future experiences with caring classroom communities through a series of classroom assignments

designed to capture students' perspectives on care and community based on their lived experiences.

Participants

Sampling

This study used purposeful sampling approaches consistent with Yin (2011). Participants for our study fit the following criteria: (a) preservice school students enrolled in educational methods courses at two public universities located in rural parts of the U.S.; and (b) participants needed to be willing to share their time, energy, and perspectives about their perceptions of caring classroom communities. We were able to find a total of 79 willing participants who met these criteria; 49 participants from University A, and 30 from University B. Sampling occurred in mathematics methods courses at University A and mathematics content courses for education majors at University B. There were two methods courses at University A, and three content courses in algebra, geometry, and statistics at University B. University B students were mostly juniors or seniors in the teacher education program. Participants were allowed to opt in to the study voluntarily with no consequence for opting out. Because our student populations at our respective institutions were consistent with current data showing a lack of diversity within preservice teacher populations, we reduced our sample to 10 students from each school. By reducing the number of participants in our study, we were able to select particular samples from different subgroups, including gender, race, and ethnicity. In doing this, we narrowed the focus to 10 participants from each university for a total of 20 participants. This was not to create monolithic voices but to have more diverse representation within our sample.

Characteristics

Because our sampling method was intended to lead us to willing participants enrolled in education methods courses taken two semesters prior to participants' student teaching internship semester, we felt it necessary to denote some demographics of the students involved in the study. This included students' gender and race. All participants were given generic pseudonyms to conceal their identities. Table 1 below illustrates the demographics of the populations. Although we had a limited number of African American and Hispanic students, these were not the only students in the courses who identified in this way. We hoped we could add more diversity into our data set; however, due to the voluntary nature of our study, we were unfortunately not able to add more diversity into our study. Additionally,

participants were undergraduates at the time of our study and were two semesters away from their student teaching internships.

Table 1. Demographic Data

	University A	University B
Male	1	2
Female	9	8
White	9	5
African American	1	1
Hispanic	0	4

Note. All demographic data was based on how students identified themselves to the university they attended.

Data Collection

Participants for this study were asked to engage in three different course assignments about community and care. These assignments included sharing past experiences with caring classroom communities, describing and drawing how they envisioned their future classroom, and conducting a recorded interview about their present perceptions of care and classroom community. The assignments had both written and audio components to them. The Appendix contains assignments given to students that were submitted digitally to students' respective learning management systems used at their respective institutions. Interviews were conducted via an online video recording service wherein students could answer our interview questions, record their responses, and upload them to our institutions' learning management systems. Participants could volunteer any information they wished and were able to decline answering questions without consequence. The reason for choosing these sources of data stems from the work of Nieto and McDonough (2011) with PSTs. They argue that *autobiography*, when used with PSTs, allows for the critical examination of beliefs, attitudes, and values about teaching and learning within the context of their own lived experiences and cultures.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis, each researcher independently reviewed a group of 10 participants and created open codes based on those participants using spreadsheet software. The data coded included: interview transcripts, written responses within the three assignments, and drawings included in assignments. After open coding was completed, the researchers met again

to compare results of open codes and to narrow codes using the process of axial coding (Merriam, 2009). The open codes between the two groups of participants were similar and were condensed into broader themes. This method allowed us to code our qualitative data and develop categories in a systematic manner. As a research team, we met multiple times after an initial round of coding to determine reliability, validity, and consistency before proceeding with our remaining data. We then repeated this process to determine axial and selective codes.

The researchers independently coded said data samples, met to compare analysis, and discussed how to name categories until full agreement was reached on similar codes that emerged from our independent analyses. For example, there were common codes between the two groups related to teachers being understanding, being helpful, and treating students with respect. We were able to use these common codes when we went back through our process of axial coding to determine emergent themes from all 20 participants within our case. From our previous example, open codes such as "understanding," "respect," "teacher welcomed me," and "warm hug" were all aspects of a holistic view of students and so were combined into one broad theme.

Findings and Analysis

Upon completing the analysis of our study, our data yielded four emergent themes to begin answering our research questions. These themes were: *a holistic view of students*, *collaboration in the classroom*, *safety*, and *spontaneity*. These themes provided us with insights and connections to extant literature that can potentially help classroom teachers better support PSTs in their courses. Select quotes from the participants are summarized in a table which is available from the authors upon request (contact information is at the end of the article; ask for Appendix B).

