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The School Community Journal publishes a mix of:

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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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(2) essay and discussion,

(3) reports from the field, including descriptions of programs, and

(4) book reviews.

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Editor's Comments

Welcome to the Fall/Winter 2010 issue! Once again we have a nice array of articles addressing the engagement of stakeholders in education, ranging the span from early childhood through high school. Kreider and Raghupathy's article even takes us beyond school hours to address the importance of family engagement in out-of-school time programs.

Citing the pivotal role of building principals in involving parents of high school students, Lloyd-Smith and Baron examined the views of South Dakota administrators. Presented a little later in this issue, Nygaard investigated middle schools' School Community Councils to learn what helped diverse council members to feel confidence that their work impacted students positively.

Bartels and Eskow discussed their pilot program which used in-depth professional development courses to train a variety of school professionals to engage families. Also noting professionals' general lack of training in linking home and school, Hindin presented a picture of undergraduates' beliefs and experiences that could inform future teacher preparation.

Schnee and Bose took an insightful look at parents' inaction, so often labeled "lack of interest in education," and determined that, sometimes, not acting is a calculated choice on the part of families and may benefit students. Patel and Stevens also looked at parents' beliefs, in this case comparing them with those of teachers and students, to see what correlation discrepancies had on parents' and teachers' actions around involvement. Fletcher and her colleagues studied the social aspects of schooling, particularly mothers managing their own and their child's relationships, with some surprising results that warrant further investigation.

In the early childhood/special needs arena, Pang provided a vignette that illustrates the need for culturally sensitive, family-centered practices to ease the transition from early intervention services in the home to center-based preschool services. Finally, we wrap up with two book reviews, each of which gave a helpful glimpse into a promising new resource on family involvement.

Lori Thomas
November 2010

Engaging Families in Boys & Girls Clubs: An Evaluation of the Family PLUS Pilot Initiative

Holly Kreider and Shobana Raghupathy

Abstract

Research has shown that engaging families through youth development and after-school programs may benefit children. This paper extends knowledge in this arena, describing a set of strategies for implementing family-strengthening activities in youth development settings. The paper reports findings from a pilot evaluation of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Family PLUS initiative. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected in the form of surveys, phone interviews, and focus groups with club leaders, parents, and youth. Results uncover emerging family support strategies that actively link school, club, and family; culturally tailor programming; foster long-term and family-friendly staff; place children at the center of family programming; and pair family-strengthening activities with other types of programming. The paper also reports on the obstacles such strategies address as well as initial evidence of the positive influence of such programming on parent–child relationships, parent development, and parent–staff relationships. Implications for future research are discussed.

Key Words: Boys and Girls Clubs, afterschool, youth development, engagement, involvement, families, evaluation, family, PLUS, initiative, pilot, staff, programs, out-of-school time, after-school, relationships, activities

Introduction

Four decades of research contribute to our understanding of family engagement in schooling and its benefits for children (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

However, much less is known about engaging and supporting families in youth development contexts, such as the strategies by which organizations engage families and the benefits it may confer. Yet youth development and after-school programs are increasingly prevalent contexts in which children and youth develop. Over 6.5 million of the nation's children and youth are in after-school programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2004), and nearly a million school-age children participate in structured after-school programs and activities under the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program (Naftzger, Kaufman, Margolin, & Ali, 2006). Below, we examine family strengthening and engagement in this increasingly prevalent developmental context and identify promising strategies for increasing such engagement.

The nascent body of evidence that does exist on engaging families through youth development and after-school programs suggests that such efforts can benefit children and youth. Research and evaluation studies show that family engagement after school leads to increased family involvement in children's education and school, better academic performance among children, improved implementation and outcomes for after-school programs, and improved relationships between parents and schools (Bennett, 2004; Horowitz & Bronte-Tinkew, 2007; Kakli, Kreider, Little, Buck, & Coffey, 2006). Programs with a family component delivered through Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) show equally promising results (James & Partee, n.d.; St. Pierre, Mark, Kaltreider, & Aiken, 1997). Family strengthening and engagement after school also improves relationships between parents and children—increasing parent–child closeness and trust, reducing conflict, and promoting greater understanding and involvement in children's schoolwork (Harris & Wimer, 2004; Intercultural Center for Research in Education, 2005; Massachusetts 2020, 2004).

Yet families and programs face numerous challenges to implementing family strengthening and engagement efforts. Parents' work schedules and time constraints, transportation and child care needs, family culture and language, and residence outside of the neighborhood create obstacles to family engagement (Debord, Martin, & Mallilo, 1996; Weiss & Brigham, 2003). Inadequate staffing and funding as well as negative staff attitudes towards families or an overall unwelcoming atmosphere prevent some programs from effectively attracting families (Intercultural Center for Research in Education, 2005; James & Partee, n.d.; Robinson & Fenwick, 2007; Weiss & Brigham, 2003).

Research has begun to map out strategies that after-school and youth development programs use to engage families, including supporting families, communicating and building trust, hiring and developing a family-focused staff, and building linkages across individuals and organizations (Kakli et al.,

2006). This paper confirms and extends knowledge in this field with findings from a pilot evaluation of BGCA's Family PLUS (Parents Leading, Uniting, Serving) initiative. The evaluation reveals promising strategies for implementing family strengthening activities in clubs across the U.S., how these strategies help overcome programmatic obstacles, and how such efforts may positively influence relationships between parents and children.

Method

In partnership with the Kimberly-Clark Corporation and after a year of careful planning with a committee of national advisors, BGCA launched Family PLUS in 2006, representing a major initiative to strengthen families. This revised family-strengthening initiative and strategy built off of earlier success and identified five key components of family strengthening on which to focus: outreach strategies, father/male involvement, economic opportunity, kinship care, and the FAN Club (an evidence-based family support program).

With the goal of integrating Family PLUS into clubs nationwide over five years, the initiative has given seed grants to several dozen clubs since 2006 through a grant application and review process. BGCA provides these clubs with implementation support through grant funds, a guidebook, a Family PLUS web site, a National Family Support Symposium, site-based training, and ongoing technical assistance. The aim of these supports is to increase family strengthening activities within clubs and, ultimately, to positively impact a sense of family togetherness among club youth and their families.

This paper presents select findings from a pilot evaluation of the first two years of Family PLUS implementation (2006-2007). Specifically, Sociometrics conducted a mixed method evaluation of the capacity building, implementation, and initial outcomes of the Family PLUS initiative. Evaluation measures included a 2007 symposium participant exit survey and follow-up survey six weeks later (n = 102 and 78, respectively), surveys and interviews with leaders from Boys & Girls Clubs with Family PLUS grants (n = 29 and 21, respectively), a parent/caregiver survey (n = 175), two parent/caregiver focus groups (n = 4 each), two youth focus groups (one group with 9–12 year olds and another with 13–18 year olds, n = 8 and 7, respectively), one club site visit, and review of quarterly reports from clubs with Family PLUS funding.

The club chosen for a site visit during this first phase of the evaluation was selected based on its receipt of Family PLUS grant funding, its history as a well-established club, and the depth and range of its family engagement activities. Specifically, the selected club has a unique approach to engaging families, requiring a minimum number of family volunteer hours and meeting attendance

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for each child enrolled in the club, assuring high levels of parental presence and engagement in the club. The youth focus groups were conducted during this site visit with youth recruited by request of club staff and with selection criteria consisting only of age parameters mentioned above, youth interest, and parental consent. Parent/caregiver focus groups were conducted both during the site visit as well as during a national family support symposium, with group participants recruited by evaluators and club staff based on their interest and familial ties to one or more children currently enrolled in a club. Finally, all leaders of clubs with Family PLUS grants during 2006 and 2007 were invited to participate in the club leader survey and to help gather completed surveys from 10 parents at their club. A random sample of these club leaders were also contacted by phone for follow-up interviews.

This paper draws primarily from qualitative data from interviews and focus groups and highlights evaluation findings related to overarching strategies used by clubs to deliver family-strengthening programming, common barriers to such programming, and resultant parent–child outcomes.

Results

Qualitative and quantitative data from the pilot evaluation of Family PLUS revealed a number of implementation strategies for strengthening families in the club context that were both innovative and addressed common challenges faced in working with families. Findings from multiple data sources also begin to suggest the positive outcomes of family strengthening activities for children, families, and clubs.

Family Engagement Implementation Strategies

Through the initial evaluation, several promising strategies for implementing family strengthening and engagement activities were uncovered that informed the design and delivery of Family PLUS programming and worked to overcome common challenges faced by clubs. The Family PLUS activities whose design and delivery was facilitated through these strategies ranged from social activities such as family bingo night, movie night, Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, and parent social nights; to courses and workshops focused on parenting, adult education, and enrichment (e.g., ESL, computer, nutritional cooking, family involvement in education); to other services for children and families, such as dental services, tax preparation, child developmental screening, and holiday gift/food drives. These categories of activities held true across club leader, parent, and youth reports. According to the parent/caregiver survey, the vast majority of parents participated in one or more Family PLUS

events over the six months prior to the survey (1 event = 18%, 2–3 events = 39%; 4–5 events = 13%, and 6 or more events = 18%).

The most common barriers to implementing these activities—as reported in the symposium exit and follow-up surveys and through the club leader surveys and interviews—included limited amounts of funding (reported by 52% of symposium attendees), limited staffing (reported by 34%), and need for staff training (28%), as well as outreach barriers. Other barriers mentioned were lack of interest from the communities and families themselves, local preferences for programming that didn't focus on families, language barriers in predominantly Latino communities, and lack of support from schools.

Strategies for delivering the above-mentioned activities and overcoming implementation challenges included actively linking schools, clubs, and families; culturally tailoring programming; designating long-term staff with a family-friendly mindset; shifting staff perspectives through shared responsibilities; and pairing family-focused efforts with other targeted programming for outreach and sustainability, as described below.

Linking Schools, Clubs, and Families

Club leaders spoke of linking families, schools, and clubs, which in turn helped address outreach and funding challenges. Club leaders viewed themselves as experts in forming positive relationships with families and youth and collaborating with outside agencies. But schools bring added access to new parents through groups like the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). One club brought together the best of both worlds to better serve youth by hosting family social nights in a middle school, piggybacking off of school PTA meetings. This encouraged PTA parents[1] to enroll their children in the club and club parents to get involved in the PTA. Eventually, other parents with children in the school were also drawn in for these double meetings.

Other clubs worked directly with school staff around children's school readiness and behavioral issues; with youth and families via homework help and guidance on parent involvement; and with school leadership to establish shared space and objectives. For example, one urban club housed a charter high school, providing the club with substantial unrestricted revenue each year through rental income. The club's parents and youth enjoyed first priority for coveted school enrollment. Families enjoyed club staff's motivational influence on and information about children's school performance. Parents, school staff, and club staff also benefited from mutual expectations about parent volunteering (which was required at both the club and the school).

Tailoring Programming to the Local Community and Cultural Background of Families

In surveys and interviews, club leaders cited language and cultural barriers to engaging families in their family support program. For example, cultural barriers were among the top four barriers cited by symposium attendees. Reaching out to Latino families and undocumented families, in particular, was a repeated theme in interview questions about implementation challenges. For example, conducting background checks to allow undocumented family members to volunteer is a challenge, especially for clubs with a volunteering requirement. To increase outreach to and engagement of Latino and undocumented families, clubs leaders identified community groups who could "adopt a family" to serve their required volunteer time, used alternative background check services that require only a name and address (rather than a social security number), and hired staff who shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds with targeted families.

Likewise, for some clubs, issues of locality and socioeconomic status presented challenges for family programming, for example in designing events that appeal to both affluent and low-income families in a community or adapting workshops for use in suburban versus more urban sites. One club bridged the economic divide in its community by offering food-centered family social nights, international celebrations, and events that showcased the good work of children, thereby appealing to all families.

Designating a Long-Term Staff Person with a Family Support Mindset

Staffing and funding problems were frequently cited as barriers to sustained family engagement activities. Several club leaders spoke of a prior grant that funded a designated person with primary responsibility for family support programming, but the position disappeared when the funding ended. Others found different types of funding to support the stability of such a position in combination with other roles, such as preschool director or individual services provider. Persons in such positions also sometimes continued to informally function in a parent liaison capacity even after their job description no longer formally called for it. Club leaders also spoke about the importance of having a family support coordinator with a mindset and passion for family inclusion, which they sometimes found in professionals with a social work background. In the absence of a long-term designated staff person, clubs also spread responsibility for family programming across staff and/or through the use of parent volunteers and parent advisory committees.

Placing Children at the Center of Programming

According to club leader interviews, many staff members place youth at the center of their work and find it hard to include families for fear of detracting from their core value of focusing on children and youth. One club leader explained how they kept youth at the center of family programming by showcasing youth talent and letting parents be a part of that. Many others hosted periodic family nights as a social activity geared toward all family members rather than just adult caregivers. Other club leaders focused directly on shifting staff perspectives by discussing and modeling the purpose, concept, and importance of Family PLUS. Beyond this, club leaders also spread the responsibility and ownership of family programming across staff to increase their appreciation of families. For example, at one club staff members took turns hosting a monthly family night at the club, giving each staff member an opportunity for closer relationships with families.

Pairing Family Support Activities With Other Types of Programming

Pairing family support activities with other types of programming, namely preschool and prevention programs, also helped overcome funding and outreach issues. As an example, consider one club in which family outreach really took off with a free preschool program for low-income families. The preschool program engaged parents as volunteers and had regular communication with families during drop off and pick up. Building off of this success, the club now offers activities and services for preschool families and beyond including educational and health counseling and a teen parent support group. The club's preschool leader noted that teaching young children successfully in the preschool classroom requires that parents support similar behaviors at home. The common mindset in early childhood education of educating the "whole" child and viewing the child as part of the broader family system may also make club-based preschool programs an ideal entry point for family support programming. Developmentally, a strong family component in the early years may prime both parents and children for family support and involvement moving forward (Kreider, 2001). Similarly, other clubs mentioned prevention programs on which their family support work was built.

Benefits

Albeit preliminary, positive outcomes were a persistent finding across parent, youth, and club leader reports, via both quantitative and qualitative data. Family togetherness, and especially parent–child relationships, were improved both in terms of the time spent with one another and the quality of that time. In addition, parents reported benefiting directly as individuals in their role as

parents and beyond as a result of Family PLUS programming, and club leaders reported multiple improvements to parent–staff relationships.

Parent–Child Relationships

The vast majority of club leaders, parents, and youth reported a positive influence of Family PLUS on parent–child relationships, meaning the quality and quantity of time that children and parents spent together. For example, on the parent/caregiver survey, the combined mean rating on a scale measuring family relations and cohesion[2] (Tolan, n.d.) improved from an average of 3.18 before the grant period to 3.50 after the grant period, which was a statistically significant result.

Interestingly, qualitative data across informants suggests processes by which parent–child relationships are improved. For example, parents and youth described how parental presence in a club increased parental knowledge about their children's talents and friendship networks, provided information on which to base meaningful conversations with their children, and presented opportunities for parents and children to have fun with one another and for parents to model a strong work ethic. For example, one teenage boy talked about his skills at playing pool and public speaking, talents his mom would have never seen if she hadn't volunteered at the club. Youth award ceremonies and competitive events hosted by clubs also facilitated parental awareness and celebration of youth talents.

Likewise, several youth agreed that their parents knew who all their friends were because of parental presence in the club. These were not necessarily friends who lived in their neighborhood or attended the same school but with whom the youth spent a lot of time and clearly had close bonds. These introductions meant that parents were more likely to approve of out-of-club visits between friends and that youth felt their parents knew more and important things about them—like how they interact with their friends. Note that this may be exceptionally important given the research literature on parental monitoring in adolescence as a predictor of positive academic and social-emotional outcomes (Kreider & Suizzo, 2009).

Parent Development

Parents reported deriving individual benefits from Family PLUS programming in their role as parents and beyond. First, the majority of parents described feeling emotionally and practically supported by the clubs, for example, recounting how club staff members helped them hang sheetrock in a family kitchen, escorted an inebriated father to the hospital, and helped locate housing and employment. Parents also pointed to the respect, listening, and

kind suggestions they received from staff. As one mother put it, "It's all about relationships with staff."

Several parents also described feeling assured by the safe environment in which their children spent time. A leader from one urban club explained that gang activity exists in the neighborhood, but the club is considered sacred ground among all in the community and has a strong relationship with the police and sheriff's department. Parents at this club explained that just knowing their children were spending time in the safety of a high quality club offered valuable peace of mind and was a powerful family support in and of itself.

Some parents reported an increased sense of economic empowerment as well. A single mother with two school-age boys living in a small town spoke eloquently of the importance of the economic supports her club provided, including distribution of food, school supplies, and Christmas toys, as well as housing referrals. Clubs also provided employment and training for parents, for example, implementing the Youth Establishing Savings (YES) program, which offered (among other things) financial literacy workshops to youth and families and matching funds to incentivize financial savings.

In addition, a few parents credited clubs with fostering a sense of community and civic engagement. Parents described volunteering in the community as a result of their positive experiences with the club, for example helping with a neighborhood clean-up that they heard about through the club. They also looked out for other people's children in the neighborhood and experienced a strong network of other parents with whom they could talk and feel a sense of community. One single mother explained the value of having such adult connections in the context of her life at home with three school-age boys and no adults other than herself. For the handful of parents who presented at the National Family Support Symposium, the connections were even more cherished. As one mom explained, she was "…isolated as a parent, so it is great to come here." Youth see and feel this, too. As one 12th grade boy explained, "our parents have each other and the staff. I like being able to share my mom with the other parents."

Parent–Staff Relationships

According to club leaders, Family PLUS programming also resulted in positive relationships between parents and club staff, and equally important, less negative relationships as evidenced by fewer parental complaints. These positive relationships translated into more joint problem-solving around child behavior issues, word-of-mouth marketing by satisfied parents (a benefit not examined by those who study family engagement in public schooling), and smoothly run programs as assisted by a dedicated parent volunteer workforce. At the club in which we conducted a site visit, even the younger children (ages 9–12 years)

recognized the power of families' presence in the club to help children. Children in a focus group discussed two "out-of-control" boys who underwent a remarkable transformation during their tenure at the club, aided by the club's strict adherence to rules and discipline and by strong communication between parents and staff, as any form of misbehavior was reported to parents immediately. As one club leader elaborated, problem-solving can occur across parent, child, and staff member because parents are often present in the building as volunteers, so it doesn't feel like a staff member is dumping on a parent at pick up time, but rather having a timely conversation with both the parent and child about disciplinary issues/concerns.

Discussion

Preliminary findings from an evaluation of the first two years of BGCA's Family PLUS initiative reveal emerging strategies for implementing family-strengthening activities by actively linking school, club, and family; culturally tailoring programming; placing children at the center of programming; and pairing family-focused efforts with other targeted programming. Such strategies partially address common challenges in working with families in youth development settings, including outreach, staff buy-in, and sustainability.

Findings also suggest that these Family PLUS programming strategies may positively influence parent–child relationships, adult development, and parent–staff relationships. Central theories in the family engagement literature may help explain how the above-mentioned strategies promote these outcomes. Specifically, improved parent–child relationships may be facilitated by parental presence in and communication across youth settings, which affords parents knowledge of children across youth contexts. Research and practice increasingly demonstrate that such intentional linkages across youth contexts (e.g., family, youth development, school, informal learning institutions, and health and social services) may promote positive academic and social outcomes, especially for the most at-risk youth—a concept recently described as complementary learning (Weiss, Coffman, Post, Bouffard, & Little, 2005).

Likewise, creating meaningful and culturally relevant programming conveys respect and heeds parents' priorities, which may in turn encourage parents to take advantage of crucial family support services, realize personal goals, and contribute their own talents to the club (Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999; Valdés, 1996). Also, hiring and fostering family-friendly staff may engender trust and the exchange of information, which in turn improves parent–staff relationships and joint support of children. Such trust is conducive to productive conversations between parents and educators and is a manifestation of strong

social capital, meaning the relationships within and between learning settings that confer multiple benefits on children (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004).

As a relatively new endeavor, the components and processes that make up the Family PLUS initiative as well as its evaluation results should be considered preliminary. The evaluation results in particular relied on limited data, including a single case study of a highly lauded club with a unique approach to engaging parents through a strict volunteer requirement, two parent focus groups that are not representative of all parent constituents but rather consisted of parents in leadership positions at the club level and beyond, and a pre- and post-survey design that focused only on grant recipients and did not include a comparison group. The study limitations and preliminary evaluation findings of the Family PLUS pilot initiative have informed a research-based outcome evaluation study now underway with 2008-2009 grantees. The study builds off of the initial evaluation but incorporates a matched group of comparison clubs, site visits to 8 grantee clubs across the U.S., more extensive parent and youth focus groups, and new data collection on specific implementation supports (e.g., site-based training). Data collection processes have also been strengthened by integrating evaluation data requests into existing monitoring requirements (i.e., quarterly reports) and by utilizing BGCA staff to make data collection requests.

More generally, future family engagement research focused on youth development settings must head in the direction of family engagement research in general. First, toward longitudinal and randomized experimental studies that can map family influences on youth outcomes over time, with a sense of the complex mediated and moderated pathways involved, and with more causal confidence about specific interventions. Likewise, a multitude of outcomes must be considered, especially as the aims of youth development programs are potentially broad and far-reaching. Second, the field must head toward research-based typologies and in-depth qualitative studies that provide a framework in which to understand and guide practice efforts and to explore in greater depth the processes by which family engagement strategies foster positive outcomes in youth development settings.

Endnotes

[1] We use the term "parent" broadly in this paper to refer to parents and other primary caregivers of children and youth.

[2] The family relations and cohesion scale includes six items, each measured on an ascending four-point scale that denotes increasing familial cohesion and positive relations.

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Beyond Conferences: Attitudes of High School Administrators Toward Parental Involvement in One Small Midwestern State

Laura Lloyd-Smith and Mark Baron

Abstract

The importance of parental involvement for students of all ages has been documented by researchers and acknowledged by practitioners. Although many earlier studies have contended that there is a positive association between parental involvement and school performance at the middle and high school levels, administrators in the field are aware that parental involvement levels decline as a child progresses through school, and that there are many challenges associated with implementing parental involvement strategies at the secondary level. This study assessed the attitudes of South Dakota high school principals regarding parental involvement in four categories including communication, competency, collaboration issues, and external factors. Analysis of the data revealed that while principals may agree that parental involvement is critical at the secondary level, implementation of appropriate and meaningful roles for parents is challenging. The most significant differences in principals' attitudes were found within the complex category of communication. Other slight attitudinal differences were found in the responses of principals to statements related to external factors which may inhibit secondary level parental involvement. The attitude of the principal cannot be understated when it comes to establishing a schoolwide parent involvement program. Thus, many principals would be well served to assess their own attitudes toward this sometimes overlooked aspect of educational partnerships.

Key Words: high schools, administrators, principals, parental involvement, parents, conferences, communication, programs, competency, collaboration, external factors, partnerships, roles, attitudes, perspectives, South Dakota

Introduction and Purpose of Study

The terms for parental involvement are as varied as the definitions. Some theorists and practitioners refer to *home–school partnerships*; some prefer to call it *parental participation*, some *parents as partners*. Whatever the terminology, the issue of parental involvement in schools has become an increasingly popular topic, both conversationally among professional educators and legislatively among politicians in charge of school funding (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004; Fan, 2001; Fege, 2000; Teicher, 2007). Moreover, some reference to parental involvement is addressed in most legislation concerning K–12 education. As a result of such legislation, researchers recognize that parents and principals alike have a tremendous opportunity to build partnerships and work together (Igo, 2002). Epstein (2007) maintained that nearly all educators recognize that successful students, regardless of ability level, have "families who stay informed and involved in their children's education" (p. 16). Indeed, parental involvement may be one of the few things in education about which there seems to be universal agreement (Nichols-Solomon, 2001).

Although varied in name and definition, the importance of parent involvement has been documented by numerous researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. The need for involvement extends beyond elementary school, and sustained levels of parental involvement have been shown to have a positive effect on student grades, attendance, attitude, and motivation (Deslandes, Royer, Turcotte, & Bertrand, 1997; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Wheeler (1992) noted that "parent involvement at the middle and secondary school levels is vital if teenagers are to become stable and productive adults" (p. 28). Research indicates that when parents participate in their children's education, an increase in student achievement and an improvement of students' attitudes are typical outcomes. Increased attendance, fewer discipline problems, and higher aspirations have been correlated with an increase in parent involvement (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Moreover, a positive association between parental support and school grades has been established (Deslandes et al., 1997); Deslandes and colleagues also found "empirical evidence that parents retain substantial influence over their adolescents' school performance" (p. 202).

In a recent review, Kreider and colleagues (2007) analyzed studies linking types of family involvement to both middle and high school students' social and academic outcomes. They identified three family involvement processes

including parenting, home–school relationships, and responsibility for learning outcomes. These processes can all be linked with higher grades and test scores, higher self-esteem, reduced substance abuse, and desire for further education (Shumow, 2009).

Unfortunately, parental involvement has become a phrase oft mentioned but subsequently ignored, especially at the high school level. Leon (2003) believed that like a buzzword, we trust that just repeating the term will effect some benefit. Unfortunately, contemporary research has shown that parental involvement actually declines as students grow older; by the time a child reaches secondary school few parents remain active in the educational process (Spera, 2005; Stouffer, as cited in Lebahn, 1995). "In comparison to the wealth of attention that has been focused on involving parents with schools during the early childhood and elementary school years, less attention has been directed to parents of high school students" (Shumow, 2009, p. 2).

The decline in parental involvement may occur for a variety of reasons, including the structure of the high school, the sheer number of students that teachers are responsible for at the secondary level, and the increased difficulty level of a secondary curriculum (Shumow, 2009). However, research has demonstrated that continued participation by parents throughout high school remains in the best interest of the child (Connors & Epstein, as cited in Phelps, 1999; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Simon, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes toward parental involvement of high school principals and assistant principals in the state of South Dakota and to identify potential challenges to parental involvement from the perspective of the school administrator. This study also sought to determine if attitudinal differences exist based on principals' gender, professional title, years of experience, educational attainment, size and type of school, and percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch.

Literature Review

Leon (2003) aptly noted that the mere scarcity of research done on parent involvement at the secondary level is a noteworthy "clue" that such involvement occurs much less frequently than it does at the elementary level. Even so, parental involvement in a child's school life, which usually constitutes his or her main social world, continues to be important during the secondary years. The attitudes and habits that a student forms during these years of adolescence have a significant impact on his or her success in later life, thereby making it important that "parents or guardians continue to play a significant role in a student's life, both in and out of school" (Leon, 2003, p. 32).

Flaxman and Inger maintained that the "benefits of parent involvement are not confined to early childhood or the elementary grades. There are strong positive effects for involving parents continuously through high school" (1991, p. 5). Such efforts work to not only increase opportunities for academic success but also to assuage the natural turbulence caused by adolescence. Parental involvement at the middle and secondary levels is often a difficult balance between adolescents' developing independence and their parents' quest to nurture (McGrew-Zoubi, 1998).

The benefits of continued parental involvement during the high school years are not confined to the development of sound work habits and parental role modeling. Sustained research over the past 20 years has consistently shown that secondary-level parental involvement has a positive impact on both grades and attendance, and is negatively correlated with student dropout rates. Deslandes et al. (1997) noted "significant positive relationships between family discussions about school, grades, and the future and school achievement" (p. 200). Studying 525 Canadian secondary students, their results indicated three factors that contributed to school achievement: parental acceptance, supervision, and psychological autonomy granting. The above study defined parental involvement as presence at school, communicating with the teachers, or helping at home with homework. The authors noted "modest, yet positive correlations" between parenting style and parental involvement levels in school and cite several earlier studies that indicate "students with higher grades come from parents who demonstrate high levels of warmth, supervision, and psychological autonomy granting and who are highly involved in their adolescent's schooling" (Lamborn et al., 1993 & Steinberg et al., 1992 as cited in Deslandes et al., 1997, pp. 192-193). These results reinforce those obtained by Dornbusch and Ritter (1988) in which a positive relationship between student grades and parental attendance at student activities was identified.

Chronic absenteeism can be reduced with effective communication strategies and a commitment from the school to partner with parents to improve attendance rates. Sheldon and Epstein (2005) found that schools implementing diverse partnership strategies focused on improving communication regarding student attendance allowed parents to more effectively monitor and supervise their teenager.

While it is generally accepted that parental involvement is necessary to maintain a quality educational system, there exist a number of reasons why parental involvement may decrease at the middle and secondary levels. One such factor appears to be related to the age of the child. Parental participation in school activities drops significantly from elementary to middle school and continues to decline as the child progresses through school (Brough & Irvin,

2001; Eccles & Harold, 1993). In general, parents of elementary school students are more active in school-related activities than parents of older students. In 2003, *Principal* reported that greater than 90% of parents with students in grades kindergarten to fifth grade attended a scheduled parent–teacher conference, while only 59% of ninth and tenth grade parents attended ("Trends in Educational Statistics," pp. 54-55).

Hollifield (1994) suggested that the adolescent student has an increased desire for autonomy and greater individual responsibility. Parents who are aware of this need for independence may distance themselves from their teen, including their school life. As Shinn (2002) stated, "Parents, recognizing that adolescents need to assert their independence, tend to back away from their child too soon" (p. 34).

McGrew-Zoubi (1998) spoke of the "delicate balance" that exists when parents try to remain actively involved in their teen's education while at the same time affording their child the opportunity to experience greater freedom and responsibilities. However, other research contends that "parent involvement at the middle and secondary school levels is vital if teenagers are to become stable and productive adults" (Wheeler, 1992, p. 28), noting that adolescence is the time when most teens are forming lifetime values, making continued parental involvement in both home life and school life especially critical. Studying the attitudes toward parental involvement among selected secondary-level principals, teachers, and parents, Atha noted that "it appears that parents choose not to visit their teenager's classroom in high school because many do not feel welcome at school, many do not have or take the time to visit, and many feel that their teenagers would be embarrassed if they attended their classes" (1998, p. 157).

A communication problem often exists between parents and teachers resulting in a decline in parental involvement as children progress through the educational system. "Many teachers feel that parents are not willing to become involved in their children's education, and many parents are not aware of opportunities for involvement" (Halsey, 2005, p. 58). Observations of a junior high school in Texas revealed that while teachers felt they maintained an "open door policy" with respect to parental involvement, parental perception was quite different, and traditional school communication efforts relied heavily on those which could be best defined as institutional in nature. As explained by Epstein (1987), institutional interactions refer to those that involve all families such as parent–teacher associations, open houses, newsletters, or general invitations to a school play or activity, whereas individual interactions between a parent and teacher involve a specific student. The majority of the teachers at the junior high school used institutional methods of communication,

which were perceived by parents as announcements or notifications, not as true invitations or requests for parental participation. Moreover, Halsey found that teachers believed that parents were not interested in participating in their children's education, given their lackluster response to the institutional communication methods. However, parents felt that because they did not receive personal, individual invitations, their presence was not truly desired. The failure of communication efforts at the junior high became a "deterrent for parent involvement. Once such failure occurred, efforts on both sides decreased, and the connection between the groups was minimal" (Halsey, 2005, p. 64).

A 1999 national poll conducted for the Public Education Network indicated parents often "feel excluded from, or without a role, in their local school" (Fege, 2000, p. 42). While 47% of those parents polled admitted that time was a barrier to their school participation, even more (48%) felt that they were never given the opportunity to become involved or did not know how to initiate such involvement (Fege, 2000). These numbers demonstrate a clear lack of communication between parents and schools.

The principal's attitude toward parental involvement may be the key determinant of the extent of involvement parents have in school programs (Peiffer, 2003; Lebahn, 1995). Even though many principals view parental involvement as desirable and necessary for a successful school climate, many do not actively support substantive parent involvement programs, and the subsequent levels of parental involvement in a given school may be the result of the attitude of the principal toward the concept (Lacey, 2000). Established educational practices may even serve as barriers to effective parental involvement. "Administrative practices frequently serve to defeat and discourage parental involvement, although not intentionally" (Peiffer, 2003, p. 12). Principals play a crucial role in establishing parental involvement; however, sometimes they are not willing to take the necessary steps to promote parental involvement in their individual schools (Peiffer, 2003). "Generally, high school principals indicated that their schools view parents as important partners with lukewarm enthusiasm in comparison to their enthusiastic elementary counterparts" (Osborne & deOnis, 1997, p. 21).

Challenges related to parental involvement definitions and strategies for implementation are further compounded when one considers the inherent developmental differences between students at elementary, middle, and secondary schools. Elementary schools often have more concrete, defined roles for parents, both in and out of school (Brough & Irvin, 2001). As the student progresses into middle and high school, the parent role becomes less defined and ultimately more challenging for parents to navigate. The mental picture of what constitutes successful levels of parental involvement at the elementary

level is not necessarily appropriate for secondary schools, and merely implementing the same parental involvement strategies at the high school level will most likely be met with failure. Definitions and implementation responsibilities are typically left to the building-level school administrator who frequently has not received formal training in building home–school partnerships as part of their graduate coursework. This factor compounds the underlying challenges of creating a developmentally appropriate parental involvement program at the high school level. Since the responsibility for implementation of parental involvement strategies typically falls to the building-level administrator, it is imperative the secondary-level principal be cognizant of his or her personal attitudes as they relate to the issue.

Methodology

Prior to research design, a literature review was undertaken which specifically related to studies which addressed parental involvement efforts that focused on the middle and secondary grade levels. The population for this study consisted of all individuals identified as active secondary school administrators in the state of South Dakota via information received from the *South Dakota Department of Education Directory* and confirmed by individual school websites; 245 secondary school administrators were identified for the 2007-2008 academic year. Given the relatively small population, all secondary-level administrators were surveyed, including those identified as principals and assistant or vice principals. Data were collected from public school principals and private school principals, as well as principals working in alternative and tribal schools, using "The Parent Involvement Survey for Secondary School Principals." This instrument was modified by the researcher from the Parent Involvement Inventory originally designed by Brittle (1994) for elementary principals and subsequently replicated with secondary school principals in Michigan by Peiffer in 2003. Due to the changing nature of parental involvement as a child progresses through school, the current researcher (lead author) felt modifications were necessary in order to specifically address issues relevant to parental involvement at the secondary level. As a result, some questions were altered, several were omitted, and others added to specifically deal with issues prevalent at the secondary level.

The survey was comprised of two parts. Part I presented 32 statements designed to quantitatively assess the attitudes of principals toward parent involvement as well as one qualitative open-ended question. The first 32 statements within Part I collected information related to four researcher-identified categories: communication concerns, competency issues, collaboration issues,

and external factors. For the purposes of this study communication concerns were defined as issues related to both the formal and informal methods of communication between the school and the parent(s). Competency issues were those attributed to human nature such as the fear of failure on the part of the parent and/or fear of criticism on the part of the educator. Collaboration issues involved how principals viewed the role of the parents in a secondary school, especially with respect to decision and policymaking. External factors were defined as those beyond the control of the administrator or parent, such as parental lack of time to volunteer as well as autonomy issues typically associated with adolescent development. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they believed a statement to be true using a four-point semantic differential scale with 1 = strong disagreement, 2 = disagreement, 3 = agreement, and 4 = strong agreement. The researcher intentionally chose a four-point scale given that the survey is relatively innocuous and was not likely to stimulate complex, emotional responses. Mangione (1995) stated that if given a choice, many respondents will choose the middle. By eliminating the natural middle point, respondents were forced to make a definitive, reflective choice. The final question provided an opportunity for principals to share innovative or successful strategies that they had utilized to generate secondary level parental involvement. The proposed independent variables of the study were formulated from data in Part II, which consisted of seven demographic questions related to the administrator and their school.

Prior to data collection, a draft of the survey instrument was critically reviewed by six professionals including two college faculty members, two school superintendents, and two former educators no longer employed in the education field. All members of the critique panel were former secondary school principals, but were not currently part of the population pool. Critique panel members provided written comments and suggestions regarding the survey, and adjustments were made and incorporated into the final draft of the survey instrument. At the recommendation of the critique panel, two statements were excluded to eliminate possible redundancy, and two statements were reworded for clarity.

Prenotification postcards were sent to all secondary school principals in South Dakota one week prior to the mailing of the survey instrument. Survey instruments with an accompanying cover letter were sent in mid-September 2007, and a second set of postcards, these offering appreciation for completed surveys and serving as a reminder to those who had not yet returned the survey, were mailed two weeks later.

Data Analysis

Three research questions guided the study:

1. How strongly did South Dakota secondary school principals believe in parental involvement? Means and standard deviations were created for each individual item response based on the four-point Likert scale.

2. What was the relative concern regarding secondary principals' attitudes as they related to the following four identified survey areas: communication concerns, competency issues, collaboration issues, and external factors?

3. What differences in principals' attitudes, if any, were based on demographic characteristics?

Demographic data were reported as frequencies and percentages to provide a general representation of the respondents. Demographic data were grouped for statistical purposes. Professional title was grouped as either Principal or Assistant/Vice Principal. Number of years of experience was grouped 0-5, 6-11, 12-19, and 20/+. Educational attainment was grouped into four categories: masters, educational specialist, doctoral degrees, or other. These groups were later reduced to two groups entitled masters and post-masters for analysis purposes. The type of school was noted as public, private, or other. The category "other," which included those schools identified as South Dakota tribal or Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) secondary schools as well as alternative schools, was eliminated from statistical analyses due to lack of responses.

The principals' attitudes toward each category (communication concerns, competency issues, collaboration issues, and external factors) were then compared based on the demographic categories (years of experience, size of school, and percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch) using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs). Comparisons in the areas of gender, professional title, educational attainment, and type of school were made using t tests for independent means. For each statistical test, the principals' demographic grouping served as the independent variable, and the composite mean for each response category served as the dependent variable. All significant ANOVAs were followed by Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test to identify which groups differed significantly from the others. A .05 level of significance was used for all inferential statistics. Of the 245 administrators who received the survey, 156 surveys were completed and returned, resulting in an overall response rate of 63.7%.

Demographic Data

Data were obtained regarding seven demographic characteristics. Four characteristics related to personal and profession demographics of the administrator

(gender, professional title, educational attainment, and years of experience), and three related to the school in which the administrator was employed (type of school, size of school, and the approximate percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch). Not all percentages sum to 100.0 due to rounding. Additionally, not all independent variables included 156 responses due to elective omission or invalid responses. Percentages were based on the number of valid respondents for each independent variable. Table 1 provides a detailed description of demographic data.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent		Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Gender				*Type of School*		
Male	127	84.1		Public	131	84.0
Female	24	15.9		Private	18	11.5
Omission	5	--		Other	7	4.5
Years of Experience				*School Size*		
0-5	55	35.5		0-100	57	36.8
6-11	42	27.1		101-300	53	34.2
12-19	33	21.3		301+	45	29.0
20/+	25	16.1		Omission	1	--
Omission	1	--				
Professional Title				*% of Students Qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch*		
Principal	125	80.6				
Asst/Vice	21	13.5		0-25	49	34.8
Other	9	5.8		26-50	67	47.5
Omission	1	--		51-100	25	17.7
				Omission	15	--
Educational Attainment						
Masters	94	61.4				
Specialist	52	34.0				
Doctorate	7	4.6				
Other	3	--				

Data summarized in Table 1 indicate that most respondents identified themselves as principals, were male, and worked in public schools. Additionally, more than two-thirds of the respondents held administrative positions in schools serving less than 301 students, and many worked in schools where a high percentage of students qualified for free or reduced lunch status. Over one-third of the principals responding had five or less years of experience, and the vast majority held either a masters or specialist degree.

Instrument Reliability

The computed reliability coefficient (Cronbach Alpha) for the survey instrument was 0.692, indicating that the instrument was moderately reliable. Additionally, reliabilities computed for each subscale produced the following coefficients: Collaboration = 0.612, External Factors = 0.590, Communication = 0.449, and Competency = -0.015.

Results

One objective of the study was to determine how strongly South Dakota secondary level principals believed in the concept of parental involvement. Means and standard deviations were computed for each individual item response based on the four-point Likert scale. As noted in Table 2, "Creating a partnership between the school and parent(s) has a positive impact on student grades" (M = 3.64) and "Creating a partnership between the school and parent(s) has a positive impact on student behavior" (M = 3.55) represented the strongest beliefs among responding principals. Both statements related to collaboration issues. Additionally, the very low standard deviations associated with these two responses (.507 and .570, respectively) indicate a high degree of consensus among principals regarding these beliefs. Likewise, principals tended to agree that "The school should develop creative ways to overcome barriers when parents do not participate in school events, such as parent–teacher conferences" (M = 3.44).

Survey statements showing the lowest level of agreement also included two collaboration statements. Respondents did not feel that "Parent input in the evaluation of teachers is useful" (M = 2.17), nor that "Parents should participate in staff hiring decisions" (M = 1.73). However, the high standard deviations associated with these items (.812 and .741, respectively) is indicative of less consensus among the respondents. "The primary responsibility to increase parental involvement within a high school lies with classroom teachers" was categorized as a communication concern between the high school and adolescent parents. Principals demonstrated a general tendency to disagree with this statement (M = 2.20).

Table 2. Strength of Principals' Beliefs in Parent Involvement

Principals' Beliefs	N	M	SD
1. Creating a partnership between the school and parent(s) has a positive impact on student grades.	156	3.64	.507
2. Creating a partnership between the school and parent(s) has a positive impact on student behavior.	156	3.55	.570
3. The school should develop creative ways to overcome barriers when parents do not participate in school events	156	3.44	.655
4. The primary responsibility to increase parental involvement within a high school lies with classroom teachers.	154	2.20	.582
5. Parental input in the evaluation of teachers is useful.	156	2.17	.812
6. Parents should participate in staff hiring decisions.	156	1.73	.741

Research question two sought to identify whether principals' attitudes differed with respect to the four categories in which the survey statements were grouped (communication, competency, collaboration, or external factors). Although a wide range of individual agreement toward each category was evident, descriptive analysis failed to identify any significant differences when comparing group responses for survey items within the four identified categories. As noted previously, communication concerns included issues related to the methods of communication between the school and the parent(s), while competency issues were factors attributed to human nature such as the fear of failure on the part of the parent or fear of criticism on the part of the educator. Collaboration issues involved how principals viewed the parental role in school, and external factors were defined as those beyond the control of the administrator or parent, such as a lack of time to volunteer.

Table 3. Relative Concern Among Principals

Category	N	M	SD
Communication	151	2.66	.289
Competency	151	2.54	.283
Collaboration	154	2.68	.320
External Factors	153	2.76	.361

Research question three sought to identify differing respondent attitudes toward parental involvement based on the independent variables including teh administrator's professional title, educational attainment, years of experience, and gender, and the type or size of the school and percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Results found that there were no significant differences in attitudes of South Dakota principals with regard to collaboration and competency based on any of the respondents' characteristics. However, differences were noted in attitudes toward communication based on gender, educational attainment, and professional title, as well as the size of school in which the principal was employed.

As depicted in Table 4, male administrators tended to show a higher degree of agreement toward statements related to communication issues than did female administrators. As noted, the category communication includes issues related to both formal and informal methods of communication between the school and the parent, such as "Our school does a sufficient job of encouraging parental involvement," and "The primary responsibility for increasing parental involvement at the secondary level lies with the building administrator."

Table 4. Differences in Principals' Attitudes Based on Gender

Category	Gender	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Competency	Male	123	2.54	.299	.113	144	.910
	Female	23	2.53	.217			
Collaboration	Male	126	2.66	.340	-1.952	147	.057
	Female	23	2.77	.206			
External Factors	Male	124	2.77	.382	.911	146	.364
	Female	24	2.70	.258			
Communication	Male	125	2.68	.282	3.088	145	.002*
	Female	22	2.48	.285			

*Significant difference at .05.

Another difference was found when comparing responses based on levels of educational achievement. Administrators in the post-master's group tended to respond more positively to statements related to communication than did those in the master's group, $M = 2.72$ and $M = 2.61$, respectively, $t (145) = 2.335$, $p = .021$.

Table 5. Differences in Principals' Attitudes Based on Educational Attainment

Category	Type	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Competency	Masters	91	2.52	.237	-0.776	145	.440
	Post-Masters	56	2.56	.343			
Collaboration	Masters	92	2.65	.329	-1.177	148	.241
	Post-Masters	58	2.71	.306			
External Factors	Masters	91	2.72	.374	-1.530	147	.128
	Post-Masters	58	2.81	.344			
Communication	Masters	89	2.61	.287	-2.335	145	.021*
	Post-Masters	58	2.72	.275			

* Significant difference at .05.

Likewise, respondents who self-identified themselves as principals indicated a higher level of agreement (M = 2.70) with statements related to communication than did those who claimed titles of assistant or vice principal (M = 2.49).

Table 6. Differences in Principals' Attitudes Based on Professional Title

Category	Type	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Competency	Principal	121	2.54	.297	0.035	139	.972
	Asst./Vice	20	2.53	.244			
Collaboration	Principal	123	2.67	.318	-1.143	142	.255
	Asst./Vice	21	2.75	.266			
External Factors	Principal	122	2.79	.347	1.524	141	.130
	Asst./Vice	21	2.66	.351			
Communication	Principal	120	2.70	.280	3.049	139	.003*
	Asst./Vice	21	2.49	.283			

* Significant difference at .05.

Another significant difference was noted in the category of communication among principals of smaller (0-300) and larger (301/+) schools. Generally, those principals employed at larger (in South Dakota this was identified as high schools with 301+ students) were less likely to show agreement with survey statements related to parental communication compared to principals in smaller schools.

Table 7. Differences in Principals' Attitudes Based on School Size

Category	Response Means			F	p
	0-100	101-300	300+		
Competency	2.52	2.56	2.52	0.324	.723
Collaboration	2.66	2.67	2.71	0.368	.693
External Factors	2.71	2.83	2.72	1.815	.166
Communication	2.69	2.73	2.52	6.896	.001*

* Significant difference at .05.

Although most of the respondents surveyed were employed at public schools, principals of private schools indicated less agreement toward statements in the category dealing with external factors. Generally, compared to their public school counterparts, private school principals consider external factors to be less of a barrier to parental involvement in secondary schools. One respondent indicated that there is a greater expectation for parental involvement at private schools, and principals are less inclined to view external factors as a viable justification for lack of involvement.

Table 8. Differences in Principals' Attitudes Based on School Type

Category	Type	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Competency	Public	128	2.54	.237	0.128	142	.898
	Private	16	2.53	.343			
Collaboration	Public	129	2.66	.329	-1.056	145	.293
	Private	18	2.75	.306			
External Factors	Public	130	2.78	.374	3.005	147	.003*
	Private	16	2.50	.344			
Communication	Public	127	2.66	.287	-0.394	142	.694
	Private	17	2.69	.275			

* Significant difference at .05.

Finally, one-way ANOVAs were also used for comparisons based upon student body eligibility for free and reduced lunch. This is a typical format for identifying the socioeconomic status of a community or school. The ANOVAs were conducted using the following groups of free and reduced lunch status: 0-25%, 26-50%, and over 50%. No significant differences were found to suggest differences in principals' attitudes based on the socioeconomic status of

the student body. Likewise, no significant differences were noted based upon the principal's years of experience.

Part I of the survey also included one open-ended qualitative question in which principals were asked to offer input regarding innovative or successful strategies that they had used to generate secondary-level parental involvement. Less than one-third of the respondents offered comments regarding their experiences or best practices, and most comments related to methods of collaboration or communication. However, numerous comments were received regarding the importance of personalized invitations to parent–teacher conferences in the form of phone calls. One principal stated, "Our administrative assistants called each secondary student household the week of conferences. We had a tremendous turnout of parents." Another wrote, "Phones in every classroom; teachers contact parents during their prep periods, and we use automated calling to remind parents of activities such as conferences." Principals also stressed the need to utilize multiple methods to communicate with parents including web-based parent portals, school websites, traditional newsletters, local newspaper columns, and email.

A number of respondents indicated that they used incentives to increase parental attendance at their school events, including gas card giveaways, student bonus points, and food. "Feed them and they will come! (We offer) breakfast with the teachers and dinner meetings." Another penned, "Serving food has increased our parent/community involvement at parent–teacher conferences and our open houses."

Several respondents discussed avenues related to collaboration such as advisory councils, booster clubs, and parental input into the school budget process. Although the names differed, respondents wrote of parent advisory groups, committees, or boards which met monthly or quarterly. One principal described this format as a "way for parents to bounce ideas off of school people and the school to bounce ideas off parents." Several principals included the more "traditional" formats of parent involvement within high schools including organizing post-prom activities, athletic booster club participation, and concession stand help. However, not all respondents offered successful strategies. Two administrators offered insights into their own personal belief systems. "Parents care about their students' education regardless of SES. The difference comes from their ability to navigate the system. The more education a parent has, the more likely they are able to navigate the system." Another administrator felt that "the biggest obstacle to parent involvement is parents want to run the school and interfere with the process….They are only concerned with their child and their child's best friends."

Discussion

Administrators in South Dakota's high schools do not display strong tendencies either for or against parent involvement, as only 6 of the 32 questions garnered responses that indicated agreement or strong agreement. The average mean responses for the remaining questions were below 3.0 on a four-point Likert scale. This suggests that, as a group, South Dakota principals do not overwhelmingly support or reject the concept of parent involvement. The issues with the strongest level of support were related to collaboration, while little support was given for parental participation in the teacher hiring process.

Earlier research determined that principals in elementary schools believe strongly in parental involvement and are more likely to accept responsibility for implementing and providing structured involvement opportunities (Brittle, 1994). Research done in middle schools (Lacey, 1999) indicated that middle-level principals are less likely to be strong advocates of parental involvement, and Peiffer (2003) found that high school principals in Michigan did not demonstrate a strong overall belief in parental involvement. While South Dakota secondary principals failed to show definitive support for the concept, neither did they disregard the importance of parents in certain aspects of the educational process. Given that this study dealt with only South Dakota principals, we cannot generalize to a regional or larger population.

These results confirm that individual administrator's attitudes differ regarding the concept of parental involvement at the secondary level. Furthermore, the results suggest that while building-level administrators may view parental involvement as desirable, their actions may not support this belief. Unfortunately, few teacher and administrator preparatory programs offer specific coursework in nurturing parental involvement, and both new and seasoned principals are left to define and develop their own beliefs and practices. At the secondary level, too often these beliefs are based on the erroneous assumption that high school parents no longer wish to be active participants in their children's education.

Much of the responsibility for developing such involvement and partnership activities lies with the building principals, who in turn have a responsibility to lead their respective staff members in the development of programs that foster sustained involvement at the secondary level. "Through principal leadership, schools can develop strong programs of school, family, and community partnerships and create and sustain cultures of academic achievement and success" (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009, p. 24).

The current study confirms that communication between high schools and secondary-level students' parents necessitates further examination. Both

administrators and parents struggle to find acceptable avenues for parental involvement in a secondary school setting. While the roles for parental involvement in the elementary grade levels are more clearly defined and accepted by teachers and parents alike, it does not negate the importance of continued, ongoing involvement as the child progresses through school. The commonly defined roles of parent volunteers in the classrooms are acceptable avenues for elementary-level engagement. As a child enters middle school and later high school, the roles for parents must change, not be abolished or overlooked.

A primary task of adolescent development involves increasing independence from one's parents (Eccles & Harold, 1993), and finding appropriate roles for parents within a high school setting is a challenging but not insurmountable task. While South Dakota secondary principals tend to agree that the primary responsibility for involving parents should not be placed on the shoulders of classroom teachers, they struggle with identifying appropriate involvement opportunities for high school parents. In fact, principals in South Dakota high schools are better able to define how they *do not* feel parents should be involved. With respect to collaboration, South Dakota secondary principals believe strongly and consistently that parental collaboration is important with respect to the impact it has on student behavior and grades. On the contrary, though, principals do not believe parental collaboration is necessary in regard to the hiring and evaluation of faculty. The principals also did not believe the primary responsibility for enhancing parental involvement resided with classroom teachers. It appears that principals want parents to help support and direct their teenagers, but are uncomfortable with parental involvement as it relates to some school decision-making roles. This creates a unique challenge for administrators to identify parental involvement roles that parents deem meaningful and principals deem acceptable.

A recurring theme of this study related to issues of communication between secondary schools and parents. The study found that the level of commitment afforded to communication between secondary parents and schools differed based on several variables including gender, administrators' educational attainment levels and professional titles, and school size. Generally, those administrators identifying themselves as a Principal responded more favorably to survey statements related to communication than did those who self-identified as Assistant Principals. One reason may be the nature of job responsibilities typically attributed to Assistant Principals which frequently involves issues related to truancy or discipline. Such parental communications often are not positive interactions. Survey results also revealed that South Dakota principals in smaller schools may have more time and energy to support parental involvement efforts, while those at larger schools frequently have both more students

and staff to supervise, possibly resulting in less time available to dedicate toward parental involvement efforts.

While surveyed principals stressed using multiple methods of communication, common forms used at the secondary level tend to be institutional in nature, such as newsletters, websites, recorded phone messages, and parent portals accessed via the Internet. While this type of one-way communication is successful in disseminating information, it often fails to bring about the active engagement that many principals and parents desire. If the dependence on one-way forms of communication decreases, opportunities for administrators to initiate personal interactions will be enhanced. While it may be easier, faster, and more efficient to communicate with high school parents via a one-way communication mode, many field researchers have found two-way communication is a critical component of effective parental engagement.

As noted by South Dakota principals in response to the qualitative question, attendance at parent–teacher conferences significantly increases when personal invitations are extended to parents and parents recognize that their presence is both desired and expected. It is not sufficient for administrators and teachers to say they maintain an open door policy for parents; instead, invitations should be offered to specific events. Efforts should be made to utilize both high-tech and low-tech solutions for sharing information in an attempt to meet the diverse needs of parents (Epstein, 2007).

Secondary-level administrators should strive to create meaningful roles for parents within high schools, thereby increasing collaborative educational efforts between secondary schools and adolescent parents. Sanders and Sheldon (2009) suggest that building principals can play a vital role in this process by building trusting relationships, engaging in two-way communication, encouraging meaningful volunteerism opportunities for parents, and supporting a team approach to parent partnerships in their schools. Indeed, Ferguson and Rodriguez (2007) suggested that the "crux of family–school involvement at the middle and high school level is determining the kinds of adult interactions that not only allow teenagers to have autonomy and respect, but also meet the needs of families and schools" (p. 18).

Finally, we must reexamine the belief that the parents of secondary-level students are not as interested in their child's education simply because teenagers seek independence and thus create a natural distance from their parents. The challenges associated with implementing effective parent involvement programs at the secondary level may be significant; however, it is ultimately the administrator's responsibility to negotiate the obstacles to the effective implementation of parental involvement programs. Since building-level principals often set the tone for school climate and can either encourage or discourage school practices

through their words and actions, it is important to examine secondary school principals' attitudes as they relate to the issue of parent involvement. As Fege (2000) suggested, "School leaders can no longer view parents as appendages to schooling or meddlers in their work. They can no longer ignore parents or treat them with disdain" (p. 39). Moving parental involvement from rhetoric to practice (Atha, 1998) requires a significant commitment by secondary level principals and ultimately ensures that high school students are afforded maximum opportunities for both academic and developmental success.

Directions for Further Research

Based on the review of literature and study conclusions, several recommendations for further research emerged. An analysis of both administrator preparation programs and undergraduate teacher education programs should be conducted to determine the extent of course content that is related to nurturing parental involvement, especially at the middle and high school level. Because identifying and implementing developmentally appropriate and acceptable strategies is increasingly difficult as a child progresses through school, attention needs to be given to this topic in administrative preparation programs, especially those at the secondary level.

Parent perceptions of school communication should be further examined. Specifically, issues related to home–school communications and invitations for involvement should be qualitatively assessed. Furthermore, research regarding the specific roles that both parents and students are comfortable with would help define how administrators can implement socially and developmentally acceptable parental involvement programs within their schools.

Finally, given the special challenges associated with parent involvement at the secondary level and apparent lack of preparation for this role in graduate programs, new principals would benefit from ready access to successful strategies in other schools. Such information would lessen some of the burden from trial and error in new programs and allow new secondary administrators to implement proven strategies that are age-appropriate within their buildings, thereby increasing the chance for effectiveness.