In terms of having a holistic view of students, all participants consistently stated that classroom communities of care must consider the whole person, including both the students' personal lives and their academic endeavors. One participant described this as "when teachers care, it makes me feel more like a person than a number." Further, participants shared stories about particular experiences when a teacher responded to their individual needs. Another participant shared about coming from a single-parent home and how a teacher helped with personal issues they had experienced outside the classroom, stating, "I was raised by my dad, which means I often went to school with messy hair.…My teacher began helping me fix my

hair and teaching me simple hairstyles." One other shared about an academic experience: "She asked me what she could do to make math a better learning experience for me, because she thought I was capable of doing better." These simple acts of kindness illustrate teachers' deep level of care and showcase how these moments shaped our PSTs.

Each of the participants also shared about how they were preparing to create their own communities of care in their classrooms. One explained, "I want my classroom to not only be a great learning environment but a place where my students can call home." This highlights participants' ideals for creating inclusive spaces where students can be themselves. It also showcases the importance of belonging in schools and how teachers can create spaces for students to be cared for and where their needs can be met.

Further, a holistic view of students is consistent with the *gestalt* view of education explored by Noddings (2013). In this view, the whole child is considered rather than a particular attribute of the individual. For instance, one participant stated, "When teachers care, it makes me feel more like a person than a number." This speaks to the level of care that many students look for from their teachers. They want to be seen as a whole person and not just an aspect of the classroom. This humanization of students is critical in creating caring classroom communities in schools (Delpit, 2012).

Similarly, we found connections between participants' view of students and classroom collaboration. When we asked them to draw their future classroom, most participants created desk layouts that focused on group work and a central area where students could gather. All but one participant also shared how collaborative classroom spaces could foster a social learning environment. One participant who drew larger tables indicated, "This kind of desk layout is great in times when you want students to 'think–pair–share.'"

All of the participants reflected on teacher–student interactions. One participant noted that "no one was left behind" when describing how collaboration worked in a classroom community of which they had been a member. When reflecting on a teacher that fostered collaborative classroom communities, another participant shared, "She was just one of those teachers that made students feel loved." In this sense, the teacher's bond with the student was well-established, and the student could open up to her to share about her life outside of school. Delpit (2012) calls these types of teachers *warm demanders*, that is, teachers who have high expectations of their students, but are also warm, kind, and caring. In these instances, teachers who have deep levels of care for their students and are patient in their students' learning trajectory can have positive impacts on students' well-being and their academics.

Of the 20 participants, 18 also considered student–student interactions in their responses. For example, one participant emphasized how work would be conducted: "I would lead them into group-led work instead of teacher-led work." Another participant elaborated more on social–emotional connections: "Students will care for one another just as I do." Another participant reflected, "The teachers designed lessons to have us work together with a variety of other students." This type of collaboration is consistent with authentic teaching practices that foster deeper learning, while also developing peer-to-peer relationships in classrooms (Newmann et al., 1995; Wells & Sprott, 2020). Creating instances where students are able to collaborate also provides opportunities for students to learn from one another in a role Freire (2000) refers to as *students–teacher* in the classroom power structure.

All but two of the participants described aspects of their classroom interactions in ways typically associated with family, such as learning about personal lives, supporting them in community events such as sports, or loving one another. Three participants likened their classroom communities explicitly to a family, such as one who aptly called it a "class family." In all of these cases, participants were viewing the classroom as a tight-knit social structure with success highly dependent on each other.

Regarding safety, all but one participant indicated that students need to feel safe to participate in class. This included both the physical environment and the emotional atmosphere created by the people. Within this theme, there were positive stories where participants illustrated how a safe classroom environment helped create a caring community. Three also shared negative stories describing how unsafe classrooms did not allow them to participate in the community.

Participants illustrated how they would create a classroom environment that was open and inviting. This was evidenced by participants planning for "safe places" in statements such as "I want my students to be able to have free range in getting the things that they need," and "I will have a cozy center set up with pillows, blankets, and a small couch for children." These instances of feeling safe in classrooms are also reminiscent of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) notion of membership within a community. However, students feeling safe seems to further this idea in that community members who consider the community to be a safe place also find their membership to be solidified.