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Training School Professionals to Engage Families: A Pilot University/State Department of Education Partnership

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Abstract

Federal and professional mandates call for increased family involvement in education, yet most teacher preparation programs do not teach skills necessary to engage families in a thorough or systematic manner. The current project addressed this training deficit by offering a program that included a sequence of three graduate courses to a cohort of school professionals in a high-need school district. Courses were taught at a school within that district and included projects designed to address the needs of the community in which the participants were employed. Qualitative analysis suggests that following completion of the courses, school professionals enhanced their ability to engage families and experienced positive changes in attitude toward family–professional collaboration. Importantly, participants were able to articulate specific ways in which they planned to utilize new skills in the school setting. A unique aspect of this study was investigation of continued use of new knowledge and skills and implementation of action plans six months post-training.

Key words: family, collaboration, professionals, development, involvement, schools, engagement, families, university, partnerships, education, courses

Introduction

Survey data collected from the 1980s through the present suggest that, in spite of federal and professional organization mandates calling for increased

family involvement in education, teacher preparation programs have not been able to incorporate more than minimal attention to this critical area into an already ambitious curricula (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Hiatt-Michael, 2006). In a comprehensive overview of current practices related to teacher preparation, Hiatt-Michael (2006) states that "(t)he major emphasis in teacher preparation programs is on the technical aspects of professional performance, not the deeply interpersonal aspects of their work" (p. 12). Yet knowledge about families and how to work effectively with them is not inherent; one does not become an expert in facilitating family–professional collaboration merely because one has been part of a family. Professionals who work with families need to be familiar with the empirical knowledge underlying the collaborative process and, with guidance, directly apply this knowledge base in authentic situations. This paper describes a pilot university/state department of education partnership designed to improve school-based professionals' skills in and attitudes toward collaboration with families. The project relied on both direct instruction and field experiences that explored and addressed the needs of participants' school communities.

The most recent exploration of the extent to which teacher preparation programs address family involvement was conducted by Epstein and Sanders (2006) who collected survey data from administrators in 161 teacher education programs. While the purpose of the survey was broad, most relevant to the current project was data obtained on the nature and extent of coursework that addressed family involvement. Results were encouraging. Approximately 60% of institutions responding to the survey reported offering an entire course related to family involvement, with about two-thirds of those institutions reporting that the course was required, not optional. Over 90% reported that family involvement was covered as a topic in at least one course. Individuals enrolled in programs emphasizing early childhood and special education were most likely to report the availability of coursework related to family engagement.

In spite of this positive trend, Epstein and Sanders (2006) report that "most [school, college, and department of education] leaders reported that their recent graduates were not well prepared to conduct programs and practices of school, family, and community partnerships" (p. 95). This is consistent with survey data collected as part of Harvard's Education Schools Project (Levine, 2006). Levine evaluated perceptions of principals, college deans and faculty, and teacher education program alumni regarding the degree to which they felt teachers were adequately trained in 11 "key" areas. In regard to "the capacity to work with parents," only 21% of principals reported that teachers are "very well" or "moderately well" prepared, and only 43% of alumni felt at least "moderately well prepared."

Given that family involvement has been credited with enhancing school success (Barnard, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005) and that school-based administrators recognize the minimal preparation of their teachers in this fundamental area, one might expect school systems to provide training not obtained at a preservice level. Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that "on-the-job" training in family–professional collaboration is not occurring to any great extent. Using survey data from 5,253 public school educators from across the United States, Parsad, Lewis, and Farris (2000) explored the content of formal professional development available for teachers. Results indicated that approximately 75% of teachers had participated in professional development focused on implementing state or district curricula, using technology and other new methodologies, and studying their content areas in depth. In contrast, less than half of the teachers surveyed indicated that they had received professional development training in the area of fostering family involvement.

Howland, Anderson, Smiley, and Abbott (2006) attempted to address the lack of concerted efforts by school systems to engage families by creating a school liaison program in the Indianapolis (Indiana) Public Schools System. The program utilized two family liaisons trained to support family members so that they might become more engaged in their children's education. School personnel were asked to refer families to regional special education supervisors, who in turn made referrals to the appropriate school liaison. Liaisons then made personal contact with families to explain and offer direct and indirect services. Preliminary outcome data was collected one year after project initiation via focus groups conducted with 19 participants from the 150 families who received support through the School Liaison project. Data indicated that parents reported an increased sense of self-efficacy and acknowledgment of the need for involvement in their child's education and shared their appreciation of the support provided by liaisons. The authors suggested that the success of the two family liaisons lay in their "previous life experiences and backgrounds similar to the families they served in terms of SES and urban community engagement" (p. 63). While this is consistent with literature describing the formation of effective working relationships, it is not always possible to ensure that school-based personnel will share characteristics with the families of their students (e.g., having a child of their own receiving special education services or sharing cultural identification). In fact, it is incumbent upon school systems to train personnel to collaborate effectively in *spite* of differences.

The lack of training in collaboration is significant given the powerful role of educators in creating climates that foster family involvement (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Among a sample of over 2,000 families of elementary and middle school students living in economically disadvantaged areas, Dauber

and Epstein found that "the strongest and most consistent predictor of parent involvement at school and at home are the specific school programs and teacher practices that encourage and guide parent involvement" (p. 61). In their investigation of school system policies and programs related to family involvement, Kessler-Sklar and Baker (2000) conceptualized involvement across six dimensions, including the degree to which teachers were trained to work with families. Based on survey data from 196 superintendents across the United States, Kessler-Sklar and Baker found that, of the six dimensions of family involvement activities, superintendents were least likely to report that their systems offered specific programs to train teachers to work with parents (38.7%). While the authors acknowledge that their questionnaire provided "little information…on the nature of the training programs for teachers" (p. 115), of those who did offer training, the vast majority (67.9%) offered in-service training by school staff. Off-site training and in-service provided by specialists were offered by only 3.6% and 7.1%, respectively.

While one might be encouraged that close to 40% of superintendents reported providing in-service activities that address working with parents, traditional in-service training may have minimal impact on changing skills, attitudes, and behaviors of participants. In fact, surveys of teachers regarding traditional in-service workshops suggest that such workshops are ineffective (Barnett, 2004) and that teachers "tend to forget 90% of what they learn" (Miller, 1998, as cited in Sandholtz, 2002, p. 815). Traditional in-service workshops are typically offered within a single session or day, consist of didactic lecture, and demand little more from the participants than passive attention. In contrast, professional development that leads to improved practices is more likely to be based on theories of adult learning (Lawler, 2003). Characteristics of training provided to adults generally posited as effective include opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, meaningful practice, recognition of participants' expertise, and self-reflection (Sandholtz, 2002).

The Current Pilot Project

Overview

In an effort to enhance school-based professionals' attitudes toward and skills in family–professional collaboration, a sequence of three graduate courses were offered in a high-need school system. For the purpose of this study, the term "high-need school system" meant schools that, based on data for the time period during which the study was conducted, had more than 25% of students who met eligibility for the federal free or reduced price school lunch program. In those schools in which our participants were employed, the mean

percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch was 33%. However, this was skewed as one of the 11 schools had a very low rate of 12%, while the mean percentage for the remaining 10 schools was 54%. School-based professionals included classroom teachers, special educators, school administrators, and related service providers (e.g., physical therapists, school counselors, school nurses). The intention was to offer effective training consistent with best practices in adult education. Four specific project goals were to: (1) improve participants' attitude toward family–professional collaboration, (2) foster participants' acquisition of new knowledge and skills, (3) enhance participants' intention to apply new knowledge or skills in the work setting, and (4) transfer learning from the training room to the work setting.

Thus, the pilot project consisted of a sequence of three graduate courses offered over one academic year to a cohort of school-based professionals who worked at six schools in a high-need school district in suburban Maryland. All three courses were taught at a school within that system and included projects and activities designed to address the needs of the community in which the participants were employed. Courses were taught by university faculty and, when feasible, were co-taught with school-based professionals. An additional value of the project was the interdisciplinary backgrounds of project participants, allowing them to enhance interprofessional collaboration skills concurrent with the development of family–professional collaboration skills.

The graduate coursework that constituted the project had at its foundation the concept that professionals must listen to and understand families as a prerequisite to engaging them in their children's education. Engagement was defined broadly, as a narrow definition might actually interfere with recognizing engagement when it occurs (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). For example, traditional family involvement activities that require attendance at school functions might be unavailable to family members who lack transportation, childcare, or the ability to take time off from a job. These parents might be considered no less "involved" if the definition of involvement included talking about school at home and having high expectations for educational attainment. An equally important premise of the pilot project was that skills attained via professional development were more likely to be transferred to the work setting if the training extended beyond the classroom and into the actual environments in which the skills were to be used. Finally, the use of a three-course sequence of graduate courses is consistent with results from Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon's (2001) exploration of factors that enhance professional development training. Based on their large-scale study, one significant factor that emerged was that "sustained and intensive professional development is more likely to have an impact, as reported by teachers, than is shorter professional development" (p. 937).

Description of Professional Development Coursework

The three graduate courses that comprised the professional development training were offered across one academic year and are described briefly in Table 1. Courses were developmental in nature. Content that was introduced in the first course was revisited in the next two courses at deeper levels and with more opportunities for authentic application. Within each course, there was attention given to both theory and skill development consistent with empirical evidence that grounding skill development in theory fosters more effective application in real-life situations than teaching skills alone (Brazil, Ozer, Cloutier, Levine, & Stryer, 2005). Implementing interventions without understanding theory may allow school-based professionals to apply solutions to problems that resemble those in the training session, but not to modify solutions in novel situations or when confronting varying contextual variables. It was the project developers' intention to increase the ability of school-based practitioners to apply skills with sensitivity to the particular situation in which they were attempting to improve relationships with and engage families.

Table 1. Description of Courses Comprising the Professional Development Coursework

Course	Description
Applied Family Relationships (3 credits)	Applied Family Relationships introduces the student to theories of family development and function. Students explore diversity and relationship dynamics through analysis of their family stories. They utilize foundational communication skills and empirical-based tools and techniques to understand effective family processes.
Family–Professional Collaboration (3 credits)	Family-Professional Collaboration moves the student beyond understanding and applying family-based theories to a focus on the development of collaborative relationships with school-affiliated families and other school personnel. Students learn and practice advanced communication including conflict resolution, problem solving, and reframing techniques in the classroom and in the field. They work with colleagues to interview families about their life experiences and worldviews.
Project in Family-Focused Program Development (3 credits)	Project in Family-Focused Program Development takes the student to the next level of involvement: the community. Students use action research and focus group methods to understand the perspectives of families and professionals in a particular school or community setting. This information is used to develop interventions to enhance family–professional relationships.

Theoretical topics addressed in the graduate coursework included: understanding family systems and complex family relationships, exploring family strengths and resiliency, and developing understanding of and sensitivity to issues of diversity. These topics were addressed initially in the first course, Applied Family Relationships. This course emphasized understanding family diversity and culture, as well as context, as a foundation for understanding a family's story. When families feel that their values, culture, and efforts in regard to parenting are respected, collaboration is more likely to occur (Minke, 2000). Barriers to effective collaboration are created when families perceive that school-based professionals have an overly negative view of their family's functioning or fail to identify the child's strengths when addressing problems (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Participants were also taught to identify their own potential biases toward collaboration as a prerequisite for effective relationship-building. School-based professionals may be prone to adopt their school's norms for collaboration; if individuals within schools view collaboration as a burden, teachers may inadvertently act toward parents in a manner that leads parents to avoid future interactions. Teachers may then be reinforced in their belief that collaboration is difficult and unrewarding. However, this cycle may be broken when educators become aware of how their own attitudes and behaviors may enhance or serve as barriers to collaboration (Hudson & Glomb, 1997; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

Specific skills addressed in the coursework included communicating at basic and advanced levels, conducting ethnographic interviews and focus groups, and planning action research. Development of these competencies was facilitated through didactic instruction, in-class practice using videotaping and corrective feedback, field experiences, and action research.

While strong communication skills do not ensure collaboration, their absence will likely be an impediment. Effective communication requires one to be both an effective listener and speaker. Thus, coursework addressed basic skills such as reflecting feelings, summarizing content, paraphrasing, developing appropriate questions, active listening, and integrating nonverbal and verbal messages. These constitute the underpinnings of successful collaborative relationships as described by most authors (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Friend & Cook, 2006). In many instances, even excellent communication skills are insufficient to navigate the complex path to successful collaboration. Consequently, more advanced skills were introduced. These included: conflict management, reframing, systematic problem solving, and ethnographic interviewing.

Consistent with literature describing best practices in pedagogy (Joyce & Showers, 1980), participants practiced skills in both simulated and authentic situations and were provided with guidance and corrective feedback. Project participants learned and practiced basic interviewing through a carefully designed training sequence that occurred over the course of the project. They first interviewed one another to explore personal family stories and then interviewed a panel consisting of family members from their schools. Participants subsequently interviewed individual families and conducted focus groups composed of professionals and families from their school communities.

The family member panel was noteworthy as it provided a model for incorporating authentic family engagement into project participants' skill development. Project participants developed questions to facilitate discussion regarding families' perspectives on their experiences advocating for their children with special needs while coping with complex school system policies and procedures. Questions were prepared, critiqued, and revised in class based on principles of ethnographic interviewing (Westby, Burda, & Mehta, 2003). Three parents from the project participants' school community were then invited to attend a class meeting where project participants asked questions and practiced listening skills while panel members responded. Sample questions are listed in Table 2. The panel interview was videotaped so that project participants could later critique their own communication skills, as well as listen for and identify themes regarding parents' views of collaborating with school-based professionals. The expectation was that these in-class experiences would prepare participants for fieldwork that occurred at the end of the second course and that constituted the major component of the third course.

Table 2. Family Member Panel: Sample Questions

Questions Developed by Project Participants
Describe a typical day with (child's name).
Please give an example of the most regarding and most challenging aspects of raising (child's name).
Describe your initial experiences working with a school team.
What suggestions do you have for school teams in terms of improving interactions with family members?
If you had to advise a parent who is in the initial stages of the special education process, what would you tell the parent?

During the second course, Family–Professional Collaboration, participants worked in pairs or groups of three to conduct an ethnographic interview with a family from their own school community. The purpose was to practice framing questions to foster understanding of a family's story and to facilitate family engagement. The complete process included identifying a family from the community to interview, formulating appropriate questions, conducting the interview, analyzing interview data, and presenting what they learned through ethnographic interviewing to the class. The rubric used to grade the ethnographic interview is presented in Table 3 and provides detailed expectations for project participants.

Table 3. Grading Rubric for Ethnographic Interview

Requirement	Criteria
Description of family	The description should include why this family was selected for interview and family demographics, but should not compromise the family's privacy.
Description of the specific steps from initial preparation through conducting the interview	This should include planning questions for the interview, contacting the family, determining your roles, and detailed description of procedures used to collect interview information.
Copy of release form	This release form must have signatures of interview participant(s).
List of questions	This includes both initial and follow-up questions.
Description of observations made during the interview process	This includes observations of both the interviewee and interviewer(s). A strong response includes attention to why a particular behavior may have been noted.
Summary and analysis of information	This includes your analysis of information obtained from the interviews, during both formal and informal interactions, including the major themes and support for the themes. A strong response integrates data from observations and responses to interview questions.
Observations about the process of arranging for, conducting, and analyzing the interview	This includes your perceptions, as a group, about what worked, what didn't work, and what you might do differently next time.

During the third course, Project in Community Program Development, participants worked in pairs to conduct focus groups exploring perceptions of school faculty, related service providers, and families within their particular school in regard to building family–professional relationships. They analyzed focus group data to arrive at an understanding of factors that enhanced or impeded family involvement within that school. Participants shared this analysis with all stakeholders, including the school administration, and proposed action plans to address concerns that emerged during the focus groups. Examples of action plans are discussed below and summarized in Table 5. Following completion of the Professional Development Coursework, project participants were given the opportunity to implement action plans as an independent study under one of the project developers.

Method

Researchers and Participants

The first listed author (Note: authors are equal partners in this work, thus they are referred to in the order listed rather than as first and second author) previously worked as a school psychologist in a public school system for 17 years before becoming a university professor. It was through her work on school teams that she initially became interested in the effect that school professionals have on family members' willingness and ability to be involved in their children's education. The second listed author is a licensed counselor and professor. Her background includes direct service working with and understanding families. Through her work as an occupational therapist and certified professional counselor she became interested in family quality of life and the importance of family–professional relationships. The authors' professional and personal experiences and interests brought them together and became a focus of their collaborative relationship. They developed a university program that prepares graduate students and professionals from various fields to collaborate with families and with one other. The co-authors received a state department of education grant to offer the graduate program in selected counties in the state. This article presents outcomes from the first year of the state-funded project. The first listed author taught one of the three courses and prepared program evaluation materials. The second listed author taught two of the courses. Both authors participated in data analysis. They met regularly to discuss themes and the overall process. They shared the belief that strong family-professional relationships are essential for a child's progress in school and overall well-being. They both also believed that the courses taught as part of the graduate program they developed would change attitudes and practices of professionals as they

attempted to engage families. To counter any potential positive biases they worked closely with two different qualitative research consultants when designing the program evaluation and analyzing data.

The pilot project was initiated in a suburban school district in Maryland with support by a grant from the Maryland State Department of Education. The district educates a diverse population of approximately 106,000 students, of which 52.3% are White, 39.3% are Black, 4.7% are Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.3% are Hispanic, and .6% are American Indian/Alaska Native. Approximately 2% are English Language Learners, and 13% have been identified with educational disabilities. One third of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged.

School-based professionals learned of the opportunity to participate in the project from a flier that was distributed through the professional development office in their school systems. An effort was made to recruit participants who represented different professions within the school and to obtain at least two individuals from each school. This latter aim was based on the contention of Garet et al. (2001) that when several teachers from the same school engage in training experiences together, new practices are more likely to be sustained than when training is provided to a single individual from a school. All individuals who applied to participate were selected, thus forming a sample of convenience. Course fees were paid by the local school system consistent with established policies for professional development. Fifteen participants completed the first course (FMST 601), 12 completed the second course (FMST 610), and 11 completed all three courses. Based on responses during brief phone interviews conducted with non-completers, the three participants who did not continue after the first course indicated that competing demands from their employment settings, schedule conflicts, and the level of outside work required by the courses contributed to their respective decisions. The single participant who did not continue after the second course indicated that her decision was based on a scheduling conflict. The data discussed in this paper will be limited to the 11 participants who completed all three courses. Table 4 describes the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Across all three classes, 29 family members were involved in the pilot project in the capacity of advocacy panel members (5), interviewees for the ethnographic interview (6), or members of the school-based focus groups (18).

Table 4. Demographics of Participants

Variable	$N = 11$	%
Gender		
Male	2	18%
Female	9	81%
Race		
Black	5	45%
White	6	54%
Age		
30-39	6	54%
40-49	1	9%
50+	4	36%
Education Level		
BA/BS	6	54%
MA	5	45%
Position		
Classroom Teacher	4	36%
Special Educator	3	27%
School Counselor	1	9%
School Nurse	1	9%
Media Specialist	1	9%
Occupational Therapist	1	9%

Project Evaluation

The effectiveness of the professional development coursework was evaluated using multiple methods: culminating assignments completed for each course and graded according to rubrics delineating expected competencies, post-coursework questionnaires, and a post-coursework interview conducted in person with individual participants six months after courses were completed.

Description of Questionnaire

Following completion of all three courses, participants responded anonymously in writing to a questionnaire asking three questions: (1) Has your interest in collaborating with families changed (either increased or decreased) since beginning the Professional Development Coursework? If yes, please list up to three ways your interest has changed. (2) List up to three of the most important skills you have gained through the Professional Development Coursework. (3) How, specifically, do you plan to integrate these skills into your work in your school?

An essential aspect of any professional training is the extent to which participants apply what they have learned during training in their employment setting. This is especially true in light of the extensive time and financial commitment made by both individuals that pursue and organizations that sponsor continuing education opportunities. Thus, six months following completion of the Professional Development Coursework, interviews were conducted with program completers to determine how the participants were using the information learned during the project and the status and progress of action plans developed in the third course.

Data Collection and Analysis

Responses to post-coursework questionnaires were read repeatedly before themes were analyzed. Two research assistants reviewed the responses, coded them independently according to themes, then discussed and revised the coding until agreement was reached. The same process was then followed by project developers until major themes were agreed upon across research assistants and project developers.

Approximately six months after participants had completed all coursework, follow-up interviews were conducted to determine how they were using the knowledge and skills obtained from coursework; the status and progress of action plan implementation; and, if plans had not been implemented, barriers that might have prohibited implementation. Participants were contacted by the research assistants to arrange a convenient time and place for the interview. In all cases, interviews were conducted in the participants' schools at a time the participants identified as convenient.

Pairs of research assistants conducted semi-structured interviews with individual participants. One research assistant led the interview, while the other videotaped the interview and took notes on the participant's responses. The interview utilized a script that included questions exploring participant's qualitative impressions of the project coursework and the degree to which he or she was using knowledge and skills obtained in courses within the work setting. The interview was then transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. Data analysis followed the same procedures as described above.

Findings

Findings below summarize outcomes collected via: (1) participants' responses to questionnaires completed immediately after conclusion of the third course (eight months after the program began), and (2) in-person interviews conducted six months after conclusion of the third course. The intent was

to determine both immediate and longer-term effectiveness of coursework in regard to enhancing both attitudes toward, and skills in, family–professional collaboration. All 11 participants completed the questionnaires at the end of the three courses comprising the program and 10 of the 11 participants completed the in-person interview.

Four primary themes were found in the responses: improved attitude toward family–professional collaboration, acquisition of new knowledge or skills, intention to apply new knowledge or skills in the work setting, and actual application of skills in authentic settings. Evidence of more positive attitudes and changes in the nature of interactions between participants and families were present at both data collection points. However, evidence of taking a leadership role to implement change at the school level was present only in the in-person interviews. In the following section, description of these categories and illustrative responses are provided.

Improved Attitude Toward Family–Professional Collaboration

Improved attitudes included taking interest in the family's perspective, appreciating differences among families, and increased self-awareness regarding one's own attitudes toward collaboration.

All 11 project participants noted increased interest in collaborating with families to engage them in the educational process. Several emphasized the need to expand upon how one defines "involvement," and several reflected upon an increased desire to understand family dynamics. The following quote illustrates this theme:

> I believe my interest in collaborating with families has increased since beginning the courses last fall. I am interested in pursuing more authentic collaboration that actively engages families in their children's school experiences, rather than focusing on more superficial involvement. I understand and accept (finally!) that there are some families that we will not be able to reach and that we should not give up, but instead, focus on those families we can reach.

Almost all participants (9 of 11) offered comments related to appreciating or accepting differences. They recognized the importance of actively seeking to understand the perspective of the family rather than merely expressing their own point of view when involved in dyadic interactions with family members. As stated by one participant, "seeking to understand" and developing the mindset necessary to suspend judgment must be deliberate and requires personal effort and skill. Typical comments included the following:

When you stop to listen to [the family's] story…you understand that doesn't mean that they're not involved; you find out that there are other factors that hindered them from [coming]…when you take that extra step to listen, then you find other ways.

We learned techniques and questions that don't put [families] on the spot so much…

We learned how there's what we think and then there's what's really going on and how we need to step back and look at the parents' situation and then assess it from their side.

Keeping an open mind further describes the positive attitude change. This theme captured participants' reports of recognizing and avoiding the tendency to judge, rather than to appreciate, a family's unique situation. One participant who started the program with an especially skeptical and negative attitude wrote:

I feel that a big focus of this class has been on not being judgmental. I wish I could say that I have learned to eliminate or control this aspect of my personality. However, as both a teacher and a parent, I find that I cannot help but evaluate the actions and inactions that I see within my own frame of reference. I think I can say with some degree of certainty that I am more aware of my tendencies in this area, and I am now more able and motivated to refrain from jumping to conclusions and making judgments.

Self-awareness regarding one's own attitudes toward collaboration is an essential step in understanding families' worldviews and thus a foundational component introduced in the first course. The following example from questionnaires administered at the completion of the coursework illustrates this lesson:

I learned how much my bias, my life style, and my opinions impact how I view my students and their families. Many times it is so easy to say what should be or why don't parents do this or that, or the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, etc. Many times I draw these conclusions without knowing my student's family situation. The more I know about my students and their family situations, the more I can relate to my students and be a help to them.

While improved attitude was evident immediately upon the completion of the coursework, we did not feel this was a sufficient goal, in and of itself. Therefore, we were gratified to note that the change in attitude that was initially noted in questionnaires appeared to have been sustained once participants returned to their work settings. Specifically, participants noted that their

own behaviors reflected more tolerant attitudes and that this change was a direct result of the coursework. Comments that supported this positive attitude included mention of listening without judgment, taking a strengths-based perspective, and recognizing that each family has a story to be heard and a voice to be brought to the table. For example, one participant talked about previously interpreting a family member's lack of responsiveness to a request for a meeting as the family "not caring." Since completing the coursework, this individual has begun to explore other factors that might be involved when families do not attend school meetings and to reach out in other ways. For example, she indicated that she might send a more comprehensive email or find another way to communicate rather than requiring or expecting a family to come to the school. She further reported that parents appreciated this more flexible and open-minded approach.

Positive attitudes were also sustained in the form of willingness to use clearer communication when interacting with family members, as illustrated in the following quote:

> Communication is probably one of the best things that came out of the class. It's always in the back of my mind to think about what might be going on and what I'm saying and how I'm saying it and how it sounds and how things are coming out of my mouth and how it might be interpreted by other people in different situations. It just definitely made me more aware of what I say when I talk to people and how I say it sometimes.

Another indication of positive attitude change that transferred to the work setting was participants' ability to recognize a family's unique situation and identify their strengths. Interviewees offered comments highlighting the importance of recognizing what family members bring to the interaction as a prerequisite to building effective partnerships. One participant discussed how her improved attitude was demonstrated in her interactions with family members by sharing the following:

> …maybe change my demeanor a little bit so that in my interactions with parents I try… I think to maybe look for strengths rather than always looking for weaknesses and trying to approach things in more of a positive manner even when it's a negative thing.

A goal of the program was to increase participants' recognition that building trust with a family is a prerequisite to engagement and that even when one uses highly developed communication skills, true collaboration is not ensured. However, once trust is established, the stage is set for building the family–professional relationship by using new skills proficiently. Thus we now

transition from discussing attitudes that reflect awareness of the importance of relationship-building to a discussion of new knowledge and skills acquired by participants.

Acquisition of New Knowledge or Skills

The major category of new knowledge and skills acquired through the coursework was skilled communication, as this was mentioned by all 11 participants in the questionnaires. Participants' comments reflected the importance of developing effective questions and using other advanced communication skills (e.g., reframing, conflict resolution) as primary vehicles for building relationships with families. Nine project participants described specific skills gained in communication and collaboration. One participant stated that she now "feels more confident in engaging parents in a positive dialogue, because I feel I have refined skills and awareness in questioning and identifying verbal and nonverbal cues." Effective communication is frequently noted in the literature as critical when working with families, but the specific speaking and listening skills that comprise effective communication are often not delineated. Thoughtful preparation of questions or comments prior to communicating with families, as well as listening fully to another person while she or he speaks (rather than thinking of one's next response), were skills taught and practiced as part of the program coursework. Several participants reflected upon the need to simply "be present" as a way to let families know of their interest in developing a relationship. Two quotes below clearly illustrate this concept:

> If we truly want to help children be successful, we must realize that parents and guardians need to feel that they are being heard and that their concerns are being taken into consideration. This allows us to work together for the betterment of the children, and as educators, that should be our main focus.

> It really does shed new light on a situation if you put yourself in the other person's shoes and truly see the situation through their eyes. I also learned that parents just want to be heard and understood and until we fulfill that need, we cannot build a relationship with them that can lead to offering assistance.

Most participants (8 of 11) identified conducting action research using focus groups as an important skill they acquired. In the final course, participants learned the method and art of group interviewing, and how to gather and analyze information for action planning. Skills were first developed and practiced in the classroom and then in the field, in the form of focus groups conducted in the participants' home schools. The importance of conducting focus groups in

the school setting, rather than using only simulated practice in the classroom, is expressed in the following statement:

> After completing this course, I feel that I developed an understanding of action research that could be put to use in a variety of ways. Book learning is great, but what we have completed is a reality. Meeting with our administrator and parent groups was a priceless way to interact with a cross-section of people who impact us as educators.