Another aspect of our findings connected to students feeling safe in the classroom was around language. Emergent bilingual students felt that their language was not an asset to the class but a detriment. For instance, one

participant stated, "My first language was Spanish…when I got pulled out of class to work on extra support, the teachers would speak in a mean tone." This is an example of a negative instance in which the student did not feel safe in the classroom based on something that was completely out of their control. In another instance, a different student also shared that their first language was Spanish, but in this case, her "kindergarten teacher had a lot of patience and supported" her. Both cases above showcase the value participants placed on the classroom serving as a safe place. In the negative instance, the participant hoped for a sense of safety, while the positive case showcased the value of a teacher who cared for her student to help her feel safe. Finding ways to support emergent bilingual students in their language needs can be critical to their success in schools (Delpit, 2012; NCTM, 2020).

The notion of safety continued to show up in our findings through the PSTs' beliefs that they themselves could be a safe place for their students. More than the physical space or the culture of the classroom, teachers themselves seem to be a source of safety for our participants. Further, 60% of participants shared they hoped their future students would feel safe to come to them at any instance. This showcases care at the personal level and creates a sense of safety for those in our participants' care.

The final theme was spontaneity. This theme highlighted that when students really felt care from teachers, it was not preplanned moments but moments when an unplanned need arose and the teacher chose to deviate from their schedule—even if it might have been an inconvenience. Unlike our other findings, the spontaneity theme was more limited, with evidence from only half of the participants. These instances were nearly all within the context of the assignment that had participants reflect on past situations where they encountered a caring community. This is logical, as it would be difficult to anticipate an unexpected need in a future classroom. One participant shared,

> One day the time just changed, and our clock did not change to the current time yet, so my dad and I drove to school like any typical day…the teacher took me to her classroom and allowed me to sit on her classroom couch until it was time for students to be dropped off.

It was unlikely that the teacher knew that they were going to be there early, but the teacher recognized her need and adjusted plans to meet that need.

Another participant shared,

> The teacher saw I was starting to lose focus because of frustration. The teacher [would] stop immediately and find a new point of view to help me understand. Other times teachers would take time to stop

> the learning process and have conversations with the students. These moments were a great help to build my motivation to stay focused in school. From how these teachers presented themselves, I knew I had an open door to come up to them with any situation. These teachers knew how to quickly restructure their lesson when [students] did not understand the task.

Even though this student did not share a specific instance, she broadly remembered teachers being willing to adjust plans in order to meet students' needs being a key aspect of care and community.

Discussion and Implications

In general, students' experiences in the past coupled with their current thinking seem to show that being valued as an individual is a vital part of teaching and learning. This seems consistent with Noddings' ethic of care theory (1984, 1992, 2008, 2012) and also seems to support the foundational work of McMillan and Chavis (1986) in terms of membership and identifying as part of the community. Further, participating students emphasized the importance of caring for individual needs on a level that went beyond the surface. Participants alluded to the notion that caring for and being cared for were far more valuable than the subject matter being explored in class or the final grade they may receive. We found this to be particularly interesting in the context of schools that are invested in high-stakes testing and that place incredible emphasis on improved test scores.

Our results related to prior research conducted by Eisenbach (2016). We found that Eisenbach's notion of awareness related directly to our theme of having a holistic view of students, as these seem to go hand-in-hand. Our findings support this research and extend it to more of a *gestalt* approach to teaching and learning, which differs from more antiquated classroom management tactics that tend to be antithetical to what students learn in preservice teacher education programs. Eisenbach's notions of support and growth related to the steps teachers take to create communities of care. Supporting students in their learning and personal lives are hallmarks associated with care ethics. Our findings support these notions. Finally, our themes of safety, spontaneity, and collaboration seemed to extend Eisenbach's idea of growth by differentiating various common approaches that were used in how our participants articulated their beliefs about community and care.

It is interesting to note that a majority of the narratives provided to us by participants were very teacher-centric in terms of how care and community

were perceived. Even the perceptions shared that conveyed ideas about student–student interactions were framed from the perspective of being driven by the teacher such as the example mentioned previously, "The teachers designed lessons to have us work together with a variety of other students." This carried over to how they described their classroom organization, focusing on how they would provide for their students or what they would do for students. Also, while many classrooms were organized for collaborative work, there was still a clear hierarchy in how the room was positioned around the teacher. While some of these responses may be due to the way the questions were presented, it is also symbolic of the power a teacher holds within the classroom community. This also seems to imply that PSTs recognize important aspects of community that were apparent in their classrooms as students, but do not always connect that with the plan for how to build community within their own classrooms. This is likely not unique to PSTs as it makes sense that it is easier to recognize strong communities that already exist rather than identify what one needs to do to help build such a community.