The program in its entirety was an opportunity for participants to integrate skills necessary to enhance family engagement into their professional practice. Rather than rely on a single workshop or course, the project allowed for consistent, ongoing learning and practice. The intent that each course builds upon prior courses was recognized by participants as critical to their skill development and was perceived as foundational to the success of the program. The opportunity to practice skills in increasingly authentic settings was recognized as important by participants and is highlighted in the quote below:

> We began with interviewing each other about our families. We then moved on [to] interviewing a family with a child with special needs. We ended by conducting focus groups of administrators or teachers and families. Through this all we learned an infinite amount of techniques to become better action researchers…we truly became expert interviewers. Additionally, we learned the proper techniques for conducting focus groups from preparation right through to data analysis. I feel confident that I could conduct another focus group in the future and have a successful outcome.

Intent to Apply New Knowledge and Skills in the Work Setting

While improved attitudes and effective communication are important competencies, they would be insufficient without intent to apply them in authentic situations. Too often professionals assume that because they are familiar with families, building relationships with them will be natural, easy, or automatic. Thus, a desired outcome of the coursework was for participants to identify intentional actions necessary to engage families. Through this process, we hoped to maximize transfer of learning from the training setting to the employment setting. In regard to the application of content and skills learned through the coursework to encounters with families in participants' schools, two subcategories emerged: using knowledge and skills in one's own work as an educator, and sharing new knowledge with colleagues.

At the conclusion of the program, 9 of the 11 respondents indicated that they planned to use their new skills to modify their own interactions with

families. A specific example demonstrating the skill of listening fully, as was discussed above, can be found in the following participant statement:

I hope to use the information I learned in order to be a better teacher, communicator, and leader. As a teacher I have to talk to parents quite frequently. I will listen and ask questions, not just talk. I will try and find out "why," not just tell parents "what."

The program also emphasized collaboration among professionals as one approach to encourage practices that enhance relationships with families in participants' schools. Project participants understood that to truly change school climate, they must involve colleagues in enhancing relationships with families. For example, one participant suggested that the family involvement committee of which she was a part might be more effective if it changed its approach.

At school, I am a member of the family involvement committee. This committee plans for and runs many of the after-school events. We gather, decide what events are needed, and go about planning them. From what I have learned in this class, maybe we are going about this in the wrong manner. Perhaps we should start the year with a survey or focus group to get input as to what the community of (school name) wants. I have learned that if people know we are interested in their thoughts and opinions, they will feel more connected and hopefully participate more.

Seven of 11 participants offered comments related to the intent to use new knowledge and skills for broader school change. A participant spoke of how the focus group process taught and conducted as part of the third course was already making an impact in her own practice:

The knowledge and experiences I have gained from this class have already affected future professional endeavors. The focus group conversations were valuable and will be utilized in the future to address needs or further develop programs at our school. Also, we have presented a plan that we are eager to implement and feel will greatly benefit our school. It is already planned to present our plan to the staff, and key players have been identified to start the process. Additionally, we have started to break down barriers between families, staff, and administration, and we will hopefully continue to open doors for more opportunities to strengthen our relationships.

Authentic Application of Improved Attitudes, New Knowledge, and New Skills

Interviews conducted with 10 of the 11 participants six months after the program was completed were noteworthy in that most of the participants could

clearly recall the purpose of each course and what they learned in each course. While recall of content is fundamental for application in authentic settings, it is not an end in and of itself. A more important objective was to increase participants' use of skills in their own day-to-day practices and to enhance their ability to effect broader school change. All of the participants who completed the interviews reported using the skills and knowledge they had obtained and indicated some degree of action based on participation in the coursework. A list of specific action initiatives can be found in Figure 1. Some of the initiatives included: taking actions to facilitate home–school communication, assuming new leadership and/or family involvement roles in their schools, effecting changes in school culture related to collaboration, enhancing involvement of administrators, and conducting additional focus groups. However, it should be noted that participants did not always achieve goals established as a result of their focus groups. In one school, for example, the four professionals who completed the coursework did not achieve their goal of establishing a Welcome Committee at their school, although plans were in place and some aspects of the plan were enacted. Interestingly, several commented to us that the email requesting their participation in the in-person interviews revived their interest in fully executing their plan.

We were encouraged that 5 of 11 participants took a non-required independent study course (following completion of the three-course sequence) which guided them through implementation of the projects identified from their focus groups. Of those five, three completed three additional credits and earned a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Family–Professional Collaboration.

Interviews also revealed a positive outcome that was not anticipated—increased respect from colleagues and school administrators, as captured in this comment:

> There seems to be a greater awareness of different things that we identified as problems, and to me, it is not wonderful, but it's much better environment-wise here. I do think from taking the course that we gained respect in the school as far as from the administrators and from the other teachers that saw us do this project, as far as the validity of what we're offering and what we presented, because you know they did see us working hard, they were involved with our interview sessions that we would do, and so I think we came up with the ideas. They were supportive because they knew that the work was done within the building, with real people, with the families that we actually deal with. So, yeah, I mean that was a huge positive from it.

Broader School Initiatives With Examples of Each Initiative

Actions to Facilitate Home–School Communication

- Communication folders sent home in child's backpack (adopted by two schools)
- Email communication between teachers and home enhanced with assistance of technology liaison
- Letter sent home to parents with introduction and teacher's business cards
- ESOL Information Packets developed for new students and families
- Disability support information included in monthly school newsletter (adopted by two schools)
- Option offered for evening special education (IEP) meetings

Actions to Improve Parent–Teacher Associations (PTA)

- Number of PTA meetings decreased to four a year based on parent feedback
- Length of PTA meetings shortened
- Liaison position created to improve communication between PTA representatives and principal

Actions to Improve School Environment

- Information table placed in main entrance to school
- Bulletin board created to recognize family volunteers
- Use of parent volunteers increased (e.g., to read books on tape for school use)
- New program developed, "Diapers to Diplomas," that featured 10 professionals speaking on services for students from birth to 21 years of age with special needs
- Involvement of administrators in nonacademic events with parents increased
- Focus groups involving teachers, parents, and support staff developed to explore concerns related to students with behavioral problems

Figure 1. Application of Skills in School Settings: Summary of Activities Six Months After Program Completion

An additional unexpected finding was participants' increased leadership roles through interaction with the school's administration. Many of the participants reported developing a closer working relationship with principals and other school leaders as well as increased participation on family involvement committees. Other participants were pursuing or had acquired leadership roles. For example, one became an assistant vice principal, and another was planning on becoming a pupil personnel worker (i.e., school social worker).

In summary, findings indicated that improved attitudes, knowledge, and skills were immediately apparent upon completion of the coursework and were sustained six months afterwards, although participants demonstrated application of skills to varying degrees. All participants continued to report a positive

change in attitude toward collaboration and more effective communication with families. Engagement in the coursework provided opportunities for all participants to become advocates for, and some to become leaders in, increasing meaningful family involvement in their schools. Many implemented the plans that developed from focus groups and others used the knowledge they acquired to build more effective relationships with families on an individual level. Although gaining increased respect from school administrators and being provided with increased opportunity to take on leadership roles related to family involvement were not initial goals of the coursework, they were nevertheless important and noteworthy outcomes.

Discussion

The positive influence of family involvement on children's and adolescents' school performance has been well established, yet teacher preparation programs often do not teach the skills necessary to engage families in a thorough or systematic manner. The intent of the current pilot project was to address this training deficit. Analysis of themes that emerged from questionnaire data suggests that, following completion of three graduate level courses that addressed family–professional collaboration, school-based professionals felt they enhanced their skills in communication and collaboration and experienced positive change in attitudes toward collaboration. More importantly, several participants reported making changes in how they interacted with families even prior to the completion of the three-course sequence, while other participants articulated specific ways in which they planned to utilize new skills in their work settings. Additionally, six months after training was completed, most participants reported that they had generalized skills learned in the classroom to their work settings in a variety of ways. Five participants reported that they had voluntarily implemented action plans they had developed during the third and final course, and most of the others reported implementation of some aspect of the action plan.

The pilot project was successful in achieving stated goals. The developmental aspect of the coursework was reinforced as participants noted how the courses built upon one another and how, ultimately, they viewed this as an important aspect of the program. As the courses were offered as university graduate courses prior to being taught as part of this community initiative, they were more rigorous than other professional development experiences in which the participants had been involved. While this may have resulted in early attrition of some participants, those who completed the coursework emerged as leaders or potential leaders in their schools. The coursework was designed to

promote positive change in attitudes and use of skills in authentic settings and those goals were accomplished. Although increased involvement with school administration was an intentional aspect of the program, it was not initially articulated as a specific goal. However, it was in this area that another aspect of the program's success was evident. One participant captures this well:

> I think the biggest thing has been the message that was sent to the administration. I think that they heard some [of] the data that was presented. They are actually doing things now to increase that welcoming feeling; they have been active at more parent nights; they have tried to be a little more involved in the different things, more welcoming, more seen in the different activities instead of being isolated and secluded in the office.

The positive outcomes of the coursework extended beyond changing attitudes and improving skills. Not only did participants report using new skills individually but also reported contributing to change in their schools by working with family members, colleagues, and administrators to engage families. Several participants completed additional graduate coursework and had plans to move into leadership roles. While there were many accomplishments, there were also areas that could be improved as the program is replicated in the state and further developed into a model for other school systems.

First, as a grant-funded project, coursework was offered at minimal financial expense to participants. This may have affected their attitude about training in a positive direction or may have enhanced desire to participate from the outset. If this project were to be replicated in other school systems, several strategies might be effective in addressing this issue. As many school systems have policies for reimbursement of continuing education, prospective participants could be encouraged to take advantage of this benefit. A second strategy might be to further develop the leadership aspect of the program to make it more attractive to school administrators. A final option would be to explore a skills-based approach and merge the content from the three courses into a one- or two-course program. For example, the second course, which is more skills-based, may be offered as a stand-alone course if desired change is limited to improving participants' communication skills. This approach is being investigated in a related project by the current authors. A final limitation is that project participants came from a single suburban school system. While the school system was diverse in regard to race and socioeconomic status, similar outcomes may not be realized when participants work in urban or rural school systems. Exploration of factors related to replication will be addressed through expansion of the pilot project into additional school systems and eventually through offering the

coursework in a hybrid fashion, incorporating face-to-face meetings with on-line learning in an effort to reach learners in remote locations.

Future Directions

Other challenges lay ahead. There is often little incentive for school-based professionals to engage in rigorous graduate coursework that does not directly lead to an additional professional degree, increased salary, or other form of formal recognition. While an optimum solution would be for state departments of education to include mandatory coursework on family–professional collaboration in teacher education certification requirements, it is unlikely that this will occur any time soon. In the current pilot project, participants reported school administrative support to be important for both their motivation to complete the coursework and their ability to foster change in practice. Accordingly, recruitment efforts in subsequent school systems will incorporate school administrator commitment to recognizing contributions of project participants through a variety of means. These may include providing leadership opportunities related to addressing family–professional collaboration at the school or school-system level or public recognition through school or system newsletters or websites. Sustainability of practice over time is an important outcome of any system change effort and is significantly enhanced when participants are provided with the immediate opportunity for skill use after training (Jarrell, O'Neill & Hasse, 2009). Thus, affording project participants the opportunity to provide in-service to school faculty might serve to both increase generalization to other members of the school community as well as sustain project participants' own skills.

It will be important for future research to consider methods for reducing obstacles to implementing action plans developed as a result of focus groups. Not surprisingly, in interviews conducted with project participants six months post-training, the issue of time emerged as a primary barrier. A second issue that emerged was the continuing need to further change school climate in terms of receptivity to increasing family involvement. To address these issues, future coursework might include identifying potential obstacles to implementation of plans in the work setting and development of strategies to address them. Having participants engage in peer-to-peer coaching, long considered an effective approach for teachers who wish to incorporate new skills into their behavioral repertoire (Joyce & Showers, 1981; Licklider, 1995), may also increase the potential for action plan implementation.

Overall, preliminary analysis from this pilot project supports the feasibility of training school-based professionals to foster parental engagement in their children's education. In the words of one participant:

Throughout all of these courses I have learned the value of forming and strengthening relationships between families and professionals. By putting aside our assumptions, we can hear the needs of each other more clearly. Additionally, I learned that families and staff have many common beliefs and that we can activate small steps in order to improve our relationships. Also, that listening is definitely important, but taking action to initiate change is what families and professionals find most significant.

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Linking Home and School: Teacher Candidates' Beliefs and Experiences

Alisa Hindin

Abstract

The role of family in children's education is unquestionable. While a number of factors influence the type and level of educational support that parents provide for children, researchers have found that the greatest influence on parent involvement is the classroom teacher. Despite the important role teachers play in parent involvement, little is known about the ways teachers develop their beliefs and understandings of parent involvement practices. The current study focuses on candidates' observations, experiences, and perceptions of parent involvement activities during their field placements and student teaching. Findings indicate that teacher candidates observed a number of parent involvement activities during field experiences and student teaching. Candidates viewed parents as having an essential role in children's education. However, candidates did not observe ideal interactions with families when placed in urban settings, and there were inconsistencies between candidates' perceptions of parents' and teachers' roles.

Key words: home, schools, linking, teachers, candidates, preservice, pre-service, beliefs, experiences, family, families, parents, involvement, practices, urban, suburban, roles, perceptions, special, education, regular, classrooms

Purpose

Parents play a critical role in their children's education. This is especially true in the areas of language and literacy development in which parents

can substantially influence development prior to and during children's years of formal schooling (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Durkin, 1966; Hart & Risely, 1995; Hewison & Tizard, 1980; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 1996). Although parents can positively influence children's learning, not all families provide the same level or type of support at home. (Note: The term parent is used to represent a range of caregivers.) Researchers have shown inconsistencies in the levels and types of parent involvement depending on economic, cultural, and linguistic factors. Children who live in poverty and are culturally and linguistically diverse have been found to receive fewer of the language experiences necessary to build a strong vocabulary (Hart & Risely, 1995), fewer of the school-style literacy activities in their homes that support reading performance (Heath, 1983; Nord, Lennon, Westat, & Chandler, 1999; Ortiz, 1986; Purcell-Gates, 1996), and on national learning assessments, these children underperform their peers who are raised at higher income levels (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005).

Given the inconsistencies in parent involvement and the importance of parent involvement for children's education, researchers and educators have sought ways to promote parent involvement for all families. Researchers have demonstrated that parent involvement for school-aged children is most influenced by classroom teachers (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Dauber & Epstein, 1993), yet home–school partnerships are often complicated by differing expectations between teachers and families about their roles in children's education. This is especially true for students who are more likely to struggle with academic achievement and who might not be experiencing the home-based learning opportunities that best prepare them for academic achievement, such as storybook reading and homework support (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1990; Heath, 1983; Parra & Henderson, 1982; Valdés, 1996). Moreover, these differences in home learning opportunities can be exacerbated by teachers who have a better understanding of literacy practices in middle-class homes and who may select texts that are not "relevant" for diverse groups of children (McCarthey, 1997).

In order to find ways to foster parent involvement, some researchers have examined the effectiveness of providing professional development and support for practicing teachers and families to increase communication and sharing between the home and school (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Dauber & Espstein, 1993; Epstein, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Krol-Sinclair, Hindin, Emig, & McClure, 2003; Paratore, Hindin, Krol-Sinclair, & Dúran, 1999). Although there is more research on practicing teachers, a limited number of researchers have begun looking at the role of teacher preparation in parent involvement (Graue, 2005; Katz & Bauch, 1999; Morris &

Taylor, 1998; Power & Perry, 2000; Uludag, 2008). Nonetheless, research is still needed to address the ways teachers develop their beliefs and knowledge about parent involvement.

To address this gap, this study explores teacher candidates' experiences with and beliefs about home–school partnerships and the roles parents and teachers play in children's educational development. In this study, home–school partnerships are viewed as the ways teachers and families work together to support children's learning. The term parent involvement is broadly conceived to include experiences that take place at school and in children's homes and communities. Examples of home-based experiences include helping children with homework and school-based projects, supporting children's learning through encouragement and interest, reading with children, and discussing children's learning. Parent involvement also includes parental visits to the school to advocate for children, to learn about children's educational experiences, as well as to share their culture and expertise.

Theoretical Framework

Parent involvement in children's education is clearly defined by Epstein (1994) who developed a typology for the range of parent involvement activities which include *basic obligations of families* (Type 1), *basic obligations of schools to effectively communicate with families* (Type 2), *involvement at the school building* (Type 3), *family involvement for learning activities at home* (Type 4), *decision making, participation, leadership, and school advocacy* (Type 5), and *collaborations and exchanges with the community* (Type 6). Epstein (2005) describes how this theory can be extended to view partnership in terms of *overlapping spheres of influence* that can be helpful in teacher preparation by illustrating the ways children's learning is influenced by teachers, families, and communities.

While a number of factors influence the educational support that parents provide for children, such as their own school experiences, teachers' efforts to involve parents is one critical factor. For example, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) emphasize the importance of teacher moves to involve parents in their model of parent involvement. They explain, "The considerable evidence on teacher practices intended to support parent involvement, and parents' sensitivity to teachers' attitudes about their involvement, underscores the importance of school generated invitations and opportunities for positive parental decisions about involvement" (p. 31). Similarly, Dauber and Epstein (1993) report about the impact of teachers on parent involvement and conclude, "The strongest and most consistent predictors of parent involvement at school and at home are the specific school programs and teacher practices that

encourage or guide parental involvement" (p. 61). The importance of teachers is also supported by the research of Anderson and Minke (2007) who state, "The emergence of specific invitations from teachers as the single most influential variable on parents' involvement choices is significant because schools are able to influence teacher practices more so than any other variable" (p. 321).

Despite the important role teachers play in parent involvement, little is known about the ways teachers develop their expectations and understandings of parent involvement practices. One factor that influences teacher expectations is their own experiences with parent involvement when they attended school (Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003). Graue (2005) found that teacher candidates' memories of their parents' interactions with school shaped their views about the roles teachers play in home–school partnerships. Once they begin their teacher preparation programs, candidates can be influenced by coursework addressing parent involvement (Morris & Taylor, 1998; Uludag, 2008). Yet, researchers have found this topic accounts for little of the content in teacher preparation programs (Lazar, Broderick, Mastrilli, & Slostad, 1999). Moreover, coursework is only one aspect of teacher preparation programs, and studies have shown that candidates are often more influenced by what they see in their field placements (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002). For example, in a study of 223 teacher candidates, Uludag (2008) found that candidates became more confident about parental involvement during their teacher preparation program and candidates reported their perceptions about parent involvement were most influenced by their experiences in the field. Despite the importance of these field placements and student teaching, there are few studies that document the experiences candidates have in the field that relate to parent involvement. Researchers of home–school partnerships point to the need for more studies of teacher candidates' experiences and learning during their preparation programs (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). This study sets out to address this gap by exploring teacher candidates' experiences with home–school partnerships and their beliefs about parents' roles in their children's education and teachers' roles in parent involvement. More specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of parent involvement practices do teacher candidates observe in field placements and student teaching, and do the practices differ by placement type (urban/suburban, regular education classroom, inclusive classroom, self-contained classroom)?

2. What are teacher candidates' perceptions about the ways cooperating teachers interact with parents, and do their perceptions differ by placement type?

3. What types of parent involvement practices do teacher candidates participate in during their field placements and student teaching?

4. What are teacher candidates' beliefs about parents' roles and teachers' roles in children's education, and how do these beliefs compare before and after student teaching?

Methods

Participants

Study participants were undergraduate teacher candidates enrolled in a four-year teacher preparation program in the tri-state region around New York City in the United States. Candidates in our teacher preparation program are primarily White (88%) with 8.5% African American candidates and less than 1% Hispanic and other ethnicities. Participants in this study were in their senior year. Our teacher preparation program begins in freshman year with introductory education coursework. Beginning in sophomore year, candidates take their first methods classes and begin their four field placements which are 72 hours each semester. All candidates are placed in at least one urban, one suburban, one public, and one private/parochial setting. These placements must include at least one special education classroom and one inclusive classroom. In senior year, candidates complete their 15-week student teaching placement in conjunction with a senior seminar course. Placements are assigned by the director of the Office of Field Placement, who gathers data about the schools through the state department of education as well as site visits to each of the schools. These placement types are recorded for each candidate to ensure that they receive these diverse ranges of placement types. An examination of our 18 most frequently used school sites revealed that 4 of the schools have greater than 70% of students who receive free and reduced priced lunch.

Data Sources

A survey was administered to teacher candidates prior to their student teaching in senior year and upon completion of their student teaching experience. Candidates had completed four 72-hour field placements in conjunction with methods classes in literacy, science, mathematics, and social studies. All candidates had at least one urban field placement and one special education placement. During these placements, candidates observed their cooperating teachers' practices and taught two lessons that coincided with their content-based university courses. There is no stand-alone course in parent involvement, but the topic is addressed in several classes including their literacy courses where they discuss the importance of parent involvement for supporting children's language and literacy development. In an introduction to teaching class, they wrote a family letter which is intended to be sent home to parents during

the first week of school. In the letter they introduced themselves and described their teaching philosophies. In addition, they set up a way to get to know the students such as using a parent questionnaire. Also in their introduction to teaching class, they engaged in classroom discussions about why some parents may not come to school and then brainstormed ways to promote parent involvement. In their introduction to special education course, candidates interviewed families of children with special needs about issues such as school and community supports. In the assessment class, candidates learned how to talk with parents about results of their children's assessments. During student teaching, candidates spend one of their seminar sessions on the topic of families and are required to write a letter of introduction to families.

Forty-nine seniors completed the initial survey. Recognizing the limitations of this retrospective account of candidates' field experiences, this survey provides a window into candidates' memories of their field placements in relation to home–school partnerships, and we suspect that it is these memories that candidates will bring with them into their teaching. This survey asked candidates to think about their four field placements in sophomore and junior year, to select the appropriate descriptors for the placement, and select the methods used by cooperating teachers for involving families. (See Appendix for the survey.) Candidates were provided a list of options including a space to add an item if it was not on the list. They were also asked in an open-ended question to describe any interactions they had with families during their placements. In addition, candidates rated their cooperating teachers' interactions with families using a Likert-type scale ranging from -2.0 (Very negative interactions with families) to 2 (Very positive interactions with families). The survey also included open-ended prompts asking candidates the following questions: (1) What do you believe to be parents' roles in their children's education? (2) How would you define a teacher's role in parent involvement?

Forty-seven seniors completed the second survey which was administered after candidates had completed their student teaching. Differences in response rates between the first and second survey were due to the voluntary nature of the survey, and although all senior candidates in the cohort elected to participate in the initial survey, not all candidates elected to complete the second survey. The second survey focused on candidates' student teaching experience, and like the first survey, asked candidates to describe methods used by their cooperating teachers for involving families. In addition, candidates rated their cooperating teachers' interactions with families and answered the open-ended questions relating to teachers' roles in parent involvement and parents' roles in their children's education. They were also asked to describe any interactions they had with families during their placements.

Data Analysis

Candidates' reports of the parent involvement practices they observed in their field placements were analyzed based on the frequency of practices used by teachers. The analysis included calculations of the frequency of practices depending on the type of field placement (urban/suburban, regular education classroom/special education classroom) using two-way MANOVAs. Data from the initial survey were also analyzed using a one-way ANOVA to see if there were any differences in candidates' ratings of teachers' interactions with families depending on the type of field placement.

Responses to the open-ended questions were read and reread until coding categories emerged (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Codes were developed for responses to each of the open-ended questions about parents' and teachers' roles, and then codes were compared across questions to analyze relationships between their responses. Candidates' descriptions of parents' roles were categorized based on the type of support candidates thought parents should provide. The codes included *knowing what takes place at school* which parents could learn from their children or the teacher. The second code was *helping with academics* which included any type of support with school-based learning. The third code was *having a relationship with the teacher* which links to the idea of home–school partnerships. The fourth code was *providing encouragement and motivation for children's education.* The final code was *non-specific* and this code was used when candidates described parents as having an important role but without any particular examples of the ways parents might be involved.

Similarly, candidates' descriptions of teachers' roles in parent involvement were coded based on the actions teachers could take to involve parents. The first code for teachers' roles was *providing information to parents about their children's progress* both academically and behaviorally. The second code, *encouraging participation from parents*, was used to describe teachers encouraging parents to help their children with their school-based learning. The final code that emerged from the data was related to home–school partnerships when candidates described the teacher's role as *fostering collaboration between themselves and parents*. Coded responses were aggregated to find the percentage of candidates who gave different types of responses, and responses were compared between the initial survey and the final survey.

Results

Types of Parent Involvement Observed and Differences by Setting

When looking across the four field placements, teacher candidates most often (78%) reported that their cooperating teachers communicated with parents through parent–teacher conferences, which are often mandated by school districts. The second most frequent practice was sending notes home (76%) followed by calling parents (69%) and using a homework sign-off sheet (37%). Practices reported with less frequency were inviting parents to school to present (19%) or observe (19%) and using a reading log (25.5%). Table 1 displays frequencies of each practice reported by candidates for each of their four field placements.

Analyses of the different types of field placements yielded two significant differences between special education settings and general education settings based on candidates' designations of the type of field placements. A post hoc analysis revealed that candidates reported significantly more instances of calling parents ($p = 0.39$) of children in special education settings ($m = 0.81$) as compared to general education settings, as well as a significant difference ($p = 0.02$) in sending notes home to parents, with higher rates of this practice ($m = 0.89$) in special education settings as compared to general education settings ($m = 0.69$).

Table 1. Candidates Reports of Involvement Practices in Field Placements

	Percentage of Practices Reported by Candidates				
Number of Placements Reported	All 196	Sub-urban 121	Urban 50	General Education 119	Special Education 77
Parent Involvement Practice					
Calling parents	68.9%	72.7%	64.0%	62.2%	79.2%
Sending notes home	76.5%	23.1%	74.0%	68.9%	88.3%
Parent–teacher conferences	78.1%	79.3%	78.0%	79.0%	76.6%
Inviting parents to school to present	18.9%	20.7%	18.0%	20.2%	16.9%
Inviting parents to school to observe	19.4%	21.5%	16.0%	15.1%	26.0%
Homework sign-off sheet	36.7%	35.5%	42.0%	38.7%	33.8%
Reading log	25.5%	29.8%	24.0%	24.4%	27.9%

Data from the second survey revealed that, like the field placements, candidates most often reported that cooperating teachers connected with families during parent–teacher conferences (83%) and through notes that were sent home (87%). Many candidates observed their cooperating teacher calling home (70%). During student teaching, fewer than half described their teacher using a homework sign-off sheet (47%) or using a reading log (43%). Inviting parents to school to present (34%) or observe (29%) was reported with even less frequency. Table 2 displays frequencies of each practice reported by candidates in their student teaching experience.

Table 2. Candidates' Reports of Involvement Practices in Student Teaching

Parent Involvement Practice	Percentage of Practices Reported by Candidates
Calling parents	70%
Sending notes home	87%
Parent–teacher conferences	83%
Inviting parents to school to present	34%
Inviting parents to school to observe	29%
Homework sign-off sheet	47%
Reading log	43%

Candidates' Perceptions of Teachers' Interactions With Families

Although no statistical differences were found in candidates' reports of types of parent involvement practices when comparing urban and suburban field settings, significant differences were found when analyzing candidates' response to the question about the cooperating teachers' interactions with families. Candidates were asked to rate their teacher's interactions on a 5-point Likert scale (-2 very negative interactions with families to +2 very positive interactions with families). No description of what would constitute a positive or negative interaction was provided. Findings of the two-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference ($p = 0.059$) between candidates' ratings of teachers' interactions depending on whether candidates were placed in an urban or suburban setting. Candidates rated teachers' interactions with parents more negatively when they were placed in urban settings as compared to suburban settings (suburban $m = 0.97$; urban $m = 0.64$).

Candidates' Contacts With Families

Candidates are not required to interact with families during their field placements, yet they are encouraged to do so. These interactions may help to shape candidates' perceptions of home–school partnerships and provide them

with concrete experiences with sharing information about children and learning about children from parents. When asked about contacts with families during field placements, a majority (70%) of candidates reported some interaction with families. The types of interactions reported included back to school night, open house, holiday parties, and interactions during drop off and pick up. Candidates reported similar contacts with families during student teaching, and although most candidates described interactions with families, two candidates reported that they had no interactions with families during student teaching.