While our themes were prominent throughout the narratives shared, each participant described how they perceived these in different ways. For example, some participants who learned English as a second language included narratives about how teachers helped or hurt their progress in learning English while in school. Participants without those same lived experiences may have a different perspective of how care is demonstrated and community is developed. It is feasible, if not expected, that students from varying demographics would have different expectations and interpretations of what care and community are. A study more focused on demographic differences might give more insight as to how perceptions of participants may vary due to those differences.

Our research could potentially be considered limited in scope due to small sample size and because the universities where this study was conducted were situated in rural parts of the southeastern U.S. There were also some limitations on the demographics of participants who were involved in this study, namely the fact that many teacher preparation programs, including those from this study, are predominantly female. While we believe that our study contributes to the understanding of how care and community are perceived by PSTs, the limited scope does require further research to better determine more specific implications; however, we believe our findings can inspire further research into this area in a more generalizable study.

Our observations show relevance in helping PSTs learn how to develop communities of care. Participants in this study indicated the importance

of seeing students holistically. This was not only something they valued as future teachers, but in their own learning journeys. Embracing this to cultivate college classroom communities of care could impact our teaching and our students' learning (Power & Perry, 2001). Additionally, being aware of these findings in our study can help teacher educators as they work with students to be cognizant of what they observe when they spend time in classrooms in the field, especially if those observations are antithetical to beliefs about caring classroom communities.

Since there was a focus on the teacher in understanding how communities of care are developed, a key implication for practice is to have more guided conversations with PSTs on co-creating democratic classroom norms. Helping PSTs foster environments in which students view other students holistically is relevant not only for building academic communities but also feasibly for building community at large. Additionally, teaching PSTs to maintain safe environments and how to support their students to intentionally collaborate are ways to help PSTs carry out their vision for their classroom communities. Finally, because our research evolved from potential disconnects between how PSTs engaged with constructivist ideals about teaching and learning and how they often embraced behaviorist pedagogies when they participated in their field experiences, we found our study to be particularly interesting in that our findings were consistent with classroom communities that are conducive to constructivist learning theories. Perhaps additional coaching of PSTs and the supervising teachers in their field experiences would also be beneficial.

We found that students who would be considered part of a minoritized population focused more on classroom cultures being safe places for children to learn. This was evidenced from the fact that our participants of color shared this directly. This idea of safety is consistent with the work of Delpit (2016) and other teacher educators who emphasize the importance of schools being havens for students to be seen and heard and to feel safe and cared for. Further, the issue of safety is consistent with the work of those labeled as "warm demanders," that is, teachers who have high expectations but are also safe people for students to come to when they experience challenges in and out of school (Delpit, 2016).

In summary, care and community are integral aspects of classrooms. The PSTs we worked with, like many in the teaching field, recognized the value of these aspects as well as the spontaneous moments in which they can demonstrate their importance in their future classrooms. However, many still leaned heavily on a teacher-centric structure of the classroom and had limited plans to purposefully establish community. As future research in

this area is conducted, it may be worth exploring how learner-centered instructional strategies, curricular models, and teaching methods can add authenticity to classrooms that can be described as communities of care.

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Appendix. Classroom Community Assignment

There are three parts for this assignment. Each is designed to help you think about your past, present, and future classroom. Feel free to draw upon what we explored in our synchronous sessions and in your readings from this course.

Part 1

Take a moment to consider your past educational experiences. This could be as a student or as a teacher. In those experiences, in what instances did you perceive a strong community structure? In those experiences, in what instances did you

perceive care from the classroom teacher? What about these experiences makes you feel that there was a strong community structure or that the teacher cared? Write your story below:

Part 2
Consider the questions below:

1. How would you define care in a classroom?
2. What does a healthy classroom community entail?
3. How would you demonstrate care to your future students?
4. How does being a part of a learning community model care?
5. How would you describe a supportive classroom community?
6. What do you think the most important factors are that contribute to the formation of a supportive classroom community?
7. Do you use any teaching strategies to help foster community in your classroom? If so, what do these look like?
8. How do you feel about students having input in your classroom procedures and practices?
9. How do you think building positive relationships in your classroom may impact the community in your classes?
10. How might these attributes help ELL/EB students?