Candidates' Perceptions of Parents' Roles in Children's Education

The qualitative analysis of candidates' responses revealed that most candidates believed parents' roles in education fall into four categories which include (1) parents should be informed about what is taking place at school and how their children are progressing; (2) parents should help with academics; (3) parents should work as a team with teachers to support their children; and (4) parents should encourage and motivate children in their educational pursuits. Table 3 displays the percentage of candidates who described the different parent roles. Of these types of involvement, the most frequently described prior to student teaching (43%) and after student teaching (42%) was helping with academic work, either by helping with homework, discussing school-based learning, or through activities that reinforce what children are learning in school. As one candidate explains, "Parents are teachers just as much as teachers are. If parents do not provide reinforcement of subject matter at home, I find that students do not master material as quickly. An example of this was when my students [kindergarten special education class] were learning letter–sound relationships."

Table 3. Candidates Descriptions of Parents' Roles in Education

Parents' Roles	% of Candidates Describing Role Pre ($N = 49$)	% of Candidates Describing Role Post ($N = 47$)
Knowing what takes place at school	20%	17%
Help with academics	43%	42%
Have a relationship with teacher	16%	8%
Encourage and motivate children's education	14%	11%
Nonspecific	29%	25%

The role described with the next most frequency by candidates was for parents to be informed about what is taking place at school and to know how their children are progressing. As one candidate explained, "I think it is crucial for parents to get involved and understand what their child is learning about and have a watchful eye on their success or decline in school." Twenty percent of candidates described this role prior to student teaching, and 17% described this role after student teaching.

Prior to student teaching, a greater percentage of candidates (16%) described a parent's role as working as a team with teachers as compared to 8% percent of candidates who described this role in the second survey. For example, one candidate stated, "Parents and teachers are a team that should work together in providing education for children." They used words such as "teamwork" and "partners" to describe the way parents should work with their children's teachers. Similarly, on the initial survey, a number of candidates (14%) described parents' roles as encouraging and motivating children in their educational pursuits and described parents as "the ultimate role model" for their children. Somewhat fewer (11%) described this role after student teaching.

Candidates' Perceptions of Teachers' Roles in Parent Involvement

The analysis of candidates' responses revealed that most candidates believed teachers' roles in education include the following three categories: (1) providing information about children's progress; (2) encouraging participation from parents; and (3) encouraging collaboration between parents and teachers. Table 4 displays the percentage of candidates who described the different teacher roles. Of these roles, the category appearing most often on the survey before student teaching was providing information on children's progress (39%). For example, one candidate explained, "A teacher should communicate with parents about activities, grades, [and] behavior of the students when needed." The role described with the next most frequency was that teachers should encourage collaboration between parent and teachers (37%). Fewer candidates reported that teachers should encourage participation (16%). Candidates who described this role included statements such as, "A teacher should encourage parent involvement by making them [parents] a part of activities that go home."

After completing student teaching, more than half of candidates (64%) described a teacher's role as encouraging collaboration between parents and teachers, and one fourth (25%) of candidates thought it was the teacher's role to provide information on children's progress. Fewer candidates (13%) described a teacher's role as encouraging participation from parents. Differences between candidates' descriptions of teachers' roles in parent involvement may reflect a change in their view of teachers as initiators of collaboration between families and teachers.

Table 4. Candidates Descriptions of Teachers' Roles in Parent Involvement

Teachers' Roles	% of Candidates Describing Role Pre (N=49)	% of Candidates Describing Role Post (N=47)
Provide information on child's progress	39%	25%
Encourage participation from parents	16%	13%
Encourage collaboration between parents and teachers	37%	64%

Connections Between Candidates' Perceptions of Parents' and Teachers' Roles

When looking across candidates' responses, mixed results were found with regards to consistency between their descriptions of parents' and teachers' roles. For example, before student teaching, many candidates (43%) described parents' roles as including help with academics, whereas only 16% specifically described teachers' roles as supporting or fostering that home learning. Similarly, after student teaching, 42% of candidates described parents' roles as including help with academics, whereas only 13% specifically described teachers' roles as supporting or fostering that home learning. Candidates who did include this as part of their description of teachers' roles thought teachers should either provide suggestions for ways parents could help with academics, inform parents how they could be involved, or create homework assignments that include a parental component.

Discussion

The current study provides evidence that field experiences and student teaching experiences provide candidates with opportunities to learn more than just teaching content; we need to consider the ways these experiences shape candidates' views of home–school partnerships. Our teacher candidates observed a number of parent involvement efforts by their teachers in all types of field placements; we found some differences between parent involvement efforts in special education settings and general education settings with candidates reporting significantly more instances of calling and writing notes to parents in special education settings. Not surprisingly, candidates most often reported that their cooperating teachers held parent–teacher conferences. The high percentage of candidates who reported the parent involvement practice of parent–teacher conferences is consistent with data from the Parent and Family

Involvement in Education Survey of the 2003 National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES), which reported that more than three-quarters of the students reported that the school held parent–teacher conferences (Enyeart, Diehl, Hampden-Thompson, & Scotchmer, 2006).

In addition to parent–teacher conferences, candidates also reported that their cooperating teachers primarily used the practices of calling or writing notes home or had parents sign-off on completed homework. All of these types of involvement parallel Epstein's (1994) Type 2 practices which involve the schools "basic obligations" to communicate with families. Reading logs were used with less frequency, although they were used with greater frequency in special education placements. Fewer of the candidates reported seeing parent involvement practices at Epstein's (1994) Type 3 level which included invitations for parents to come to the classroom during the school day to either share information with the class or observe in the classroom. These types of practices might be viewed by teachers as more difficult to arrange and require teachers to open up their classroom to families in ways that might not be as comfortable for them. Yet, if candidates are not seeing these types of practices in schools, it is important that teacher preparation programs teach candidates about the value and use of these practices.

Although there were no significant differences in the types of parent involvement practices used in urban and suburban field placements, candidates in our study reported significantly more negative interactions between teachers and parents in urban field placements. Although this finding is limited by candidates' self-selection of the placement type and their own idea of what constitutes a positive or negative interaction, this finding is consistent with the research that shows more strained relationships between parents and families in low income and linguistically diverse communities (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Lareau, 1986; 1991; Parra & Henderson, 1982) where there is more likely to be a mismatch between parents' and teachers' expectations for parent involvement in education.

Our teacher candidates' descriptions of parents' roles in their children's education included knowing what was taking place at school, helping with homework, connecting with teachers, and motivating and encouraging their children in their schoolwork. These are similar roles as described by practicing teachers (Baker, 1997; Shumow & Harris, 2000) who wanted parents to help children academically and to communicate with teachers. Our findings are also similar to teachers' expectations for families described by Wissbrun's and Eckart's (1992) description of "Level II: Support" which includes reviewing homework or completing activities at home that are requested by the teacher. Despite the importance of these forms of parent involvement, successful

home–school partnerships are based on the belief that parents can learn from teachers and teachers can learn from parents. As Paratore (2001) explains, "They share an assumption that parents and teachers have much to learn from each other, and they have established practices and routines that enable such learning to occur" (p. 88). Since none of the candidates described parents' roles as informing teachers about home educational practices, this indicates that candidates may not see parents as providers of valuable information about their children despite efforts to emphasize the importance of parents' perspectives in our courses.

Some of the candidates' descriptions of teachers' roles echoed their expectations for parents. Candidates in our study believed that teachers should inform parents about school practices just as they thought that parents should be informed about what takes place in school. Similarly, candidates believed that both teachers and parents should help to form partnerships with each other. There were also inconsistencies when viewing the relationship between candidates' expectations for parent and teachers. Although candidates valued parents' support of school learning, the majority of candidates did not describe ways teachers should work to facilitate that support. This is especially important when considering Mapp's (2003) finding that parents desired more clarity and support in helping with homework. Candidates perceptions were similar to Dauber and Epstein's (1993) description of their findings from their research on teachers and families, "Teachers were more sure about what they wanted from parents than what they wanted to do for parents" (p. 55). Changes in candidates' beliefs about teachers' roles can be viewed as evidence that candidates gained an increased understanding about the important role teachers need to take in initiating collaboration with families. This is an important finding because researchers have found that practicing teachers often expect parents to initiate contacts (Shumow & Harris, 2000). Nonetheless, what seems to be missing is candidates' understanding that they need to provide specific opportunities, strategies, and suggestions for how families can work with children to foster academics.

Although this study is limited by the relatively small number of participants, understanding the types and nature of parent involvement activities experienced by our candidates helps move us closer to finding out how teachers' beliefs and practices are shaped. The fact that our teacher candidates' beliefs so closely mirrored beliefs of the practicing teachers they observed further emphasizes the importance of providing teacher candidates with positive experiences and models, especially if we want to improve on teachers' parent involvement practices.

The design of this study does not allow for conclusions about whether candidates entered our program with these beliefs about parent involvement or if their beliefs are similar to practicing teachers because of their experiences with teachers in their field placements. We suspect that, like those studied by Graue and Brown (2003), our candidates did have particular notions of parent involvement when they entered our program. Questioning candidates about their childhood experiences with home–school partnerships would provide a deeper understanding of how candidates develop their beliefs. Yet, this study helps us understand that our teacher candidates value parent involvement, but also underscores the need for teacher educators to create consistent and more meaningful experiences for candidates that allow them to connect with and learn from families (Katz & Bauch, 1999; Power & Perry, 2000). Just as Power and Perry (2000) explain,

> We tell these novice teachers that parents will be important, even essential, partners in their work. But if there's one thing we've learned as teacher educators, it's that the things that will endure from our classes are those things our students have tried themselves. (p. 10)

Our findings also support the need for teacher educators to provide specific requirements for candidates to connect with families. This is especially necessary in light of the finding that two of our candidates had no contact with families during student teaching. Limitations of our survey prevent us from knowing whether these candidates also had no contact with families during their field placements; this necessitates requiring candidates to interact with families so that their first experience working with them is not after they become teachers. In order to better prepare candidates for parent involvement, teacher educators need to examine both the content of coursework and the match between the ideas expressed about home–school partnerships in courses and experiences candidates have in classrooms before they begin working as teachers.

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Appendix. Second Parent Involvement Survey

What do you believe to be parents' roles in their children's education?

How would you define a teacher's role in parent involvement?

Did the seminar help prepare you for parent involvement in education? If yes, please describe any activities, readings, or discussions that you found useful.

How would you describe your student teaching placement? Check all accurate descriptions.

	Urban	Suburban	Elementary school	Middle School	Preschool	Private School	Inclusive	Special Education Self-contained	Special Education Resource Room	Specialized School for Special Education
Student Teaching Placement	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

During student teaching, what methods did your cooperating teacher use for involving families?

Calling parents	Sending notes to parents	Parent Teacher Conferences	Inviting Parents to School to Present to the Class	Inviting Parents to School to Observe or Learn about the Class	Homework Sign-off Sheet	Reading Log
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Did you observe any other forms of parent involvement during student teaching? If so, what did you observe?

How would you describe your cooperating teachers' interactions with families during student teaching? What makes you think that?

	Very negative interactions with families	Negative interactions with families	No interactions with families	Positive interactions with families	Very positive interactions with families
Student Teaching	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

What do you think influenced your cooperating teachers' interactions with families?

Describe any contact you had with families during student teaching.

Parents *Don't* Do Nothing: Reconceptualizing Parental Null Actions as Agency

Emily Schnee and Enakshi Bose

Abstract

This paper presents findings from a larger study that examined the roles that parents and caregivers are given and/or choose to enact to support their children's mathematics learning, particularly in relation to their children's math homework. Based on interviews with parents of elementary-age children from three different urban school districts in the northeastern United States, we propose a conceptualization of parental engagement that uses a framework of human agency to understand both beliefs and rationales underlying parental actions as well as the apparent lack of actions. Our findings identify challenges parents encounter in relation to their children's school mathematics and reveal the limits of school-centered conceptions of parental engagement.

Key words: parental engagement, homework, parents, agency, learning, elementary schools, mathematics, null actions, urban, involvement, perceptions

Introduction

Attempts to support and improve the learning and performance of American children in mathematics, and in particular the mathematics education of children in traditionally underserved urban environments, have looked to curriculum, assessment, teacher education, and even to the home. Parents are increasingly viewed as "an untapped resource for improving the mathematics performance of American children" (Hyde et al., 2006, p. 136), and research

suggests that there is a relationship between parent involvement and improvements in student achievement and outcomes (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Acknowledging research that frames parents as potential resources or partners in student learning, even textbook publishers have developed curriculum-related instructional materials to go beyond the school walls—to the home. This study examined parents' involvement in their children's homework as a lens through which to understand parents' engagement with their children's math learning. (Note: In this paper, we use the term parent to refer to the child's primary caregiver, most frequently a mother or grandmother.)

From curriculum materials to government and district policies which try to promote parent involvement, an implicit, and at times explicit, vision of what parent involvement ought to look like and of what counts as parent involvement emerges (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). This conception of parental involvement typically revolves around school-prescribed behaviors in which parents are encouraged to engage rather than interactions generated and directed by parents. Despite efforts on the part of advocates for more egalitarian home–school relationships (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss, 2008), the prevailing picture of effective parent involvement which still dominates in many urban schools evokes concomitant images of disengaged parents and ineffective parent involvement. Lightfoot (2004) has described the language centering on parental involvement in urban schools as carrying an implicit "discourse of deficit" that shapes the perceptions of parents and their involvement.

Within the mathematics education community, many researchers have worked to establish frameworks for examining parental roles in children's learning and schooling that challenge the traditional, school-centric assumptions about what constitutes effective and appropriate parental involvement. In their work with Latino families, Civil and Bernier (2006) countered the deficit view and low expectations of minority families and students by positioning parents as intellectual resources (see also Anhalt, Allexsaht-Snider, & Civil, 2002). Remillard and Jackson (2006) illuminated the questions and challenges African American parents in a low-income neighborhood experienced as they encountered reform-mathematics curricula through their children's schoolwork. While the parents viewed themselves as critical players in their children's learning, they had little understanding of the reform-oriented curricular approaches, which influenced (and at times limited) how and when they engaged with their children's school mathematics. Martin (2006) critically examined parental involvement within a sociohistorical context, noting that efforts to promote certain parental behaviors rendered others invisible or less valuable. Sharply underscoring the assumptions underlying calls for increased parental involvement, Martin observed,

The practices and behaviors that are idealized—for example, volunteering in schools and classrooms, helping students with homework, fundraising—are those against which all parents are judged. What is not discussed or conceptualized is the fact that agency for many African American parents can take alternative forms and may or may not involve direct involvement in the school context. (2006, p. 216)

Expanding the possibilities of what counts as parent involvement, Calabrese Barton and colleagues (2004) presented an ecological model of parent engagement in urban education that sought to capture how parents understand "the hows and whys" of their interactions with schools. They asserted that this perspective

is particularly relevant for understanding parental engagement in high-poverty urban schools for it uncovers how parents activate non-traditional resources and leverage relationships with teachers, other parents, and community members in order to author a place of their own in schools. (Calabrese Barton et al., 2004, p. 11)

Despite the differences in focus, the aforementioned research efforts share a common thread: rethinking the role of parents in children's math learning by understanding the vantage point of the home rather than the school.

This study builds on the research that has sought to broaden understandings not only of *how* parents are involved in their children's learning at home, but also of the rationales underlying their decisions and their actions (Civil & Bernier, 2006; Martin, 2006; Remillard & Jackson, 2006). In questioning commonly held assumptions about what constitutes parental engagement in children's schooling, we hoped to illuminate the multifaceted way in which urban parents from diverse backgrounds exercise their agency in support of their goals for their children's learning.

Parental Involvement in the Context of Math Education Reform

The *Principles and Standards of School Mathematics* ("*Standards*") proposed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (2000) outlined a vision of mathematics education reform that challenges long-held assumptions about the nature of mathematics, how mathematics is learned, and how it is effectively taught. Emphasizing access and equity for all students of math, the *Standards* called for mathematics education to support problem solving, reasoning, communication, and connections, so that all students learn math not only with procedural competency but also relational understanding. Drawing on research on how mathematical learning develops, the *Standards* outlined new ideas of what constitutes the math that students should learn and how they

should encounter this material. *Everyday Mathematics* (University of Chicago School Mathematics Project [UCSMP], 2001) is one example of a reform-oriented curriculum developed to implement these ideals and is widely used in urban districts. It includes an extensive component directed to and for parents in its printed materials.

The role of parents, however, in relation to mathematics education reform is less clear. Peressini (1998), for example, noted that much of the research on mathematics education reform "characterizes parents as obstacles to school mathematics reform and positions them at the margins of mathematics education" (p. 559). While certain actions of parental engagement are aligned with school and reform goals, such as checking homework and encouraging children to explain their thinking or use multiple approaches to solve problems, these actions are often fostered by teachers, schools, and curricula in ways that do not take into account parents' voices, beliefs, and expectations of what mathematics learning looks like.

This study examined parents' perceptions and understandings of math homework and their role in supporting their children's mathematics learning. We contend that parent actions, including those which may be perceived as suggesting a lack of engagement, are intentional and purposeful. While certain acts of engagement may align with teacher, school, and curricular expectations, we suggest that other acts that may cause parents to be perceived by practitioners and researchers as uninvolved or disengaged are in fact reasoned and concordant with parental goals for their children's learning. We maintain that both are acts of parental agency in support of children's math learning.

Methods

The data analyzed for this paper came from a larger Mathematics Homework Connections study that used qualitative research methods to understand the role of caregivers in the mathematics learning of children in underserved urban communities. This study was conducted in schools in three urban school districts in the Northeastern United States. To understand the perspectives of different stakeholders, administrators, teachers, and parents have been interviewed, and teachers' classes have been observed multiple times. Data collection and analysis methods are structured to provide evidence about how teachers and parents interpret, experience, and respond to the *Everyday Mathematics* (UCSMP, 2001) curriculum and its components oriented towards the home to promote parental engagement in children's math learning.

In this paper, we drew from interviews with 18 parents whose children attend three schools in the three different urban school districts (see Table 1;

please note that all names of participants and schools are pseudonyms). The schools typically served low-income, minority student populations, though at one school, a charter school, the population was more diverse in terms of parents' educational levels. Seventeen of the parents interviewed were African American or Latina women; one was a White woman. All parents self-selected to participate in the study in response to a flier that was sent home with children in second, third, and fourth grade (and one combined fourth/fifth grade class). Parents were asked to return the form so that a researcher could contact them for an interview. All interviews were conducted individually, in person, and recorded in English or Spanish according to the parent's preference. Interviews averaged one hour in length. The interviews were semi-structured, and questions focused on the parent's views, experiences, and involvement in their child's math homework and overall schooling.

Table 1. Research Participants, Districts, and Schools

District # 1	District # 2	District # 3
Sycamore Charter School (SCS)	**Whitman Elementary School**	**King Elementary School**
Ms. Demond (2nd grade)	Ms. Smith-Sanders (2nd grade)	Ms. Rivera* (2nd grade)
Ms. Ingram (2nd grade)	Ms. Washington (2nd grade)	Ms. Esteves* (2nd grade)
Ms. Jansen (3rd grade)	Ms. Garcia* (2nd grade)	Ms. Rosales* (3rd grade)
Ms. Nichols (3rd grade)	Ms. Knight (2nd grade)	Ms. Almonte* (4th grade)
Ms. Keller (4th grade)	Ms. Davis (3rd grade)	Ms. Marose (4th grade)
Ms. Jacobs (4th grade)	Ms. Decker (3rd grade)	Ms. Santos* (5th Grade)

* Interviews conducted in Spanish
Note: All schools and participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Our data analysis process involved reading through all parent interviews to identify salient themes and generate emergent codes. Then, interview transcripts were coded by at least two readers for examples of parental acts of agency and for factors influencing parental decisions on when and how to act.

The research team that collected and analyzed this data was composed of a diverse group of more than a dozen researchers that spanned three universities located in three different cities. We represented a range of different ages and experience levels from twenty-something graduate students to tenured faculty in their fifties. We came from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds including White, African American, Latina, and Asian. Our team included men and women, parents and non-parents, and represented a variety of disciplinary perspectives including pure mathematics, education, and urban studies.

Though, of course, we invariably brought our different subjectivities to the research, we believe that the diversity of our research team and the fact that all data were analyzed by multiple researchers helped to ameliorate any potential biases and worked to strengthen the validity of the findings that are presented in this article.

Human Agency as a Perspective on Parent Involvement

We see the notion of human agency as a critical component to an alternative formulation of parental involvement in children's mathematics learning. In this paper, we draw from Ahearn's (2001) definition of agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). Like Giroux (1983), we believe the concept of human agency helps us "to understand more thoroughly the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint" (p. 108). Agency as a theoretical term helps us to balance the extremes of structural determinism and unconstrained volition in order to understand human action.

We believe parents make intentional decisions about the interactions in which they will engage with their children and with school personnel (teachers, administrators) around issues in school mathematics. We define parental agency as intentional goal-directed behavior and use the word agency to demonstrate that "within the constraints of their world, people are planful and make choices among options that construct their life course" (Clausen, 1993 in Elder, 1994, p. 6). Thus, human agency is the intentional action of human beings seeking to fulfill meaningful purposes. From a theoretical perspective, the question for us is not whether, in a given situation, human actors display agency but rather *how* and *why* agency is expressed and what contributes to that expression. Consequently an understanding of parental agency requires more than simply noting what parents do or don't do in a particular situation. It requires grasping the interests, goals, and purposes of parents' actions in the particular contexts of the schooling of their children. This paper explores how urban parents both envision and exercise their agency to support their children's math learning. We examine the variety and complexity of parental beliefs and perceptions that motivate the exercising of agency as well as the actions themselves.

Reading Parental Explicit Actions as Agency

The agency of parental explicit action is consistent with much of the existing literature on parental involvement which focuses on understanding "parents' motivation for involvement in homework, the content of their involvement,

the mechanisms through which their involvement appears to influence student outcomes, and the consequences of their involvement" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, p. 195). Explicit actions of parental involvement include establishing structures (physical, temporal, emotional) for homework, interacting with the school or teacher around homework, providing oversight to the homework process, and engaging in homework tasks with children. Consistent with this literature, our data show clear and explicit examples of parental agency in support of children's math learning. In this sense the agency model coheres with the conventional picture of active and effective parental involvement in children's education, though it is important to note that not all examples of explicit actions were visible to or recognized by school personnel. Nonetheless, based on both research and policy recommendations for school-directed modes of parent involvement, we can assume that these parental acts would meet with approval. Our data, however, led us to examine more closely those cases in which parents appear to be uninvolved or inactive, according to traditional, school-centric definitions of parent involvement.

Reading Parental Null Actions as Agency

We propose the notion of null actions as a descriptive and explanatory concept to help us understand parent agency. A null action is not synonymous with parents doing nothing or being disinterested or disengaged in their children's learning. Rather, *we see null actions as expressions of agency that reflect specific parental interests and intentions that lie behind an apparent absence of parental action*—particularly those that might be expected or desired by school personnel—in a given situation. In this study, we found that parental null actions result in two very specific circumstances. Parents sometimes choose null actions in an effort to affect self-reliance strategies in their children. Parents make the purposeful choice to *not* intervene in certain aspects of their children's schooling to encourage their children to become self-reliant learners. We also found that null actions are often engaged in response to perceived impediments to the interests and goals that parents hold for their children. These parents choose not to engage in explicit actions on behalf of their children because they believe that their actions would not achieve their goals. These parents perceive the barriers they face to be of sufficient strength to overwhelm certain courses of explicit action, and thus they opt to engage in null action.

It is important to note that most parents in our study did not engage exclusively in explicit or null actions. Rather, most engaged in both at different times, depending upon the circumstances (see Table 2, which displays our research participants' null and explicit actions). We believe that this crossing over from explicit to null action and back again on the part of our research participants

confirms our assertion that these are not passive or disengaged parents. Rather they are making purposeful choices about when to activate their agency, and in which ways, depending upon the circumstances and their intentions for their children. The agency perspective suggests that what is conventionally perceived as disinterest or disengagement on the part of urban parents may be re/conceived and re/interpreted when one looks more closely into the parents' beliefs, interests, and goals.

Table 2. Explicit and Null Parental Actions

	Parent (Child's grade)	Categories of Parental Actions Around Math Homework			
		Explicit Actions	Null Actions: *To Foster Self-Reliance*	Null Actions: *Response to Challenges/ Curriculum*	Null Actions: *Response to Language Barrier*
Sycamore	Ms. Demond (2nd)	✓	✓ (+)	✓	
	Ms. Ingram (2nd)	✓ (+)		✓	
	Ms. Jansen (3rd)	✓		✓ (+)	
	Ms. Nichols (3rd)	✓	✓ (+)		
	Ms. Keller (4th)	✓	✓	✓ (+)	
	Ms. Jacobs (4th)	✓ (+)	✓		
Whitman	Ms. Smith Sanders (2nd)	✓			
	Ms. Washington (2nd)	✓ (+)	✓	✓	
	Ms. Knight (2nd)	✓	✓		
	Ms. Garcia (2nd)	✓		✓	✓
	Ms. Decker (3rd)	✓ (+)	✓	✓	
	Ms. Davis (3rd)				
King	Ms. Rivera (2nd)			✓	✓ (+)
	Ms. Estevez (2nd)	✓	✓	✓	✓ (+)
	Ms. Rosales (3rd)	✓		✓	✓ (+)
	Ms. Marose (4th)				
	Ms. Almonte (4th)	✓	✓		
	Ms. Santos (5th)				✓ (+)

(+) most of the references were in this category, though others were also mentioned

Parental Explicit Actions

The parents who participated in our study supported their children's math homework and learning in a range of ways that fit with traditional conceptions

of what constitutes effective parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Many parents set up routines which enabled their children to do their math homework. They created both a time and space in which their children completed their homework and positioned themselves nearby in case they were needed. Ms. Keller explained:

> When I start preparing their dinner, then that's when it's kinda homework time. So we're normally in the kitchen. They're sitting at the counter, and Scott's at this counter doing his homework, and I'm cooking, and then that way if he needs my help I kind of just look over and help him, and then, that kind of thing. (SCS, 4th grade)

Other parents felt that it was best to sit with their children as they did homework. These parents actively participated in their children's math homework, helping them to read and understand problems and aiding them in developing strategies for solving them. Ms. Ingram described how she worked with her second grader on work with numbers and number sense:

> He had a lot of number sequences. Like, he would count by 10s. With 66, 76, 86. He was used to counting by 10s at 10, 20, 30, 40. So I really had to pay attention to make sure he sees the pattern. You can count by 10s a lot of ways. You could do it with 2, 12. You know?…You can go on and on and on where every number ends in 2, you know. And so, that was one project that I would help him with, and he would see it, but I had to bring it out to him, although he learned it earlier that day. (SCS, 2nd grade)

Other parents may not have participated in *doing* homework with their children, but they consistently monitored the homework process. For some parents this involved checking that a child had completed her homework, for others it included determining that the homework answers were correct, and for a few, like Ms. Washington, it also included reviewing the homework when it was returned by the child's teacher:

> My daughter do all her homework, bring it back to me, I look it over and [check] if there's something wrong. I got to do that for her and my first grader. Sometimes I got to do that, well, not even sometimes, I do that every time for her. She go and do her homework, and I say, bring it back to me, and I check it after it's finished. (Whitman, 2nd grade)

Many parents engaged in ongoing communication with their children's teachers and other school staff as a way to support their children's math learning. For some parents, those who lived within close proximity to their children's school and had the time, this involved frequent, informal visits to the school.

For others this communication most commonly took the form of notes sent in with their children in reference to a difficulty with the math homework.

> I make my appearance about three days out the week, maybe sometimes about four depending how they've been the couple days before. But I try to make my appearance about three days out the week…I talk to the principal, I talk to the teachers, I talk to the resource teacher; I talk to everyone before I leave. (Ms. Decker, Whitman, 3rd grade)

Ms. Santos, a parent with limited English language proficiency, strove for direct and personal communication with her child's teacher and other school personnel, explaining that whenever she has a question or problem, "I come personally and talk to the person" (King, 5th grade).

Other parents expressed their engagement by familiarizing themselves with the school's and teacher's homework policies and practices. Some were aware of these policies because they had attended school-sponsored events such as Open School Night or regularly read the information teachers sent home. Others, like Ms. Decker, went out of their way to ask their children's teachers directly about homework policies and expectations:

> They're supposed to have homework every night, I know that. I asked. I asked all the teachers, you know, each class that they be in. "Is homework mandatory? Every night, you know what I'm saying?" They said it should take no longer than ten or fifteen minutes the majority of the nights. I try to keep up on all of that. (Whitman, 3rd grade)

Some parents, especially those who felt that their own math knowledge limited their ability to help their children with math homework, made sure to enlist the teacher's active help. Ms. Decker described her strategy for getting the teacher to help her child with his math homework:

> I think we make it a tag team, like I said before, between myself and his teacher, so if he hits a snag then we try to get on top of it as soon as possible. Even if he comes home and he still don't understand it after I explain it to him, then I make sure he be here bright and early in the morning so he can eat his breakfast and she can, you know, go over it with him on the one on one until it's time for school. (Whitman, 3rd grade)

Other parents sent notes or email to their children's teacher indicating they were unable to assist their children with the math homework and asking for the teacher's intervention. Ms. Ingram explained, "I would write a note. 'Please correct.' Or, 'Tell us the correct way' if I couldn't get it." She elaborated,

> I make sure I consult with his teacher. Because not only is he stuck, I'm like, clueless. So, we want to *know*. Because, you know, 3rd grade, that's

gonna come up, 4th grade it's gonna come up, and I don't want him to miss it in 2nd grade. (SCS, 2nd grade)

Many parents engaged a wide network of family and friends to assist their children with math homework if they could not. Most commonly, older siblings were enlisted to help their younger brothers and sisters, but aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, and family friends were also approached for math homework assistance. In addition, several parents mentioned using the internet as a resource to help them understand the math their children were doing and in turn enable them to assist their children with math homework.

Though very few parents used the games or activities suggested by the *Everyday Math* curriculum (in either the homework or the Family Letters), most parents engaged their children in conversation, games, and other daily activities that encouraged the development of their math abilities. These ranged from cooking together to telling time to counting change and using money to organizing family games of Monopoly. A few parents supplied their children with supplementary math materials, such as workbooks, which they monitored and corrected.

Parental Null Actions as Self-Reliance Strategies

Not all parents engaged in the explicit actions described above, and sometimes there was variation in how the same parents responded in different circumstances. Rather than attributing this lack of explicit action to disinterest or disengagement with their children's math homework and math learning, we argue that many parents engaged in null actions purposefully, in order to build their children's self-reliance as math learners. These null actions represented a coherent enactment of these parents' philosophy of engendering self-sufficiency in their children and of what would best aid them as math learners.

Several parents articulated the view that homework was their child's responsibility—not theirs—and chose to not intervene in any aspect of their children's homework. They, like Ms. Demond, did not monitor or otherwise supervise what they considered to be a child's contract with the teacher and school.

I'm trying to teach my girls that, that's your responsibility, it's not mine. Not so much, you know, I've been to school, I've done school already. No, that's your—it's a responsibility, you have to get that done, and that reflects...on your grade. (SCS, 2nd grade)

One of our interviewers queried Ms. Demond about her role in her child's homework, and she was explicit in articulating the view that homework was her daughter's responsibility and that it was the province of the teacher—not

the parent—to monitor that it was done and that learning had happened. After recounting that she neither assists, nor observes, nor monitors her daughter's homework, Ms. Demond stated emphatically, "That's the teacher's job. That's the teacher's job."

Other parents were concerned that parental support for/intervention in homework could end up with the parent doing the homework for the child and hindering the child's math learning in the process. Ms. Decker recalled, "I had it easy, I was the baby so my sister did my homework for me. So, when I got older I had to relearn how to do it on my own." In response to being asked how this experience influenced how she helps her children with homework, Ms. Decker declared, "I'm not doing their homework!" Ms. Santos also insisted that the best way she could help her daughter was to *not* help her with her math homework:

> I tell my daughter, you are going to leave that blank. The situation is not to hand in homework that is well done but that you don't understand. I don't want that. I understood, but you're going to leave that blank, and tomorrow, please ask your teacher to explain it to you again. (King, 5th grade)

Other parents, like Ms. Demond, acknowledged their own limitations in helping their children with math homework and shied away from the tendency of giving the child "the answer."

> Some of that stuff I just—it's just, it's all news to me, and I don't want to, if I do know it, she's seeking the answer. And I don't want to give her the answer. I want her to know it—learn it on her own. (SCS, 2nd grade)

Several parents felt that it was important to use homework as an opportunity to teach their children to ask questions of other adults when they don't know something.

> So I did let her know, you know, like, no matter how old you are, you could have a problem, you have to ask. You know? Even mom sometimes, don't know something, I have to ask. (Ms. Demond, SCS, 2nd grade)

While most parents did not take a fixed stance against helping their children with homework, many articulated the view that teaching their children to be self-reliant with homework was the foundation of their helping strategies. These parents came from a diverse spectrum of educational backgrounds themselves—from one with less than a high school degree to another who is an educator with a Masters degree—and cut across the different schools. These parents created a structure in which their children do homework and provided

the resources for its successful completion. Several parents explained their philosophies:

> I don't think that homework is something that they should, you know, necessarily do on their own. Like, we should just assume because they were in school all day, they should just be able to complete their homework. But by the same token, you don't want them to be dependent on you, so the way I help them, is normally just to leave them the resources. I don't do it for them, I show them by leaving some resources, whether it's the conversion table in the back of the composition book, or if you have to pull up something off the internet, but I don't do it for them. (Ms. Keller, SCS, 4th grade)

These are parents who waited until their children came to them with a question before they offered assistance. Even then, the assistance may have taken the form of encouragement to seek an appropriate resource so that the children could solve the problem on their own rather than the parent immediately offering direct assistance.

> When she has a little nervous breakdown? Then she comes and says, "What's mean, median, and mode?" and I say, "Why don't you look it up?" And she says, "I don't know where," and I say, "How about a dictionary?" And then, you know, if she's really unhinged, I help, and if she's not, I shoo her on to do that. (Ms. Jacobs, SCS, 4th grade)

A parent's confidence in the mathematics ability of her child also influenced decisions on when to help and when to step back. Ms. Nichols explained,

> Well, my 3rd grader, he's excellent in math. He doesn't get his math genes from me. He's really, really good in math. So, he doesn't really even need help in math, you know. It's sometimes, a time or two, where he will have a little difficulty, and I would help him through it.…But he's really good in math. (SCS, 3rd grade)

Like Ms. Nichols, Ms. Knight describes stepping back in response to her child's desire to work independently: "But she, she kind of is getting to the point where she wants to be independent. So…she'll say, 'Well, I'll go and I'll do it, and I'll come back and show you…or if I need help, I'll come and get help'" (Whitman, 3rd grade).

Parental rationales for fostering self-reliance and encouraging independence seemed to be influenced by various factors, from a belief that their children should develop responsibility to confidence in their children's ability to do math. This goal coheres with school views on student accountability, especially as students advance to upper elementary grades; however, the parental

null action exercised in support of this goal may not always be acknowledged or viewed as concordant with the teacher's purpose and, thus, parents may be perceived as uninvolved.

Null Actions Associated with Impediments to Parent Agency

An emphasis on self-reliance is one factor influencing parental decisions to engage in null actions. Other parents in this study described or alluded to impediments to their engagement with their children's math homework and math learning. Previous research has suggested that parents' lack of confidence in their own mathematical understanding can impede their ability to help; this often is further complicated by unfamiliarity with mathematics education reform goals and practices (Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Remillard & Jackson, 2006). Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) explained, "Parents appear to become involved in their children's homework also because they believe their activities will make a positive difference for the child" (p. 201). We posit that certain impediments constrain parent agency. Parents may desire to be involved but make an intentional decision not to be because they judge the existing, or perceived, barriers to be sufficiently robust.

In our study, we found two significant impediments to parental agency. First, for immigrant parents, limited English language ability and cultural expectations of schooling posed significant barriers. For many parents, limited math content knowledge and the *Everyday Mathematics* curriculum itself presented obstacles to involvement in their children's math homework.

Immigrant Experience as Impediment to Parental Agency

When trying to exercise agency to support their children's math homework and math learning, the immigrant parents in our study faced an additional set of barriers, beyond those faced by U.S. born and/or English-speaking parents, that led directly to parental null actions. For the non-English-speaking Latino immigrant parents we interviewed, the most salient impediments to their agency were *language barriers* and *cultural beliefs and expectations around schooling*.

Despite their perceived low level of participation in their children's schooling, the immigrant parents in our study had high aspirations for their children's futures and recognized the importance of education. Most articulated a deep faith in the power of formal education to improve their children's lives. Ms. Rosales explained,

> I finished college. I graduated and am a system's analyst, and the experience for me was wonderful. Arriving to this country, everything stops.

All those studies for nothing. So, I tell my daughter, "you have to study, you have to go to college, you have to progress more than mommy, just because mommy makes tacos in Taco Bell doesn't mean that mommy doesn't know"…I try my hardest so that my daughter can continue so that she will hopefully be better than her mother in terms of her education. (King, 3rd grade)

Though the parents in this study desired to be a part of their children's education, the language barrier and related fear brought about by their lack of English served as a significant impediment to these parents' agency and often resulted in null actions. Ms. Santos explained her apparent non-involvement this way:

If they [the school] ask me why I don't come to talk to them, it's because I am afraid they will speak to me in English. I assure you that 50% of the mothers that at times they don't even recognize or don't call here, it's the fear that they will speak to them in English. So, that's really where we have to start. (King, 5th grade)

Ms. Rosales said,

I think that we need more people who speak Spanish…last year my child had a teacher who only spoke English. Therefore when I want to ask many things, I can't. In that moment she doesn't have someone to tell me, "Ok, your daughter is doing well"…I hear many moms who say that when they go to pick up their child's report card they can't ask anything…I ask, "Ok, she is fine? She talks too much?" Short phrases that I know the teacher understands. (King, 3rd grade)

These immigrant parents wished they could speak with their children's teachers about education *in their native language* and were able to communicate with school staff when their children were in need of assistance. Their inability to do so led many to retreat from trying. Ms. Santos explained,

I know the principal is a very good person, but I always wonder and I am going to find out because I have this question, there must be a statistic of the number of Hispanic children in this school, and I think it must be more then 50%. And if at least half the children who come to school are Hispanic—I know this is an English-speaking country—but I think that if there are many Hispanic children and the parents don't come, don't see a way to relate to the school because they don't speak the language, then the principal, as a person with a college education, who got to be the principal of a school, why doesn't she see the possibility of learning the other language which in this case is Spanish?…When I've come to

speak to the principal, for a complaint or something, I've had to look for an interpreter, so a lot of us feel like we have our hands and feet tied because in the short amount of time that is available to us we cannot tell the principal how we really feel with our own words, and this bothers many of us. (King, 5th grade)

Ms. Estevez, a King 2nd grade parent, concurred, "…the principal speaks only English, so I don't go to him much."

Other parents understood that the impediment of language extended from their ability to communicate with their children's teachers and other school officials about their children's learning directly to their ability to assist with math homework. Ms. Rivera explained how difficult it was for her to understand her son's math homework:

I don't understand much. I more or less understand when I see the problem, but to read them I almost don't understand anything. They don't write them clear, they use language like in the doctor's office, like they say, "that is I-no-I-don't-know" [laughs], and you don't understand what that is…you don't know what that is, you don't understand what they are saying. You understand from the homework, if you know a little bit of math, but not from the expressions they use. (King, 2nd grade)

Ms. Rosales' developed a strategy for helping her daughter with her math homework which involved getting her husband, who spoke more English, to help when he was home in between his two jobs or using her English-speaking nieces as a resource. Ms. Rosales explained,

I talk on the Internet with my nieces who are older, and they tell me. I write the question, and they answer by calling on the phone and explaining to my daughter in English. (King, 3rd grade)

Ms. Garcia had also confronted a language barrier that prevented her daughter from completing her math homework, despite their best efforts.

She's in regular classes [not bilingual] so the instructions are in English. I can read a little so I get out my dictionary to translate, right, and sometimes it just doesn't work. I try and try to translate the instructions but then the problems don't work for us, and it's better to leave it like that [undone]. (Whitman, 2nd grade)

Others parents emphasized the cultural breach between their preferred styles of communication—direct and personal—with their children's teachers and the kinds of communication systems in place in many urban schools, where most information, including information about the math curriculum and math homework, is communicated to parents via letters or fliers sent home

in the children's backpacks. This system, compounded by the language barrier, led several parents to feel a deep lack in communication with their children's school. As new immigrants to the United States, the norms and mechanisms of their children's schools, particularly in regards to expectations of parent involvement and school–home communication, were entirely different from what they had experienced in their countries of origin (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990).

When Ms. Rivera was queried about the types of communication she received from her son's school, she initially said she received, "Nothing. Only if the child misbehaves." When pressed, she acknowledged that "…the school does send some papers home during the week, but…I don't, I look at it, but I don't pay too much attention" (King, 2nd grade). To her, these papers did not constitute a true form of communication because she, like most of the Latino immigrant parents in our study, preferred communication with her child's school to be direct and personal.

Several parents were put off not only by the generic quality of the materials being sent home, but also by the fact that much of the written information was sent home in English. Ms. Estevez explained that the school mostly sent "papers" home to the parents and that often they were sent in English and she had to find someone—a friend or her son's teacher—to translate them for her (King, 2nd grade). Yet, when she needed to communicate something to the school, like most of the immigrant parents, she went there.

Valdés (1996) noted that, "Immigrant parents are unsure of their role in the U.S. public schools; they often misunderstood their role in their children's education because they didn't understand the concept of involvement as defined by the school" (p. 33). Not only were most of the immigrant parents interviewed unaware what math curriculum their children's schools were using and whether or not the school had homework policies, but some were unsure if their children's teachers even wanted them to be involved in their children's homework. When asked about this, Ms. Estevez, a 2nd grade parent at King, laughed nervously and responded, "I don't know, I don't know."

Barring direct and personal communication, the non-English-speaking immigrant parents in our study were left unsure of how and when to intervene in their children's math learning and math homework, and they often resorted to null actions in the face of such impediments to their effective involvement.

Math Content and Curriculum as Impediments to Parental Agency

For a variety of reasons, several parents explained how they found the curriculum itself, and the math content knowledge they believed it expected of parents, erected significant challenges to parents' inclinations to exercise their

agency to engage in their children's math learning through homework. It is important to note that neither we nor the parents we interviewed were suggesting that reform-oriented curricula should be abandoned in favor of other, more traditional curricula. The parent agency framework, however, affords a better understanding of how and why parents do not always engage in the explicit actions recommended through the *Everyday Mathematics* curriculum materials and desired by school personnel.

Many parents described *Everyday Math* as the "new math," indicating that its content and methods were distinctly different from what they learned in school. Ms. Washington explained this disconnect between how she learned math and what her children were doing:

> It's frustrating because I don't understand, and sometimes I'll try to call my sister and I'll ask her, and she's like, I got to see it. I don't even know what the heck you talking about, and I'm like, I don't even know what the heck I'm looking at. I mean, it be like that because sometimes you get something and be like, what the heck? Are you supposed to have this? Is this on your level? We're older. I guess they got new and improved things. They got things that we don't know, and some things that we do. (Whitman, 2nd grade)

Practically, this concern was often manifested in the confusion parents encountered with *Everyday Math* conventions. For example, when asked about fact triangles, a means for students to practice math facts, parents were unclear about what the symbols on the triangles represented and why the facts were displayed on triangles in the first place. (More than one parent asked whether the dots on the cards were places to punch holes to make a necklace.) Mrs. Keller described,

> I didn't understand it at first. I'm like—because, you know, we didn't use those symbols. Those are computer symbols, you know? When I did multiplication, division, the symbol was different. (SCS, 4th grade)

Some parents, like Ms. Demond, questioned the efficacy of the spiral structure and sequence of the *Everyday Math* curriculum:

> But I know, in her grades, we did have, like, more time, for everything, as far as addition, subtraction. We might have two weeks, or…I just know we spent more time than a week.…Then they cram different things each day. Because each different day they might come home with something different. We had a set time to learn how to tell time, and… what's the other stuff?…We might have spent two weeks on that. Two weeks spending on something, that's different. Other than just a week. Because, you're not gonna learn how to do the rows and maybe money,

in just a week, and then move on down to something else. They're not gonna learn it. Can't learn like that. (SCS, 2nd grade)

For some parents, the unfamiliarity with *Everyday Mathematics* conventions reinforced feelings they had towards math (such as lack of confidence) based on their own experiences as learners. Ms. Demond explained,

> I would love for them to go back to the basics. And I mean, if I probably—probably kind of knew it worked well, was explained, why it's that way, then I would understand. I wouldn't have such a negative feeling about it. If they, you know, kind of explained it to you, it wouldn't be such a bad—it might not be a bad thing. (SCS, 2nd grade)

Ms. Ingram wondered whether her own confusion with math as a learner limited her understanding of the curriculum, saying, "You know, if you were good at math, you could figure this out. I was not one of those parents. So…I didn't get it" (SCS, 2nd grade). This gap between the parents' school math experiences and those of their children factored into parents' concerns about how they should act or help.

While *Everyday Math* does provide materials for parents through the *Home Links* component (including the Family Letter and Family Notes), how schools and teachers distributed these materials varied. What was notable in parent responses was that many parents suggested that they needed resources to support their children, and while sometimes the resources were not made available (e.g., workbook pages assigned but no Student Reference book sent home), even if they were, there was no assurance that they would be sufficient or helpful. For some parents, this stemmed from confusion over what the examples were demonstrating (i.e., what was the math, and how did it connect to math they knew?). Mrs. Washington described,

> One time, the demonstration came home with the homework, and I thought it was homework, and I skipped over it. Then when I started doing the homework, I was like, hold up, oh okay, shoot, this is cool, they should do this more often. But when I was getting it without the homework, it's a different story. (Whitman, 2nd grade)

Ms. Jacobs noted,

> Yeah, that was one thing that I—I wasn't clear about. Whether she has a math notebook that she wasn't toting home with her, and that's why she doesn't—you know [remember or understand something]…I thought maybe there should be a glossary in the back of her little workbook there. (SCS, 4th grade)

Mrs. Keller adamantly stated that she felt a textbook would aid her own understanding:

But one thing I did not like was that textbooks never came home. And what I didn't like about that was the fact that it didn't make me—I'm not in the classroom learning the lesson with Scott. So if he needed my help, I wasn't always able to give it, because I don't just off the top of my head, know cubic measurements, or…remember the geometric, you know, the names of the shapes or the area and perimeter formulas. I don't remember that. And so it was a little bit more difficult for me to help him, because they're not sending textbooks and things home.… Without the textbook, sometimes I felt inadequate so far as, am I giving him the right—? (SCS, 4th grade)

Parents' self-perceived lack of familiarity with or knowledge of the curriculum and the ways it represented math content served as an impediment to school-approved explicit actions and content support, such as encouraging children to try to solve problems in different ways and to communicate their reasoning. Ms. Rivera lamented the unfamiliar structure of certain problems:

I know when she sends homework that is like, "So and so has so much and so and so has so much" and it's like a summary, and you have to come to some conclusion from that and, ay! Those make me crazy. [laughs] And we are both like half an hour thinking about that, and we try to come to some conclusion and it's not right [laughs], and we make some horrible erasings in the notebook and in the end we say, "Let's let the teacher explain it to you!" after we've spent half an hour on that. (King, 2nd grade)

Parents also expressed frustration at the ways in which the parent components of the *Everyday Math* curriculum intruded into the home space and time. Ms. Demond emphasized,

But the stuff that—as far as the things like, us doing—I understand it's more somewhat interacting for children, and I'm just like that's not math, that's not math.…I don't need no one sending home a paper to tell me how to…interact with my children. I have my own special way of interacting and bonding, and I can take them to the store and show them how to do that.…Some people—like, at the end of the day, like, my hours, the way I work, by the time I get home from work, it's not enough hours in the day to find time to do some of these things. You know? It's only, do what you really have to do.

That parents encountered challenges in understanding reform-oriented approaches in their children's mathematics schoolwork confirms findings in the field (Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Remillard & Jackson, 2006). How these challenges affect parental engagement—that parents may opt to engage in null

actions when they perceive that other actions might not help them to support their children—complicates the efforts on the part of school personnel to use the "home" components of the curriculum as a means to improving communication and collaboration between home and school.

Conclusion

Our data compel us to argue for a reconceptualization of parent engagement in children's math homework that is broad enough to encompass alternate views of how and why parents activate their agency in support of their children's math learning. What we are calling null actions are intentional strategies on the part of parents that are very much aligned with parents' goals for their children's education. Challenging a one-dimensional conception of parent involvement seems particularly important for parents in urban, underserved schools who are often characterized as disengaged and disinterested in their children's schooling. Though current research on parent involvement might have moved from a "schools know best" deficit model of parent engagement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss, 2008), the schools in which our study was conducted have not. Thus, our research calls upon educators to look beyond narrow conceptions of parent engagement with an exclusive focus on school-mandated actions so they don't miss what parents are actually doing and why.

If parent involvement is increasingly seen as a policy move towards improving student achievement and part of math educators' view of how children learn math, then *how* and *why* parents interact with their children's math homework becomes critically important. Paying close attention to the differing ways in which parents act to support their children's math learning will be fundamental to these children's success. We would also suggest that the parental null actions for self-reliance described in this paper do not, in fact, run counter to schools' goals for children's math learning. Parents' goals for student self-reliance actually align quite well with schools' goals for student accountability and responsibility. However, the schools in our study failed to capitalize on this potential for alignment in any meaningful way. A reconceptualization of homework as a teacher–student contract, rather than a window through which to examine or a bridge through which to build home–school partnerships, might fit better with the perspectives of those parents who engaged in null actions for self-reliance. This recommendation further supports our observation that many of the students in our study actually do their homework in school, mostly in academically oriented after-school programs aimed at raising student achievement on standardized tests, *not* at home. In these cases, homework is not a "boundary object" between home and school, as our study

initially conceived it to be (Wenger, 1998). This finding cautions us to be realistic about what "home" work is and how parents can and do interact with it, despite their best intentions to support their children's schooling.

The other null actions described in this article resulted in the context of impediments to parental engagement that can only be solved if addressed more directly and fully by schools. Schools with large immigrant parent populations must create a more welcoming environment for non-English-speaking parents, in part through the presence of bilingual personnel, but also through the more systematic and widespread use of Spanish language resources such as those the *Everyday Math* curriculum makes readily available to schools. Those impediments presented by the math curriculum itself involve recognizing that parents and children often do math quite differently. While reform curricula may offer some parents an opportunity to reengage with a topic they found alienating when they were younger and a chance for them to connect with and support their children's learning as learners themselves (see Civil & Bernier, 2006; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Martin, 2006 who support this claim), for some parents that is not going to happen, and this must be considered acceptable as well. Options must be made available to parents *without judgment* if they choose, for whatever reasons, not to engage in a visible way. Parents should not feel that the curriculum prescribes particular interactions with their children, or their children's homework, that do not cohere with their understandings of what it means to support their children's learning. Overall, our research underscores the belief that greater latitude in conceptualizing and understanding parental involvement can potentially lead to more inclusive school practices and greater engagement on the part of parents which can, in turn, only serve to increase students' school success.

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Parent–Teacher–Student Discrepancies in Academic Ability Beliefs: Influences on Parent Involvement

Nimisha Patel and Sharon Stevens

Abstract

Most studies examining influences on parent involvement focus on common demographic factors, such as social class or gender, and on elementary grades. In the present study, we investigated a more malleable influence, perceptions of ability, in the context of middle school. We examined how perceptions held by parents, teachers, and students concerning students' academic abilities affected parents' involvement and teachers' facilitation of school programs for involvement. We considered differences between parents who spoke Spanish or English in our sample drawn from two low-income, urban middle schools with a large Latino population. We also examined how involvement and programs are related to discrepancies in perceptions of children's academic abilities between parents, teachers, and students. In general, as discrepancies increased between parents and teachers or between parents and students, parents tended to be less involved and teachers tended to facilitate fewer programs for parent involvement. Furthermore, significant differences in involvement were found between Spanish- and English-speaking parents related to parent–teacher discrepancies in perceptions of students' general scholastic abilities and to parent–student discrepancies in students' math abilities. This study indicates that perceptions of student ability held by teachers, parents, and students have an influence on parents' and teachers' actions regarding family and school partnerships. It also underscores the importance of clarifying how beliefs are indirectly communicated in order to improve our efforts to promote collaboration.

Key Words: parents, teachers, students, beliefs, discrepancies, academic ability, perceptions, middle schools, practices, involvement, urban, programs, facilitation, Latino, Spanish, English, language, math, partnerships, communication, collaboration, family, families

Introduction

Overview

Educational practitioners and policymakers continually seek ways to increase and maintain parent participation and interest in their children's academics, stemming from decades of research supporting the benefits of such involvement. Benefits range from enhancing students' academic success (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002; Kenny, Gallagher, Alvarez, & Silsby, 2002) to creating more positive academic self-beliefs and behaviors (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002; Sanders, 1996). In order to successfully promote parent involvement, we need a better understanding of factors that facilitate or impede cooperation and collaboration by parents and teachers.

To date, much of the literature has focused on common demographic factors, such as social class, ethnicity, and gender (see Jeynes, 2003 meta-analysis) and on elementary grade levels (Boethel, 2003). In the present study, we investigated a more malleable influence, perceptions of ability, in the context of middle school. We examined how perceptions held by parents, teachers, and students concerning students' academic abilities affected parents' involvement and teachers' facilitation of school programs for involvement. We considered differences between Spanish- and English-speaking parents in our sample drawn from two low-income, urban middle schools with a large Latino population.

Going beyond the question of how perceptions affect parent involvement and school programs, we also examined how involvement and programs are related to discrepancies in perceptions of children's academic abilities between parents, teachers, and students. Exploring these differences is particularly intriguing given previous research revealing parents' tendency to overestimate their children's academic and developmental abilities (Pharis & Manosevitz, 1980 as cited in Miller, 1988), which often conflict with teachers' more accurate accounts (Miller & Davis, 1992). For example, Ames and Archer (1987) found mothers' judgments to be less accurate, especially if they did not hold performance-based goal orientations for their children, while Miller and Davis (1992) noted that though parents and teachers overestimated students' abilities, it was more pronounced among parents.

While these studies clearly illustrate the discrepancies between parents' and teachers' perceptions of students' abilities, they provide little insight into any actual effects of the perceptions, accurate or otherwise, on children's academic progress. In a more recent study, Msengi (2007) suggested that a lack of shared understanding among parents, children, and teachers regarding perceptions of students' reading abilities and activities was related to students' actual reading levels. When the families and teachers were in agreement, students' reading levels were at or above the class average. Our present research examined agreement among parents, children, and teachers regarding students' abilities, with a focus on its relationship to parents' participation in their children's education and to teachers' facilitation of programs for parents' participation. We expected that larger parent–teacher and parent–student discrepancies in beliefs would be related to greater social distance between the groups as measured by parents' reports of their involvement and teachers' facilitation of school programs.

Theoretical support for our research comes from Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2001). Accordingly, parent involvement is a function of interinstitutional interactions between the family, school, and community and the philosophies, experiences, and practices embedded within each. The influences of these three spheres overlap and are integral to the development of the child. Time, the fourth factor, reflects an individual's age and grade level, as well as the historical time during which development occurs. At varying times, the forces will either become closer with more overlap or pull further apart resulting in less overlap.

The overlapping spheres are commonly drawn apart by individuals' familial practices and developmental characteristics, as well as historical and policy contexts, all of which create fewer opportunities and incentives for shared activities (Epstein, 1996). Consequently, rather than reinforcing shared goals, families and schools tend to be disconnected in their teaching (Epstein, 1990). Children often get lost in the discontinuity between the values and norms promoted at school and those which are supported by their families (Coleman, 1988). In contrast, greater family–school overlap in goals and practices creates more collaboration and partnerships by closing the social and psychological distance between family and school members (Epstein, 1996). Students are then more likely to receive common messages through common patterns of communication, reinforcing social norms associated with educational success and promoting academic success itself (Msengi, 2007). The congruity in values and sanctions on behavior increases the amount of information that can be shared among the social networks linking schools, families, and communities (Coleman, 1988; Epstein, 1996).

Epstein posits that the interinstitutional interactions reflect six modes of parent involvement: parenting (developmental support), school–home communication, school-based volunteerism, home-based activities, participation in school governance, and the use of community resources. Parents are not expected to initiate all forms of involvement nor to participate in them in isolation. Partnerships require that schools, families, and communities work in conjunction with one another to ensure children's academic success (Epstein, 2001).