Part 3
For the last, I want you to think about what your classroom might look/feel like as you work to create spaces to support ELL/EB students. How are students being supported in your class? How are students arranged? Do you use small groups, centers, or something else? Do you use discussions, lectures, or other modes of content delivery? What do interpersonal relationships look like in your classroom? Think about these questions as you consider what your learning space will look like and as you complete the tasks below:

1. Your first task is to draw a picture of your classroom (an ideal of how you'd like it to be) and how it integrates community and care.
2. After drawing your picture, describe what is happening in your picture in a paragraph or two.

Feel free to simply take a picture of your drawing and upload it to this Google Doc or hold onto it for our next session. You can also include your description here.

Book Review of *Family and Community Partnerships: Promising Practices for Teachers and Teacher Educators*

Kyle Miller

Overview

As a teacher educator, I am continually looking for opportunities to deepen the conversation about families and communities with preservice and practicing educators. Therefore, I was eager to review *Family and Community Partnerships: Promising Practices for Teachers and Teacher Educators*, edited by Drs. Margaret Caspe and Reyna Hernandez. This book is part of a broader initiative to enhance effective family engagement practices and policies. It is organized around four key family engagement competencies established by the National Association for Family School and Community Engagement (NAFSCE), which are *reflect, connect, collaborate,* and *lead*. Each section begins with theoretical insights into a specific competency and is followed by chapters on practical examples and strategies for implementation. It is important to note that while each section of the book is organized under a designated competency, reflecting, connecting, collaborating, and leading are inherently intertwined in family and community work and therefore appear together across sections of the book. I found this to be the case in every chapter and saw little distinction between proposed sections as a reader.

Designed for teacher candidates, educators, and teacher educators alike, the book offers a wide array of family- and community-centered practices through a strength-based mindset. The text is under 200 pages with a total of 22 chapters in addition to a Foreword by Dr. Karen Mapp and Afterword by

Vito J. Borello. The chapters are concise, around six to eight pages, and each chapter features a brief introduction, main content (often with bullet points or figures), discussion questions, and references. Chapter topics range from research underscoring the importance of engaging families and communities to the use of case studies, (tribal) home visiting programs, afterschool/summer partnerships, relationships in a digital world, and co-facilitating activities with families. There is minimal overlap across chapters, which keeps the reading fresh. The theoretical perspectives embedded in the text include culturally responsive and culturally sustaining practices, funds of knowledge, trauma-informed approaches, and asset-based ideologies. While the editors suggest the text offers theoretical guidance, I did find these mid-range theories as secondary to family-oriented strategies and practices.

Throughout my reading, I felt a genuine respect for educators. Early in the book, Caspe and Hernandez acknowledge that teachers cannot do this work alone and that communities and schools must provide structures and conditions to support family and community engagement efforts (p. 6). In those moments, I was reminded that this work is difficult, and we, as family-facing professionals, are all in different places due to the contexts in which we serve. These types of acknowledgements made me feel respected as an educator and make the book relevant to administrators and policymakers who are critical stakeholders in our work with families and communities. Therefore, although administrators, policymakers, and consultants are not the primary audience for this book, they need to hear its message.

Contributors and Contributions

This book offers numerous viewpoints and contributions, largely due to the diverse range of contributors involved. The authors come from varied linguistic, geographic, and racial backgrounds, providing a wealth of unique perspectives and experiences. Their professional and personal roles related to communities and families—such as nonprofit leaders, consultants, academics, parents, policymakers, students, and teachers—further enrich the content across chapters. The diverse authorship is a primary strength of the book because although some theories and ideas are revisited across chapters, they are presented and integrated in different ways. The blend of emerging and established scholars also adds depth to the work. Since some of the contributing authors were unknown to me, it prompted me to explore their larger body of scholarship, while I also enjoyed reconnecting with well-known leaders in the field.

The first chapter, authored by editors Caspe and Hernandez, lays a strong and comprehensive foundation for understanding why the core competencies of reflect, connect, collaborate, and lead are crucial for educators. Their perspective conveys a compelling urgency for educators to address these issues while also framing family engagement as a systemic concern. Educators need the "structures and conditions" (p. 6)—such as funding, time, and professional development—to effectively engage with families. Despite spending that last two decades of my life reading scholarship on family and community engagement, I found myself engrossed in this chapter as I generated an embarrassing number of notes, questions, and ideas in response to its content.

The subsequent chapters maintained a similar sense of urgency and call to action, enriched by useful analogies and examples of successful partnerships. Powerful quotes, such as "If you don't know your students' families, then you don't know your students" (p. 21) and "When educators invite families to tell their stories, it humanizes and shifts the order of relationship" (p. 102), encourage readers to pause and reflect on their current practices and aspirations in family engagement. Many sections are likely to spark deep and meaningful discussions among in-service and preservice teachers. Additionally, the empathetic tone of the contributing authors made me feel *seen* as an educator rather than judged, rendering the text both welcoming and engaging.

Within any text, there is often a chapter or section that captures your heart and mind. For me, that chapter was "Building a Better Table" by Scaife and colleagues. In this analogy, the adult table represents where important decisions are made—decisions that affect the children—while the children (i.e., parents and other family members) are seated at a side table. This children's table is designed to be comfortable because, as the authors note, "the more comfortable the children are, the quieter, more under control, and less demanding they will be" (p. 143). This mirrors how families are often treated in so-called "partnerships." I have already incorporated this analogy into my courses with preservice teachers because it powerfully illustrates the injustice that frequently occurs in schools and communities. Similar chapters remind educators of the importance of "listening carefully and deeply" and being vulnerable with families as we work towards culturally responsive and sustaining partnerships (pp. 60–61). These are the types of impactful insights the book provides.

Limitations and Vulnerabilities

It's worth noting that some chapters did not reach the high standards set by others. Specifically, a few chapters appeared to support school-centric or outdated viewpoints. For instance, some reflective questions asked readers to consider: *How do parents know what grade-level work looks like?* and *How do families learn about what is happening in your classroom?* These questions seemed more one-way and traditional rather than relational and reflective. However, these instances were relatively rare, and those chapters or prompts can be supplemented or skipped by anyone facilitating learning activities related to the book.

Additionally, levels of criticality varied across chapters. Drs. Joanna Geller and Danielle Perry delivered a robust and critical chapter on culturally responsive and sustaining partnerships, offering clear definitions and practical guidance for building humanizing and trusting relationships despite prevailing norms and hegemonic pressures. In contrast, other chapters approached issues of race, class, power, and privilege more tangentially or danced around the issues. Depending on the audience engaging with the text, some chapters might not provide the depth of criticality desired, while others might be beyond the group's readiness. Personally, I wished more chapters offered reflective questions rooted in issues of power, privilege, and equity for my work with preservice teachers. However, others might need to use modeling or additional supports to productively mobilize a chapter-related discussion, depending on the context and population of educators engaging with the book.

It is clear the contributing authors have extensive experience in the field, which is a definite strength. However, many of the recommended activities and strategies that are presented across chapters only seem feasible with a preexisting foundation or infrastructure within the school community. For example, having a team of parents ready to observe preservice teachers in their clinical experiences and provide feedback (p. 34) or having within-culture facilitators ready to host workshops and parenting groups with families (p. 67) may currently be beyond the reach of some schools and communities—my own included. Consequently, this book might be less practical for educators or leaders who are just beginning their work. It presumes a certain level of community, school, and familial engagement to implement many of the suggested activities or initiatives. However, it certainly provides concrete examples of what communities and schools can strive to achieve.

One thing I wished for in this book was a section of recommended resources and tools at the end of each chapter. While the chapter on afterschool programs includes some accessible documents in its reference list, other chapters do not. Given the concise nature of each chapter, which I appreciated, I frequently found myself wanting more information on the programs or ideas discussed by the authors. This requires additional research on the reader's part. Although one author kindly invites readers to personally reach out for more information and materials (p. 97), it would have been helpful to include a brief section with digital resources or links related to the content of each chapter.

Conclusion

As I reflect on this book, I find myself considering three main questions: Did it achieve its stated objectives? Does it address and challenge outdated and inequitable practices in family and community engagement? Will it serve as a source of inspiration? While there are some moments of vulnerability throughout the chapters, my overall answer to these questions is yes. As a teacher educator, I am always on the lookout for new materials, ideas, and directions for my work with schools and preservice teachers. I also seek inspirational voices to guide me both personally and professionally. Caspe and Hernandez's text effectively meets many of these needs. Drawing from the words of contributing authors Geller and Perry, this book will encourage readers to "enter into relationships seeing, respecting, and understanding the fierce love families have for their children that drives their persistence, passion, and urgency" (p. 59). This is exactly what we need in education today. I highly recommend this book for practicing and preservice educators, as well as any other professionals working closely with families.