Parent Involvement in Middle School

The research on parent involvement and teacher communication in middle school is limited but generally suggests that both activities decline significantly from elementary school, creating greater social distance between families and schools. There is a greater likelihood for elementary school teachers to have strong communication practices in place and to demonstrate more effective inclusion of parents at school and at home with homework (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). On the other hand, middle school teachers use fewer specific communication practices and communicate less often and with fewer families (Epstein & Dauber, 1991, Vaden-Kiernan & McManus, 2005). They also provide more limited information regarding student expectations and how parents can help with homework (Van Voorhis, 2003), leading to a deficit of parent involvement (Epstein, 2001).

It appears that parents' perceptions of this lessening communication impacts their decisions to become involved, as noted in the framework of involvement by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997). In an example of this, Balli, Demo, and Wedman (1998) found that teachers could influence parents of middle-schoolers to become involved with homework by directly inviting them or by influencing students to invite parents. Their findings relating to math homework and middle school students indicated that families receiving prompts to be involved directly from the teacher or from the students were significantly more involved in math homework activities than those families receiving no prompts. Van Voorhis (2003) similarly reported significantly higher amounts of parent involvement from parents who received direct requests to interact with their children on their homework.

These studies reinforce the necessity for continuous and open communication on behalf of the schools to facilitate parent involvement. Fargnoli's (2004) study reinforces this as it also showed that parents recognized the need to be involved with their adolescent children and to support learning at home. They also wanted to maintain communication with their children's teachers and were willing to use alternative methods than those used at the elementary level.

Although research demonstrates that middle school teachers generally provide fewer invitations, we cannot draw a parallel with their actual beliefs about parent involvement. Pelco and Ries (1999) reported that elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers (99%) "agreed or strongly agreed that parent involvement is important for a good school and that parent involvement can help teachers be more effective with more students" (p. 269). However, elementary school teachers reported significantly higher levels of actual personal support for parent involvement than did middle school teachers. Despite the high expectations for parents to be supportive, the majority of teachers felt that parents provided only minimal to some support for family–school collaborative efforts, and that parents' roles in school decision-making needed to increase. The majority of the middle school teachers (60.5%) believed that parents did not want to be involved in their children's education more than they were currently.

To explain their results, Pelco and Ries (1999) used Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995) framework of why parents become involved in their children's education to propose a comparable model of why teachers involve parents. The framework includes the need for teachers to "perceive opportunities, invitations, or demands from their students, their students' families, their schools' administration, and/or the community for such initiatives" (p. 273). As Epstein's theory asserts, communication must stem from both the family and the school. It is important for both parents and teachers to receive invitations for collaboration (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Pelco & Ries, 1999).

Parent Involvement and Ethnicity

When middle school teachers communicate less with parents, they also receive less information from parents. This can create misunderstandings about the ways by which parents can and do participate with their children. Consequently, parents' reports of actual family involvement are commonly inconsistent with school reports of family involvement. These inconsistencies are greater for schools with larger minority populations (Boethel, 2003).

Research shows that the vast majority of parents from all ethnic groups support their children's learning at home in a variety of ways, reflecting differing cultural patterns (Catsambis & Garland, 1997; Desimone, 1999; Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998; Pena, 2000; Ramirez, 2003). While there are important differences in parenting styles among ethnic groups, the basic mechanism of support and scale of impact with regards to parental influences is constant across all ethnic groups (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Despite prevalently cited research (Coleman, 1987; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991), minority families are repeatedly found to be highly interested in their children's

education and to hold high expectations for their academic success (Boethel, 2003; Mapp, 2002).

As Azmitia and Cooper (2002) explained, it is more common for White, higher-income parents to participate in activities held at school. Minority parents, who are less visible at school, are often perceived as not valuing or being interested in education. Consequently, their involvement is often underestimated by teachers who focus on direct school participation, such as volunteering. For instance, Azmitia and Cooper reported that teachers rated White parents as being significantly more involved than Latino parents even though both were equally involved at home. These results parallel other research showing that parents who are ethnic minorities are no less participatory than their White counterparts (Ho & Willms, 1996), and misconceptions related to this may be due to White parents' tendency to be more active in the school building (Griffith, 1998).

Data from the *Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the 2003 National Household Education Surveys Program* (weighted sample size 51,394,188) indicated that, in fact, there are differences in school communication practices and opportunities for parent involvement between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking households. A greater percentage of students in English-speaking households than in Spanish-speaking households had parents who reported receiving personal notes or emails about the student (50% versus 40%) and newsletters, memos, or notices addressed to all parents (92% versus 82%). They also reported more opportunities to volunteer (88% versus 58%) and to attend general meetings (97% versus 89%) and school events (78% versus 65%). Differences were still apparent after taking poverty status into account (Enyeart, Diehl, Hampden-Thompson, & Scotchmer, 2006).

Research Purpose and Hypotheses

The purpose of our research was to examine how parents', teachers', and students' perceptions of the students' abilities affect parents' reports of their involvement and of school programs to facilitate their involvement. This went beyond the commonly measured demographic characteristics, although we also examined our results by language groups. Extending our investigation further, we explored how parent involvement and school programs were related to discrepancies in perceptions of abilities. We based our research on the theoretical framework of overlapping spheres developed by Epstein (2001). Using this theory, we suggested that discrepancies in perceptions of students' abilities may result in less overlap between the family and school and thus less involvement and fewer school programs for parents.

Our first set of hypotheses was derived from research that suggests that English- and Spanish-speaking parents are involved in distinctive ways (Catsambis & Garland, 1997) and that schools interact differently with parents of diverse cultures (Enyeart et al., 2006). Furthermore, we considered the research suggesting that as students increase in grade level, parent involvement declines (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Vaden-Kiernan & McManus, 2005; Van Voorhis, 2003). Therefore, we hypothesized that differences would exist between English- and Spanish-speaking parents' reports of their involvement and that parent involvement may vary as a function of their children's grade level. In a parallel manner, we hypothesized that differences would exist between English- and Spanish-speaking parents' reports of school programs for involvement and that school programs may vary as a function of children's grade level.

Our second set of hypotheses was based on research suggesting that parents' and teachers' estimations of students' abilities are often conflicting (Miller & Davis, 1992), which result in less collaboration (Epstein, 1996). We hypothesized that greater parent–teacher differences and parent–student differences would predict less involvement by parents and fewer school programs facilitated by teachers.

Our final set of hypotheses built upon the first two. We hypothesized that discrepancies in perceptions of students' abilities by parents, teachers, and students would be correlated with more specific types of involvement practices: volunteerism, parenting, and learning at home on the part of the parents, and communication, invitations to volunteer, and facilitation of learning at home on part of the teachers. More specifically, we hypothesized that these correlations would vary for English- and Spanish-speaking parents.

Methodology

Participants

We recruited participants from sixth, seventh, and eighth grade regular education classes in two K-8 public schools in a large, urban area in the Southwest. Both are designated as Title I schools and serve ethnically diverse student populations. We invited 437 parents/guardians and their children to participate. We received an overall return rate of 41%. Thirty-nine percent of those were completed in Spanish. Frequency distributions are represented in Table 1. Additionally, 12 teachers, 6 self-contained sixth grade teachers as well as 3 math and 3 English/language arts (ELA) teachers at the seventh and eighth grade levels, were asked and agreed to participate.

Measures

School and Family Partnerships: Survey of Parents in Elementary and Middle Grades

We administered the School and Family Partnerships Survey (SFPS), created by the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at John's Hopkins University (Epstein & Salinas, 1993), to obtain parents' reports of their involvment and of school programs to facilitate their involvement, such as communication and invitations from teachers. The survey included ten broad questions, each with multiple items. We utilized only two questions for a total of 32 Likert-style items. The content areas addressed by the two questions were (1) parent involvement, and (2) parents' reports of school programs. Parent involvement questions offered a four-level Likert response set ranging from disagree strongly to agree strongly. Parents' reports of school program items offered a three-level Likert response set including "does not do," "could do better," and "does well."

Reliability estimates of the factors were calculated by the questionnaire developers using the Cronbach alpha formula, which was appropriate given the Likert-style items. Parent involvement reflected four distinct factors: collective parent involvement (α = .77), parenting activities (α = .44), volunteering activities (α = .49), activities for learning at home (α = .73); as did facilitation of school programs: collective school programs (α = .83), school programs for volunteering (α = .56), school programs for communication (α = .66), and school programs for learning at home (α = .71).

Following the predefined subscales provided by the developers of the SFPS, we measured collective parent involvement (α = .83), parenting activities (α = .42), volunteering activities (α = .68), activities for learning at home (α = .79), collective school programs (α = .86), school programs for volunteering (α = .62), school programs for communication (α = .68), and school programs for learning at home (α = .76) for the sample utilized in this study.

Perceived Competence Scale for Children (PCSC)

We administered the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (PCSC) to measure students' general scholastic abilities. Harter (1982) designed the PCSC to measure children's ability to make distinct evaluations concerning their ability in a particular domain: cognitive competence, social acceptance, physical competence, and general self-worth. We utilized only the six-item subscale measuring school-related cognitive competence. Each item in the scale contained two conflicting statements. Each student had to determine which statement is more indicative of himself/herself. For example, item number

one includes two statements: "Some kids feel that they are very good at their schoolwork" and "Other kids worry about whether they can do the schoolwork assigned to them." After a decision has been made, the participant then marked if that statement is "really true" or "sort of true" for himself/herself, highlighting distinct evaluations concerning ability (Harter, 1982).

In order to measure parents' and teachers' perceptions of students' general scholastic abilities, we used a teacher-rating version of the cognitive competence subscale. Harter constructed this parallel teacher-rating scale as a secondary goal to examine the relationship between pupils' perceived competence and the perceptions of their teachers. Items were reworded to obtain the teachers' best judgment of their students' competence. We employed the cognitive competence subscale from this version of the PCSC in the present study to measure parents' and teachers' perceptions of students' general scholastic abilities. The results of this measure were averaged into a parental perceptions variable (α = .82) and a teacher perceptions variable (α = .95). The discrepancy factor for general scholastic abilities was derived by calculating the absolute difference scores between parents and teachers and between parents and students. The measures of general scholastic abilities by the math and ELA teachers were first averaged together for one teacher factor before examining the discrepancy between parents and teachers.

Letter Grades

We measured parents' perceptions of their children's abilities in math and ELA by asking parents to state the grade they believe their children should have earned in math and ELA given their ability. Teachers reported the students' actual grades earned on their most recent report card. Grades reported were converted into numerical scores based on a 4.33 scale, equivalent to an A+. Difference scores (absolute) were calculated between parents' perceptions and teachers' actual reports to derive the discrepancy factor. The same was done for parents and students. The teacher reports of math and ELA grades were left separate.

Procedures

Upon IRB approval, we collected data at the end of the first grading period in the academic year. At School A, questionnaires were hand delivered to parents who attended parent–teacher conferences. The remaining parents at School A and all of the parents at School B were provided the questionnaires in an envelope taken home by their children. Students and their teachers decided whether they would take home a Spanish or English version of the questionnaire. The accompanying consent form relayed the focus of the study, stressed

the voluntary nature of participation, and requested permission for parents' children to participate in the study. Participating parents were asked to return the questionnaire to the school in the provided envelope, sealed, along with the signed consent form. Questionnaires and consent letters were sent home on 2 separate occasions.

Participating students were asked by the principal to gather in the school cafeteria. We read a verbal script explaining the study and the participants' role. Students were then asked to sign an assent form. Completed questionnaires were then collected. Teachers were asked to complete their surveys within the following weeks. Consequently, for each parent who returned both an involvement and perceived competence measure there was a correlating measure of perceived competence from each student's math teacher, ELA teacher, and from the student himself/herself. Although all participants were asked to include their names so that the researchers were able to match parent, teacher, and student surveys, a coding page was utilized for all surveys so that names could be removed after the data were collected to ensure confidentiality.

Statistical Analyses

To determine if levels of collective parent involvement and parents' reports of collective school programs differed across parents' language and grade level, we conducted multiple one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA). Secondly, we conducted linear regression analyses to examine the predictive ability of descrepancies in perceptions of abilities on collective parent involvement and parents' reports of collective school programs. We further specified the analyses of discrepancies by examining their correlational relationships with more particular forms of parent involvement and school programs. We examined these separately for English- and Spanish-speaking parents. Fisher z transformations were used to make direct comparisons between the two groups where differences appeared.

Results

We conducted two one-way between groups ANOVA to determine if levels of collective parent involvement varied across students' grade level and across parents' language. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations. With respect to grade level, differences in amounts of parents' participation in collective forms of involvement significantly varied (see Table 2). Follow-up post hoc tests conducted using the Bonferroni method to control for Type 1 error indicated that the significant differences occurred between parents of sixth and eighth graders with the former being more involved. Parents of seventh graders

were no more or less likely to be participatory than parents' of sixth and eighth graders. With respect to parents' language, Spanish-speaking parents were significantly more involved than English-speaking parents (see Table 2).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Collective Parent Involvement and School Programs by Parents' Language and Students' Grade Level

Parents' Language	Students' Grade Level	Collective Parent Involvement			Collective School Programs		
		N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*
English	6	28	3.00	.40	29	2.54	.40
	7	45	2.90	.45	44	2.51	.42
	8	36	2.75	.53	36	2.32	.51
	Total	109	2.88	.47	109	2.45	.45
Spanish	6	26	3.11	.41	26	2.69	.29
	7	33	2.96	.44	34	2.49	.43
	8	11	3.06	.42	10	2.63	.41
	Total	70	3.03	.42	70	2.59	.39
Total	6	54	3.06	.40	55	2.61	.36
	7	78	2.93	.44	78	2.50	.42
	8	47	2.82	.52	46	2.39	.50
	Total	179	2.94	.46	179	2.51	.43

Table 2. ANOVA Results for Collective Parent Involvement and School Programs by Students' Grade Level and Parents' Language

Dependent Variable	Factor	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*
Collective parent involvement					
	Grade level Between	1.37	2	.68	3.36*
	Within	36.01	177	.20	
Collective school programs					
	Parents' language Between	1.32	1	1.32	6.5*
	Within	37.08	183	.20	

*$p < .05$

We then conducted bivariate linear regressions to examine the ability of discrepancies to predict collective parent involvement and collective school programs for involvement. We used absolute differences, meaning the analyses did not distinguish between whether the parents or the teachers reported higher ratings of children's ability. Instead, it explored the effect of the magnitude of the discrepancy and its relation with parent involvement and school programs for involvement. For each dependent variable, there were a total of six regressions performed, each including one of the following factors: discrepancy in math ability between parents and math teacher, discrepancy in ELA ability between parents and ELA teacher, discrepancy in general scholastic ability between parents and teachers, discrepancy in math ability between parents and students, discrepancy in ELA between parents and students, and discrepancy in general scholastic ability between parents and students.

The results of the bivariate regression analyses for the variables predicting collective parent involvement revealed only one significant relationship: parent–student discrepancy in perceptions of students' general scholastic ability predicted collective parent involvement activities; as the parent–student discrepancy increased, the amount of parent involvement generally increased. Although none of the discrepancy variables regarding ELA or math ability were significant predictors, they were negatively related to the measure of collective parent involvement.

Regression results predicting parents' reports of collective school programs revealed two significant relationships. Parent–teacher discrepancies in ELA ability and in math ability predicted parents' negative reports of collective school programs for facilitating their involvement. Although the other measures of discrepancy were not statistically significant, they were negatively related to parents' collective involvement and reports of collective school programs. This suggests that, in general, as parent–teacher or parent–student discrepancies increased, parents tended to be less involved and the school offered fewer opportunities for involvement. Table 3 summarizes the results of the regression analyses.

Our following analyses examined the correlational relationships of the discrepancy variables with more specific types of involvement activities and school programs. We also examined these separately by language. To make direct comparisons of statistical significance in the correlations between English- and Spanish-speaking parents, Fisher's *r* to *z*-transformations were conducted.

Table 3. Summary of Bivariate Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable	Factor	B	$SE\ B$	β	t	R^2
Collective parent involvement	Parent–teacher discrepancy in perceptions of students'…					
	Model 1					
	Intercept	3.01	.05		58.98	
	Math ability	-.08	.04	-.15	-1.82	.02
	Model 2					
	Intercept	2.98	.06		51.44	
	ELA ability	-.02	.04	-.04	-.45	.00
	Model 3					
	Intercept	2.91	.06		47.12	
	General scholastic ability	.08	.08	.09	.99	.01
	Parent–student discrepancy in perceptions of students'…					
	Model 4					
	Intercept	2.96	.05		64.31	
	Math ability	-.02	.05	-.04	-.46	.00
	Model 5					
	Intercept	2.97	.05		56.90	
	ELA ability	-.04	.05	-.07	-.84	.01
	Model 6					
	Intercept	2.85	.06		45.26	
	General scholastic ability	.17	.08	.18	2.02*	.03
Collective school programs	Parent–teacher discrepancy in perceptions of students'…					
	Model 7					
	Intercept	2.59	.05		56.57	
	Math ability	-.09	.04	-.20	-2.42*	.04
	Model 8					
	Intercept	2.55	.05		47.60	
	ELA ability	-.05	.04	-.10	-1.07	.01
	Model 9					
	Intercept	2.50	.06		45.56	
	General scholastic ability	.03	.07	.04	.45	.00
	Parent–student discrepancy in perceptions of students'…					
	Model 10					
	Intercept	2.56	.04		62.02	
	Math ability	-.07	.04	-.14	-1.70	.02
	Model 11					
	Intercept	2.59	.05		57.13	
	ELA ability	-.10	.04	-.20	-2.44*	.04
	Model 12					
	Intercept	2.53	.06		44.93	
	General scholastic ability	.02	.07	.02	.21	.00

*$p < .05$

Parent–Teacher Discrepancy

General Scholastic Ability

The first set of analyses focused on parent–teacher discrepancies with respect to students' general scholastic ability. For both English- and Spanish-speaking parents, a significant correlation was found between the discrepancy and parents' reports of school programs for volunteering. This correlation was negative for English-speaking parents, and positive for Spanish-speaking parents. A discrepancy between teachers' and Spanish-speaking parents' perceptions of general scholastic abilities also correlated positively with school programs related to learning at home. This correlation was not significant for the English-speaking parents. The difference in the correlations for the two groups on this variable was significant (Fisher's z = -2.12, p = .04).

English/Language Arts (ELA)

In the content area of ELA, there were no significant correlations between the discrepancy factors and types of parent involvement and also none with school programs for involvement. This was true for both the English- and Spanish-speaking parents. This suggests that differences in parents' perceptions of their children's abilities in ELA and the children's actual reported grades did not increase or decrease parents' types of involvement, nor their reports of the schools' programs to facilitate their involvement.

Math

As for math, results indicated that for English-speaking parents, the discrepancy with teachers was significantly negatively correlated with parents' involvement in volunteering activities as well as parents' reports of schools' facilitation of communication and volunteering activities. Although these same correlations did not achieve statistical significance for the Spanish-speaking parents, Fisher's z-transformations did not reveal any significant difference between the two groups of parents (Fisher's z = -.24; z = -1.68; z = -.42) for parental volunteering, schools' programs for communication, and schools' programs for volunteering, respectively, all p > .05.

Parent–Student Discrepancy

General Scholastic Ability

Parent–student discrepancy in perceptions of students' general scholastic abilities was significantly positively related to parent volunteering activities for the Spanish-speaking parents. Although this was not a significant correlation for the English-speaking parents, the magnitude of the correlations for both groups were not significantly different from each other (Fisher's z = -1.91, p > .05).

English/Language Arts (ELA)

Parent involvement in parenting activities was significantly negatively correlated, for English-speaking parents only, with parent–student discrepancy in perceptions of students' ELA abilities. There was not a significant correlation for Spanish-speaking parents; however, the correlations for the two groups were not significantly different from each other (Fisher's z = .75, p > .05).

Math

In the content area of math, there were four significant negative correlations for the Spanish-speaking parents. These were for parents' volunteering activities and parents' reports of school programs for communication, volunteering, and learning at home. There were no significant correlations for the English-speaking parents; however, Fisher's z scores indicated that there were only significant differences between the correlations of the English- and Spanish-speaking parents in cases of parents' involvement in learning at home activities (Fisher's z = 2.22, p = .03) and reports of school programs for learning at home activities (Fisher's z = 2.22, p = .03). No significant differences existed between the groups for parents' reports of school programs for communication and volunteering, Fisher's z = 1.62 and z = 1.44, respectively, both p > .05.

Summary of Correlation Results by Language

For participating parents who responded to the English questionnaire, five significant correlations appeared. The first four involved parent–teacher discrepancies. As the discrepancy in perceptions of students' general scholastic abilities increased, parents reported fewer school programs to facilitate their volunteering. Similarly, as the discrepancy increased in parents' perceptions of the students' abilities in math and the teachers' reports of actual grades, parents reported less participation in volunteering activities, fewer school programs to facilitate their volunteering, and fewer school programs to facilitate communication with the school. The final correlation involved the parent–student discrepancy in perceptions of the students' abilities in ELA. As the discrepancy increased, parents reported less participation in parenting activities.

There were seven significant correlations for the parents who completed the Spanish questionnaire. Only two of those correlations involved a discrepancy between the parents and the teachers. As the differences in their perceptions of the students' general scholastic abilities increased, parents reported more school programs to facilitate their volunteering and more programs to facilitate their learning at home activities. The remaining five significant correlations involved parent–student discrepancies. As the discrepancy in perceptions of the students' general scholastic abilities increased, parents reported more participation

in volunteering activities. However, as the discrepancy in perceptions of the students' math abilities increased, parents reported less involvement in volunteering activities and fewer school programs to facilitate communication, volunteering, and learning at home.

The significantly correlated variables were different according to the language of the questionnaire. When differences occurred, we used Fisher's r to z transformations to make direct comparisons for actual significant differences between the two groups. These transformations revealed two real differences between the Spanish- and English-speaking parents: (1) in the case of parent–teacher discrepancies in students' general scholastic abilities, and (2) in the case of parent–student discrepancies in students' math abilities.

Discussion

Although most parent involvement literature demonstrates that a lack of English fluency is often a barrier to involvement (Pena, 2000), it did not appear to be the case here. Our results indicated that the Spanish-speaking parents of middle-schoolers were more involved in collective activities related to their children's education than were the English-speaking parents. The Spanish-speaking parents also reported more collective school programs to facilitate their involvement. Despite language being a significant factor, it only accounted for a small portion of the variance.

Our results emphasize that language alone is not a sufficient criterion for predicting parents' and teachers' activities. Instead, it remains an important factor to consider within the context of the school and its community. For example, the school district from which we gathered our sample population has placed increasing importance on serving the Latino community due to the rapidly changing demographics of the area. However, such school policies and practices were not measured or taken into consideration in the analysis to explain what could be facilitating the more active involvement of Spanish-speaking parents over the English-speaking parents. We suggest that this is likely not a function only of their language, but a reflection of the social ties between the community and the schools. This creates greater overlap between schools and the community to promote more collaboration and partnerships between parents and teachers (Epstein, 1996).

Relationships between parents and teachers are an integral factor in the creation of productive social ties between the community and school. We hypothesized that if parents and teachers have differing views regarding students' general scholastic competence and subject specific abilities, then their relationships and social ties may be weakened. In other words, as the discrepancy

increases between the two groups, involvement on the part of parents and the facilitation of programs on the part of teachers may decline. We examined these relationships in terms of collective forms of parent involvement and collective forms of teacher facilitation of involvement. As expected, as discrepancies increased, reports of parent involvement and schools' facilitation of involvement declined. However, it is difficult to accurately measure the effects of discrepancies on parent involvement and school programs for involvement using one collective variable for each. Parent involvement is a term that encompasses a wide range of activities, including direct participation with children on educational pursuits such as homework and studying for exams, communicating with children about the importance of education, providing support, having high academic expectations, communicating with the school, and visiting the school to participate in programs, volunteer, and attend meetings (Epstein, 1995; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001). Additionally, it is difficult to accurately describe involvement among different cultures (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). Therefore, separately for English- and Spanish-speaking parents, we continued our analysis by examining correlations of parent–teacher and parent–student discrepancies with parent involvement across three specific activities: parenting, volunteering, and learning at home. Similarly, programs facilitated by the school were grouped into three categories: communication programs, volunteering programs, and learning at home programs.

For the English-speaking parents, it appears that parent–teacher disagreements are more prevalent than parent–student ones. For the Spanish-speaking parents, disagreements were more prevalent between parents and students. The disagreements between the English-speaking parents and teachers about their children's abilities generally lead to less interaction with the school, particularly for volunteering, whether initiated by the parents or the school. Overall, parents reported receiving less facilitation of parent involvement by the school. When parents disagreed with their children, they helped them less in educational pursuits at home. These results are not surprising, assuming that parent–teacher disagreements about children's abilities could lead to discomfort for both parties. Their children's ability is likely a sensitive topic for parents and as past research shows, parents tend to rate their child's abilities higher than the teacher would rate the child. Recognizing that the teacher feels less confident in one's child would logically be related to less interaction.

Despite the seemingly logical relationships found for the English-speaking parents, we were surprised by the results for the Spanish-speaking parents. For the cases in which parents and teachers disagreed, reports of parent involvement facilitated by the school increased, contradicting the results of the English-speaking parents, whose involvement decreased. We will discuss this

further, but at this point it is important to mention that upon viewing the results and recognizing our surprise, we also acknowledge the many underlying assumptions we hold based on our own experiences in the mainstream culture of the education system that are likely different than the experiences of recent immigrants to the United States. What seems logical and what seems surprising is a matter of lived experiences within specific contexts.

In order to make more direct comparisons for actual significant differences between the two language groups, we used Fisher's *r* to *z* transformations. These transformations revealed two real differences between the Spanish- and English-speaking parents: (1) in the case of parent–teacher discrepancies in students' general scholastic abilities, and (2) in the case of parent–student discrepancies in students' math abilities. We will begin with discussing the first case. Spanish-speaking parents reported more learning at home activities when there was a discrepancy between parents and teachers while there was no significant correlation for the English-speaking parents, and Spanish-speaking parents reported more school programs to volunteer while English-speaking parents reported fewer programs. Thus, when parents and teachers disagree, Spanish-speaking parents seemed to be more connected with the school through programs to volunteer and learn at home, while English-speaking parents appeared to be more distant.

Of consideration here is the fact that data on school programs were collected by parental report only; we cannot be sure whether the relationships existed because teachers actually provided fewer invitations to volunteer to English-speaking parents and more invitations to Spanish-speaking parents or if it is the parents' perceptions of invitations to volunteer that rose or declined with larger discrepancies in beliefs about students' general scholastic abilities. Either way, the results of this study suggest that the communication of invitations is not as effective for English-speaking parents if there are differing views about the students' general scholastic abilities. The inconclusiveness of the results also demonstrates that a future study needs to help clarify how teachers' perceptions of their students may be reflected in their actions and words and thus be communicated to the parents. Moreover, additional data should be gathered on how teachers' actions and words are interpreted differently by parents and how parents then decide to respond to a situation in which discrepancies occur. Of great importance is also how these interpretations and decisions are based in cultural beliefs and values.

The second case of significance occurred with discrepancies between parents and students regarding students' math abilities. For this discrepancy, the Spanish-speaking parents were significantly negatively correlated, reporting fewer learning at home activities and reports of school programs for learning at

home. These were not significantly correlated for the English-speaking parents. As opposed to the parent–teacher discrepancies, which seemed to lead to more involvement by Spanish-speaking parents through learning at home, parent–student discrepancies seemed to decrease the amount of involvement with learning at home. As with the previous results, these findings are also inconclusive and we can only make assumptions as to their causes. These results may be related to parents' views of teachers versus children. Parents may be more apt to recognize children's needs when discrepancies are noted between them and their children's teachers. Being that parent involvement increased with the parent–teacher discrepancies, this may further support the notion that teachers communicated more clearly to the Spanish-speaking parents about what their children needed in terms of parental support. Meanwhile, a decrease in home-based involvement when parents and children disagree on ability level may be a consequence of poor communication between parents and their children with respect to the latter's academic progress. In this case, parents have a less accurate picture of their children's abilities and, therefore, would be unaware of the specific needs of the children.