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Review of *On the Same Team: Bringing Educators and Underrepresented Families Together*

Amanda L. Smith

Building authentic partnerships between schools and families is essential for systemic change, and it requires effort from all parties to challenge the commonly used top-down approach in education. To create strong partnerships, there are barriers to overcome, tough conversations to have, and biased perspectives to be challenged. These partnerships are vital to changing the current school reality, which includes more than 60% of K–12 families wanting a better experience with their school district (Arundel, 2022, as cited in Gerzon-Kessler, 2023). Furthermore, 55% of educators are considering leaving the profession early (Walker, 2022, as cited in Gerzon-Kessler, 2023). While building authentic partnerships is not a quick or easy process, it is worth the effort because of the clear benefits that can result. In his book *On the Same Team: Bringing Educators and Underrepresented Families Together* (2023), Ari Gerzon-Kessler details the benefits of building authentic partnerships and describes a team structure called Families and Educators Together (FET). This structure supports strong school–family partnership practices by strengthening trust-based relationships, building an informal network among underrepresented families, and promoting meaningful dialogue. It provides families with information to navigate the school system, helps educators discover useful approaches to understanding families, and encourages the co-creation of action projects that challenge barriers (Chapter 1). Furthermore, the FET structure is centered around team efforts including family members from underrepresented families, educators, the school principal, and other staff such as counselors, community liaisons, and security personnel (Chapter 1).

In this book, Gerzon-Kessler draws on his experiences as a former principal and bilingual teacher. He is currently the head of the family partnerships department for a school district in Boulder, Colorado and works as an educational consultant to help schools build strong school–family partnerships. As a former educator, I found this book to be helpful because it is exceptionally detailed and easy to follow. If a school or a district were wanting to implement the FET structure, they could start at the beginning of Gerzon-Kessler's book and follow it chapter by chapter. Additionally, having reproducible resources offered in the text is a welcome feature.

The author divides the book into six chapters with four appendices full of resources to support FET teams' ongoing engagement and relationship building with the community. The chapters of the book include Understanding Families and Educators Together Teams, Building your Teams, Preparing for the Launch, Making your First FET Meeting a Success, Being a Great Team Leader, and Taking Action and Sustaining the Momentum. Each chapter begins with a short description of the content. Gerzon-Kessler then breaks the chapter into subsections, making the text user friendly. Finally, he concludes with a set of questions for reflection and discussion. These questions can be used in a group study prior to implementing the structure. This is an engaging approach because it encourages readers to analyze the information provided and to use conversation to learn and grow together.

In the introduction, Gerzon-Kessler addresses how the idea for implementing FET teams began. Working in Boulder Valley School District, he concluded that a major cause of the achievement and opportunity gaps were due to the lack of communication and trust between underserved families and educators. He clearly describes the importance of creating authentic school–family partnerships and how implementing FET teams will support these relationships. He also identifies the barriers that establishments face when building partnerships. These include distrust, minimal training and time, lack of district support, and cultural differences. The FET structure is built to challenge these barriers and to create a welcoming and productive environment where real, sustainable change can occur. If strong collaborative relationships are built, students, their families, and schools will benefit. Benefits include improved health and emotional well-being for students, a development of leadership skills and a feeling of inclusion for families, and a higher teacher retention rate for schools (Mapp et al., 2022).

The first two chapters focus on what FET is, how it works, and how to build a team. In Chapter 1, the author addresses who can be on an FET team, what the team does, and what the goals of a team are. Also outlined

are the Four Pillars of Authentic School–Family Partnerships, a framework used throughout the book. These four pillars, standing on a base of *intercultural understanding*, include *two-way communication*, *relationships and trust*, *learning and well-being*, and *shared decision making and power*. This framework is important because it directly impacts the FET focus. Instead of prioritizing what families *do* or their attendance, teams focus on how caregivers *feel* and how families can support learning at home (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 details how to build FET teams. Specifically, the chapter highlights who can participate, team member roles, how to navigate designating a district lead, ways to recruit team leaders, and the importance of acquiring buy-in from principals. Although district leaders can encourage effective school–family partnership efforts, Gerzon-Kessler emphasizes that the buy-in from a school principal is critical. He then provides a scenario of a school that did not have a strong FET team due to the lack of engagement by the principal and how a change in leadership resulted in a positive re-launch. It's important for principals to attend FET meetings because families become more confident when they are familiar with leadership, change is easier to implement, staff are more likely to participate, and the principal can learn about families by listening to their stories (Chapter 2).

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the launch of the FET teams and how to make the teams successful. Gerzon-Kessler provides specifics such as the length of time required for a team leader training and what will need to be discussed. He also suggests setting a budget for food, childcare, prizes, and team leader stipends, as well as how to plan meetings around school and district schedules (Chapter 3). This is vital information because the possibility of conflict is high when navigating multiple busy schedules. Furthermore, the author offers a list of essential elements to make the first meeting successful. Some of these elements include providing food, organizing team-builders and opening circles, having meaningful dialogue, and ending with a purposeful closure. By including these elements, teams are more likely to promote engagement, center parent voices, build trust and unity, determine action steps, and encourage mutual learning (Chapter 4).

Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 make clear how leaders should facilitate meetings. It's important that leaders understand their roles, serve as connectors, are flexible and responsible, and reflect often (Chapter 5). Reflection is a tool leaders can use to be more self-aware. The author encourages leaders to ask themselves, "How was I feeling as I spoke?" and "What might have been a more effective response?" (p. 84). The author also provides an Action Projects Planning Guide that can be used in meetings to help teams

in their planning efforts. Project examples include implementing personalized communication, home visits, and having teachers partner with parents to support academic learning. These are high impact engagements that can positively influence student learning (see Flamboyan Foundation's *Continuum of Impact*, 2021, as reprinted in Smith & Grant, 2024).

Strengths of the book include its attention to detail and its overall chapter organization. Important resources include reproducible checklists, agendas, and calendars. Another strength is the author's use of past examples and case studies. In the text, Gerzon-Kessler includes several case studies to provide the reader with the various ways FET teams can be impactful. In one case study, he describes a meeting held at Eisenhower Elementary School. In the meeting, the FET team discovers that the parents have little to no communication with the teachers at the school. Because FET is action-based, the team quickly scheduled a staff training on the TalkingPoints app. They asked for 10 teachers to pilot the use of the app, which encouraged two-way communication via text. Later that year, parents reported that using the app made it easy for them to communicate with their child's teacher and that relationships were changing (Chapter 6). Inclusion of the case studies allows the reader to see the kind of direct impact FET teams can have on schools and families.

In my opinion, this book stands to be useful for the broad readership of the *School Community Journal*. Specifically, district leaders and educators can benefit from the information provided by Gerzon-Kessler on how to build authentic school–family partnerships. In addition to providing a step-by-step blueprint for action, the author equips the reader with applicable handouts, easy to implement team-building activities, dialogue structures, and numerous questions to ask during FET meetings that promote trust-building conversations (Appendix C and Appendix D). Parent leaders can also benefit from this text because they play a significant role in the development of these partnerships. In the introduction, Gerzon-Kessler notes that several FET teams have been launched because a parent heard about the outcomes of the structure and brought it to their administrator.

Outcomes for families, students, and schools were gathered through personal communication and an end-of-year reflection survey administered at the all-district parent leadership summit. The survey evaluated several statements using a Likert scale. Examples of these statements include*, there is a good relationship between teachers and parents*, *educators treat parents with respect*, and *my child is doing well academically in school*. Outcomes for families included feeling heard and valued, becoming engaged advocates, building stronger relationships with the school, increasing their sense of

community, and becoming agents for change. Student outcomes consisted of performing better in school and having stronger relationships with family and educators. Finally, schools reported teachers being able to better meet the needs of the students and families, and, overall, being more satisfied with their jobs (Chapter 6). Knowing these outcomes ahead of time can propel a team forward during the beginning stages of implementation or during a re-launch if a second attempt is required.

I believe this book would be useful for any K–12 district leader, educator, or parent who is interested in strengthening school–family partnerships. The author draws a clear path to implementing successful FET teams, a process that has been shown to create a strong sense of community in schools. There are very few questions that go unanswered in the text. The author even offers answers to a set of frequently asked questions and solutions to issues that might arise (Appendix A).

I have two final thoughts on the text. First, how do FET teams ensure that each member of the group has been given ample opportunities to share? Community circles were mentioned in the book, but not described in detail. Using a method such as community circles, beyond for introductions, could be an effective way to build teams that engage with stories, experiences, and community expertise to initiate action (Ishimaru et al., 2018). Second, the author frequently uses the term *barrier*. That word suggests something unavoidable, even permanent. I wonder if some of the obstacles listed are true barriers, or if they are the result of unilateral partnerships or approaches that have not included stakeholder voices and experiences in the past. Overall, Gerzon-Kessler provides the field with an effective research-based approach to partnership-building. This text is useful, relevant, and could be the answer for many educational institutions.

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