Implications

Overall, this study can support two general findings: one, that perceptions of students' abilities held by teachers, parents, and students are related to parents' and teachers' actions regarding family and school partnerships, and two, that differences between language groups remains an important factor but we need to look beyond the language itself. A closer examination of these two findings underscores the need to clarify the mechanisms of more indirect communication.

Middle schools and teacher training programs should consider the results of this study carefully. First, the fostering of involvement should not focus on parents alone; it is necessary to consider the role of teachers and administrators in this process. More importantly, however, is the need to understand parents' and teachers' conceptualizations of student ability. In order for parent involvement to be fostered, active, and productive, it is necessary that those involved in the process understand the role of perceptions. It is not enough to provide parents with specific opportunities to be involved, for instance, as a chaperone for a school dance. Instead, productive involvement must begin with a conversation about parents' and teachers' views of students, the purpose of schooling, and the role of all stakeholders involved.

This endeavor is difficult to say the least. As such, it cannot be expected that new teachers, or veteran teachers for that matter, will miraculously have an understanding of these processes or the skill set to address them. Instead, it

falls on the shoulders of teacher education programs and those planning professional development to better prepare individuals in this area.

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Sources of Confidence in School Community Councils

Richard "Jackie" Nygaard

Abstract

Three Utah middle level school community councils participated in a qualitative strengths-based process evaluation. Two of the school community councils were identified as exemplary, and the third was just beginning to function. One aspect of the evaluation was the source of school community council members' confidence. Each school had unique themes that emerged related to sources of confidence. The first middle school's SCC's sources of confidence were the opportunity to appropriate money, the investment of time and energy, and the witness of program impact. At the second middle school, confidence developed as a direct result of the principal's support of the process and members' full engagement in the school improvement process. Confidence at the third council came as the members were involed in the hiring of a new principal, and members also expressed that confidence would increase with more parent involvement. Through comparison and contrast, a common source of confidence emerged. It became clear that building confidence depends on the level of involvement in the school improvement process. A major theme of that involvement is the need for a balance between the democratic ideals of the council and the expertise of the professionals. The evaluation revealed that confidence results as an appropriate balance is achieved between democracy and expertise.

Key Words: school community councils, confidence, middle schools, teams, evaluations, principals, engagement, improvement, involvement, parents, parental, democratic, professionals, shared leadership, site-based, administrators

Introduction

Schools are integral parts of the communities they serve. As both schools and communities have evolved over time, a relationship between them exists, but the nature of this relationship can be highly variable (Crowson & Boyd, 2001). Public schools have the responsibility to serve public purposes (Bullough, 1988). As professional educators develop ideas of how best to serve public purposes, how does the community influence these ideas? Site-based school community councils have become widely used as an attempt to unite parents, teachers, administrators, and community members in a body to govern and monitor school improvement (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1991; Crowson & Boyd, 2001; Hess, 1999; Malen, 1999; Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

A school community council (SCC) has been legislatively required at each public school in the state of Utah since the year 2001 (Children's Land Alliance Supporting Schools, 2004). The school community councils are granted the responsibility to develop and implement the school improvement plan and the School Learning and Nurturing Development (LAND) Trust program plan. The School LAND Trust program provides relatively modest funds to the school to be used by the SCC for the purpose of improving student achievement. As school community councils have been established in Utah, there has been great variability in how they are implemented.

During a qualitative process evaluation of Utah's SCC program, three middle school level SCCs were evaluated to determine the level of legal compliance, the use of strategies and processes identified in the literature, and the perceived impact of the implementation of school improvement plans. One characteristic that was investigated in the evaluation was confidence, particularly what experiences built SCC member confidence that the work of the SCC would have a positive impact on student achievement. The purpose of this article is to present the findings of the evaluation related to the practices that yield the greatest confidence in SCC members.

Literature Review

The term *community* is a commonly used term in education today, and its use can take on several possible meanings (Fendler, 2006). In the case of Utah school community councils, the term *community* refers specifically to the combined group of school personnel, students, and parents and guardians of students at each school. The SCC is a parent majority group of elected representatives of the school community and includes the school principal as an ex

officio member. Utah is not alone in including school community councils in the work of school improvement. School community councils or similar local councils are politically popular across the nation and even internationally (Caines, 2006; Hawaii State Department of Education, 2005; Khan, 2005; Swift-Morgan, 2006; Talley & Keedy, 2006).

Some researchers have identified specific positive characteristics of shared decision-making in schools. Petress (2002) suggested that group decision-making should always utilize the principles of critical thinking, stakeholder involvement, and mutual support of the final decision. Effective decisions also require adequate, high-quality information available to all members of the group. Johnson and Pajares (1996) found that stakeholders' confidence, adequate resources, established democratic procedures, and principal support enhanced shared decision-making. These characteristics add elements of clarity, but the picture of exactly what an effective school community council does to increase student achievement is incomplete.

The most recent study to provide a picture of what a model SCC might look like studied three high-performance schools in an urban Kentucky school district including two high schools and an elementary school. This study found that the positive characteristics that built instructional capacity in a school were (a) principals sharing power, (b) a network of staff and parents engaged in problem solving, (c) use of data to focus on student achievement, and (d) collective accountability for student achievement (Talley & Keedy, 2006). Talley and Keedy provide the most clarity for what effective practice may look like, but while their study provides valuable information on what makes SCCs successful at the high school and elementary level, it begs the question of SCC success at the middle school level.

Method

The purpose of this study was to conduct a strengths-based process evaluation of Utah school community councils at the middle school level. A strengths-based approach examined the strengths of the selected programs that can be built upon as an alternative to a deficit model that is traditionally used to identify a problem that can be diagnosed and repaired. Through the qualitative strengths-based approach to a process evaluation, the focus was not on what was not working and why it was not working. Instead, the focus was on what was working especially well, why it was working well, and ideas were sought for making similar performance more common (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). A criticism of a strengths-based approach is the potential neglect of any serious problems that may exist; however, just because these problems are not the focus

does not mean they are neglected. Problems emerged and were addressed in the evaluation within each exemplary SCC as well as within the unexpected opportunity to evaluate a newly established SCC that possessed the desire but lacked the knowledge and experience of an exemplary SCC. "One characteristic of qualitative research is to represent multiple perspectives of individuals in order to represent the complexity of our world" (Creswell, 2002, p. 194). Including the fledgling case along with the exemplary cases provided the opportunity to learn more by intensively studying cases at extreme ends of the continuum of program implementation (Patton, 2002). By including the non-exemplary case, the exemplary characteristics became more pronounced. All cases contain strengths and weaknesses, and by studying cases with variation, the exemplary processes of program implementation are better understood. Using a strengths-based approach with the selected cases did expose weakness, but it sought to address those weaknesses through the strengths of the organization.

Data Collection

The term strengths-based is used to describe this process evaluation as a result of two important characteristics. First, a purposeful sampling was used to select middle level SCCs viewed as exemplary by the Utah State Office of Education staff with supervisory authority over SCCs. This follows from the desire to "learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (Patton, 2002, p. 230). Second, interviews were conducted using an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). The purpose of the appreciative approach was to collect data about SCCs most productive strategies and the peak experiences of participants. With an appreciative approach there is often a concern about a positive bias to the results; however, Preskill and Catsambas (2006) point out that positive and appreciative are not synonymous. Whereas positive questioning would be biased if it emphasized acceptance, approval, and what is liked about the program without questioning the negative perceptions, appreciative questions will get at the nature of achievement and solicit desires for increasing the value of the program.

> Appreciative questions ask respondents to communicate their concept of the nature, worth, quality, and significance of a program or some aspect of the organization. Moreover, they ask respondents to honor the past while expressing gratitude for, and pride in, their achievements. And, the appreciative wishes questions invite respondents to share their ideas for how to increase the value of the program. Hence, the role of appreciative questions is not to learn what respondents liked, but rather to focus on the study of successful moments that can be used to grow and improve the program in the future. (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, pp. 76-77)

An interview guide was developed to facilitate a comparison between the strategies of effective site-based management identified in the literature and the strategies used by the selected exemplary middle level SCCs. "Because appreciative interview questions focus on instances of success, peak experiences, values, and wishes, they tend to look and feel very different from non-AI questions" (Preskill & Catsambus, 2006, p. 79). To illustrate the difference, one characteristic that related to improved student achievement identified in the literature was the level of confidence members had that the work of the SCC influenced student achievement. A traditional interview question may ask, "How confident are you that the work of the SCC will influence student achievement?" or "What are some examples of SCC practices that have built your confidence in the program?" In contrast, the appreciative prompt used was, "Can you tell me about an instance when you felt great confidence that the work of the SCC would make a positive difference in student achievement in this school?" The appreciative prompt is then followed with an invitation to the participant to express his or her wishes for the program. Although the difference between the traditional and appreciative questions may be subtle, the appreciative questions prompt more detailed examinations of both successes and desires for improvement (Preskill & Catsambus, 2006).

Site Selection and Access

Schools were selected for participation in the evaluation based on three criteria: (a) recommendation by the School LAND Trust Program administration; (b) a stated focus on improving student achievement in core subjects in conjunction with the Utah Performance and Assessment System for Students (U-PASS) results demonstrating either consistent high achievement, consistent increases in achievement, or consistent progress with subgroups; and (c) a willingness to participate in the evaluation. In addition to the extreme case sampling, an opportunistic sampling was also used when the unexpected opportunity arose to select a school that provided a contrasting example (Creswell, 1998; Weiss, 1998).

The extreme case sampling criteria shaped the procedures for selecting the three initial schools. Originally, a non-exemplary case was desirable, but because participation in the evaluation was completely voluntary, it was implausible that a non-exemplary case would agree to participate, so three exemplary schools were selected. When one exemplary school contacted chose not to participate, the district research director invited another school that had not had a functioning SCC but was striving to get one functioning to participate, and they accepted, providing an unexpected opportunity (Creswell, 1998; Weiss, 1998). Once selected, the same evaluation procedures were used for all three schools.

Although the purpose of an SCC is established by law to develop and implement the school improvement plan and School LAND Trust program plan, there was variability in the implementation. Each case provided a different socioeconomic group from which the SCC was formed, and the make up of each council was slightly different. The first middle school (M1) was located in a predominantly upper- and middle-class community with a small minority population. M1's SCC consisted of the principal, four teachers, and six parents. The second middle school (M2) was located in a growing, mostly middle-class suburban community with a small minority population. M2's SCC consisted of the principal, a counselor, two teachers, and seven parents. The third middle school (M3) was located in an older community within a large city and was predominantly lower socioeconomic class. M3's SCC consisted of the principal, one teacher, two parents, and one community partner. A parent served as the chair at each of the three evaluated SCCs. The SCCs at M1 and M2 were well established and considered exemplary, and the SCC at M3 was recently established. All three schools were obtaining positive results in terms of student achievement as measured by the U-PASS report card. Annual elections for parent members were customary at M1 and M2; however, at M3's fledgling SCC, parents were invited to participate by the administration due to demonstrated interest. School personnel at all three schools served on a volunteer basis, but no formal elections took place for these positions.

There were three primary sources of data gathered—interviews, observations, and documents. All data gathering took place January 2008 through May 2008. The same general procedures were followed at each site, but the number and type of interviews, observations, and documents varied from case to case. Interviews were conducted in person or by telephone. Interview guides were emailed to SCC members prior to the interviews, so each member could think about their experiences and be prepared to provide the most meaningful responses. Each SCC member was interviewed one time for 30 to 45 minutes using the interview guide. Whether the interview occurred in person or over the telephone, each interview was recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were emailed to interviewees who responded with any corrections or clarifications.

Observations of SCC meetings took place at each site. Observation notes were taken at each meeting, and the audio of meetings was recorded and transcribed. Descriptive and reflective notes were taken directly on the agendas provided during the observations. Additional reflective notes were added to the recording immediately following the observations. These notes were transcribed along with the transcription of the meeting.

The documents collected at each site varied depending on SCC activities and document availability. For all schools, the School LAND Trust program plans for the past three years were obtained. Additional documents included SCC bylaws, survey results, meeting minutes, and school improvement plans.

The total participation at M1 consisted of the principal (SCC member), the assistant principal (not an SCC member), five parents (all SCC members), and nine teachers (three of which were SCC members); M2 participation consisted of the principal (SCC member), a counselor (SCC member), eight teachers (two of which were SCC members), one staff member (not an SCC member), and five parents (all SCC members); M3 participation consisted of the principal (SCC member), two teachers (one of which was a SCC member), two parents (SCC members), and a community partner (SCC member).

Data Analysis

As a lone evaluator in this qualitative study, I served as an instrument of data collection and data analysis. My background, experiences, and interest in the topic of school community councils stemmed from my work as a Utah public school assistant principal and SCC member prior to conducting the study. As I began the evaluation, I had a job change that took me from the state of Utah to teach mathematics at the college level. This change created both challenges to and strengths for the evaluation. The move removed me from the state of Utah, which made the logistics of getting into the schools and conducting the study more challenging. However, the change also served to allow me to step back and approach the evaluation much more objectively. Originally, I had wanted to learn what other schools were doing so we could improve the practices at my school. With my job change, the evaluation was no longer about how I could improve my own school through improving our school community council, it was about learning as much as possible from the selected schools, so all schools can benefit from the experiences of the exemplary schools. I had no personal or professional relationship with any of the participants of the evaluation prior to conducting the evaluation.

For data analysis, an inductive approach was utilized. Creswell (2002) outlines the steps for analyzing qualitative data: (a) organize data, (b) explore data, (c) identify themes, (d) represent and report findings, (e) interpret findings, and (f) validate findings. Although these are listed as steps, the analysis process is both "simultaneous and iterative" (p. 257). The processes overlapped and cycled back and forth through the entire analysis, utilizing a constant comparative analysis for each research question at each site.

Throughout the process I sought to be as objective as possible and to let the participants tell the story of their school community council. Through

interviews, observations, and documents, participants were able to explain what was working, why they thought it was working, and whether they thought it was making a difference. Themes emerged at each site as well as across sites. The insights provided are important to building an understanding of school community councils.

Results and Analysis

When asking whether an SCC member was confident that the SCC was making a difference, a common response was, "I wouldn't choose to be involved if I wasn't confident it would be meaningful." Yet, when the appreciative prompt was used to ask participants to share experiences that have helped build that confidence, members at each school were able to identify and share different experiences that served as sources for their confidence. Data from the three sites will be shared to provide a picture of the experiences that built SCC member confidence.

M1

The data from M1 demonstrated three primary sources for building confidence. First, confidence was built by having the opportunity to decide how to spend available money to implement effective programs. Second, confidence was built by investing time and energy in the SCC process. Third, confidence was built by seeing the implemented programs impact students.

The Opportunity to Appropriate Money

A parent and first-year SCC member commented:

Sometimes it's rather intangible, what the community council does, but when we have been able to vote and purchase tools that will help be in place and help next year's kids, I would say that made—the more hands on experience there—probably is what gave me more confidence that we were helping the kids.

Another parent member was reluctant to admit that the money made a difference when she commented, "I almost hate to have this be my confidence thing, but this is the times that I have felt like, 'Yeah, we're going to make an impact.' It truly is when we have spent some of the Trust LAND money." Another member spoke of the process of deciding to devote a large portion of the available funds to an after-school tutoring program called the "homework club." A couple of teachers had started to provide some after-school tutoring. They were donating their own time. It was an inconsistent program, so the teachers went before the SCC with their concerns, needs, and vision. The SCC decided

to include the homework club in the school improvement plan. They chose to use the LAND trust funds to pay teachers to supervise and tutor students in the homework club. Several members of the SCC cited the process behind choosing to fund the homework club and learning of its impact as a specific instance that built great confidence. In the case of the homework club, SCC members' confidence grew as they used available funds to provide a program they perceived would impact student learning.

In addition to responding to questions about what experiences have built confidence, SCC members were also asked what they thought would increase their confidence further. The suggestions included funding issues. One member stated, "I would like to see us use our LAND Trust money in a way that hits a broader cross section of the kids." Another member discussed how programs could be developed beyond the core academic subjects that would still have a meaningful and important impact on student achievement if more funding were available.

Investing Time and Energy

A second contributing factor to building confidence was investing time and energy in the process. One M1 parent SCC member talked about the process of developing the school improvement plan:

> That's one of the more tedious parts about the Community Council. It's really slow work, and we do this continually. We always have the school improvement plan in front of us.…At first, I was feeling like—very tedious, slow work. Now, I can see it is a really great base of guidelines for all of us to work around. When a parent comes in with a request or a complaint or something we can go, "Oh, we have that in our works. That's one of our goals."

As this parent explained, the actual work the SCC conducts might often seem tedious and time consuming, but at the same time the process actually builds confidence that the work is meaningful. SCC meetings provided observed evidence that these SCC members work extremely hard discussing goals, reviewing survey results, and listening to proposals to inform their decisions. For example, the SCC spent 45 minutes of one observed meeting reviewing the results of a survey of students, parents, and faculty. During this time the members were actively engaged in the discussion of survey results.

A teacher SCC member cited another discussion that built confidence:

> We examined test scores and spent a lot of time talking about the achievement gap between our ELL students, low-income, and the rest of the student population. At some point, we said, "Okay, we are doing almost everything we can to help these students and close the gap a little

bit. What else are we doing to reach all students?" And that was very encouraging to me that we could have that shift in the conversation where it just wasn't doom and gloom while looking at these numbers but also saying, "Hey, things are actually going well in all these other brackets."

The same teacher member cited an open and honest dialogue that took place in an SCC meeting as building his confidence in the process. The teacher wanted to know what evidence existed that the decisions being made by the SCC had any impact on improving student performance.

> "Do all of these programs that we are investing so much time and money in really effect student achievement directly or is it just something that is a stamp on our letterhead and makes us feel better about ourselves?" It was at that point that [the principal] started to bring up research and showed us that all these programs and things that we are doing do actually tie to student achievement. At that point there was a little more buy in from me. At that point I was ready to think, "Let's support this." Because in the past, I just felt like, "This is a waste of time and money."

By investing time in open and honest dialogue, confidence in the process was built. Another parent member looked at this type of dialogue and concluded, "The principal has a very good command of how the students are achieving. His knowledge has instilled great confidence in the process." The SCC members gained a great appreciation and respect for the principal's knowledge as they spent time in the long meetings.

Other evidence that the investment of time and energy in the process builds confidence came from the suggestions the members made for building confidence. Several times members would say that it took half of their first year to figure out the SCC's purpose and procedures.

Seeing Program Impact

A third category that built M1 SCC member confidence came from seeing the impact of the SCC decisions. In the third category, SCC members commented on how seeing decisions impact students had built confidence, and several members suggested that seeing more evidence of how SCC decisions were impacting students would build more confidence.

The principal talked about how the confidence has come in making decisions that show great promise for impacting student learning. One of the programs included in the school improvement plan was the International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Programme (MYP). The principal said,

> The SCC saw the value of the IB MYP…and that's an approach and philosophy that over time is going to make a lot of difference for a lot

of kids.…They are all going to be taught once we get these things truly ingrained in mind set and practices. They will all be taught with that philosophy and framework, and I think that's going to be a really good thing.

The members expressed a strong desire to know if the plans they are implementing are having an impact. "We can't track individual students but are hoping to start tracking groups of students over the next few years. I think that would help a lot to see if what we are doing has any effect." Several talked about the need to track a group of low-achieving students over time and see if the programs being implemented at M1 are having an impact on student achievement.

One parent member indicated that the evidence of impact needed to go beyond the numbers on a report. She first indicated that she wanted to know how particular programs were helping students. She also expressed a need to see the impact in a more personal way by actually observing programs and tools implemented in the classroom or talking with teachers and students and hearing how their teaching and learning were personally affected. She said, "It's all numbers and paper, and it just seems a little hands off. I feel more productive if I'm more involved."

There were various incidents cited as building confidence at M1, but appropriating money to implement programs, investing time and energy in the process, and learning about the impact of the programs are the general themes throughout the specific instances discussed or observed.

M2

There were two broad yet interconnected sources of confidence expressed by members of the M2 SCC. The first was the principal's leadership, and the second was the SCC members' involvement in the entire process. SCC members expressed great appreciation for the principal of M2 and for the privilege of making decisions based on data, seeing the programs implemented, witnessing the results, and being free to question the practices.

Principal Support

A parent SCC member spoke of the principal, "We usually, I think, as a whole of the SCC have great confidence in his [the principal's] ideas because he lets us know so much about what is going on in the school that we are all on the same page." Another parent member said, "I have to say, [the principal] is really good and what he brings to us and the freedom. He lets us go with what we want to do or what we feel is best." The counselor SCC member also spoke of the confidence that comes from the principal by comparing his experience at M2 with a previous SCC experience at a different school:

Well, let me do a comparison here. At [another middle school] they [school administrators] would present different options and different things like that, but it was more of a head nodding session of this is what the principal wanted to do. This is what they were interested in doing, and basically, this is what we are doing, and you're here to give approval on it. There was no dissension, basically, allowed. Any time you dissented, it was not necessarily a favorable type of situation. Hence, one of the reasons why I came to [M2]. With [the M2 principal], one of the things that I have a lot of confidence in is that he is willing to put out there, "This is what I think, but you know what, you guys can vote me down on this." And a few times the community council has said, "You know what, can we look at a different avenue?…Can we look at doing a different thing here?" Or they question, "Is this an effective program?"

As members discussed how the principal supported the SCC, they elaborated and identified several principal practices that resulted in confidence that the work they do as a school community council does make a positive difference to student achievement. Three principal practices that increased SCC member confidence were (a) the principal shared data, (b) the principal supported the SCC even when he did not initially agree, and (c) the principal respected the SCC members as leaders.

In a review of the minutes for the SCC meetings over the past four years, one could see that data were presented in nearly every meeting. Several tables were illustrated in most SCC meeting minutes. The counselor SCC member described how the principal used data:

Oh, we are huge on data in this school. I run weekly reports as far as the I [incomplete grades] list, and [the principal] will go back, and he has shown this where he has several years of how our students have done, and he will present that very regularly to the community council.…We are a huge data driven school. In fact, I never realized how useful the data can be until I was here, and I saw how effectively [the principal] used it.

Knowing the principal is giving the complete data picture, the SCC members gained confidence in the principal. As a parent member put it, "We know that he isn't going to lie to us how well they are doing. He puts the data up there, and this is what it is." Whether the data showed improvement or not, he shared the information. The use of data in the SCC lead to decisions concerning programs. One parent member commented,

I think that we know so much that is going on in the school that when it comes time to spend money on the Trust LANDs, we can say, "In all of this data you have given us, we still see that science is low, and science

isn't coming up as fast as the other ones, so let's get a mobile lab for the science classes."

Another parent member explained, "As you see the improvements, you think, okay it's working, so it leads you to take the next step."

The principal also built confidence in the SCC members by supporting their decisions. The minutes demonstrate that the principal made most of the recommendations for programs and purchases, but the principal also made it clear that the SCC had the liberty to make the final decision. One example of how the principal supported the SCC member decisions occurred when the parents wanted to provide a late bus one day a week, so students could stay after school to work with teachers to increase student achievement. The principal was reluctant to spend funds on buses, not being convinced it would be beneficial. Through the process of discussion and investigation, concerns were addressed and funds were also secured to ensure that teachers would be available after school to help students who stayed late. As a result, the late buses were included in the school improvement plan, the budget was adjusted, and the School LAND Trust program for the 2007-2008 school year funded the late buses. The principal supported the SCC members in the decisions made even though he did not initially agree. Providing this kind of support to a program initiated by the SCC increased the members' confidence that the decisions they make can influence student achievement.

The third way the principal built confidence at M2 was by respecting the SCC members as leaders. The minutes from the February 2007 SCC meeting read:

> As we are beginning to look forward to the 2007-08 school year, [the principal] has asked for the council to start thinking of possibilities for the Trust LANDs money and how it should be spent. He has requested for the council to come with ideas to be presented at the next meeting in March.

The counselor SCC member explained:

> Now with that money, [the principal] usually has some ideas, "This is what I would like to use it towards." And he's pretty specific with that, you know, "This is what I would like to use it for." But then parents or teachers or whoever can question that, "Well would it be better…"

A parent member said, "I have to say, [the principal] is really good and what he brings to us and the freedom. He lets us go with what we want to do or what we feel is best."

Parent members were able to express concerns and knew that the principal took their concerns very seriously. The principal explained:

You have to have shared leadership. You are going to have the best results when you really do have shared leadership.…in some of the other schools…the principal set the agenda, the chair showed up and said, "That looks good," and they moved forward.…It's important that that chair knows they have a voice. And if they don't like what is on the agenda as the parent chair, and I always want my chair to be a parent…. So when the agendas are set there is a parent perspective and a school perspective.

The principal played an important role in the M2 SCC. He was the primary source of confidence as he was open and honest in providing data to inform decisions. He listened to parent SCC member concerns, understanding that they were the voice of the people they represented. The SCC members in turn had more confidence in the principal and the SCC process because of the mutual respect with the principal. The principal supported the process even when the SCC members led things in a different direction than he proposed, and he respected the SCC members as leaders.

Engaged in School Improvement Process

The process of school improvement in which the SCC engaged was the second main source of confidence. This is closely related to the principal's support as he facilitated the way in which M2 worked together as a professional learning community. The M2 process was best demonstrated through an instance described by SCC members in interviews and documented in meeting minutes and observations.

In the February 2008 SCC meeting, proposals for the 2008-2009 School LAND Trust budget included $13,000 to continue funding the license for the writing software. SCC members questioned the accuracy of the software in grading the papers. The principal wanted the teachers who used the program to be able to respond to the SCC member concerns, so he scheduled two English teachers to attend the next meeting and discuss the program. He also asked the parent members to ask their constituents how they felt about the program.

At the following meeting in March 2008, the English department chair and an English teacher visited the SCC meeting as representatives of teachers who use the writing program. The teachers presented the case for how the program was being used and why it should be continued, and the parents had the opportunity to express their concerns. The potential for conflict was evident by the postures of parents sitting forward and attentive even when not talking and the teachers coming prepared with a handout, but there was very little conflict evident in the discussion itself. Many questions were addressed during the hour the visiting teachers were at the meeting, and the discussion continued after the

teachers left the meeting. The next month at the April 2008 SCC meeting, the funding of the writing software was approved unanimously.

The process of questioning the writing program, hearing the teachers' perspectives, reviewing the data, and then making an informed decision to continue the program was cited by several SCC members interviewed as building confidence in the SCC process. A parent member expressed appreciation that "the teachers were able to give us as community and parents a view of this program, how it works, and why we should keep it." Referring to the discussion on the writing software, another parent said, "That, I think, was a good instance of us working together to find the best thing that we are going to spend this money on and is it worth it." The counselor member of the SCC described the whole process and then said,

> That's when I have great confidence. If there are questions, [the principal] doesn't necessarily say, "Well, this is the best way." Instead he says, "Well, let's bring in some people who are experts here and see what is the best way here."

At M2, confidence was developed through similar experiences involving teacher–parent collaboration meetings, the late bus program, and a schoolwide mastery program. In each instance, all SCC members were able to engage in questioning proposals, obtain expert opinions, openly discuss, and members were empowered to make the decisions. Of critical importance to building confidence in the M2 SCC was the principal's leadership in supporting the SCC and the members' engagement in the school improvement process.

M3

As the SCC at M3 was in its first year of functioning, there was relatively little experience among members, so when asked to identify what has built the most confidence and what would build more confidence, the responses were very similar among all members. There was one specific activity cited as having built confidence and one desire expressed for building confidence in the future.

During the evaluation period, the M3 principal accepted a position in another school district for the following year. The SCC participated in the hiring process for the new principal. This involvement in the hiring process was the activity most mentioned as building SCC parent member confidence. The community partner SCC member serving in a parent position explained:

> At first, they [school district] were just going to appoint a principal and not allow the parents and the community to go through the interview process. My role as the parent person was—because of the knowledge and

the understanding of the process—I was able to work with the School Community Council chair to request the process be given to [M3] because all the other middle schools had been able to go through that process rather than have a principal appointed. So, indirectly, that impacts student achievement, because if we can't find somebody to follow in [the principal's] footsteps—because he has brought the school so far—our achievements will go down because he has brought that school a long ways, and the parents want the same type of principal coming in.

The SCC minutes for March 2008 show that the SCC formed a principal selection committee of 10 people including parents and school personnel. They also worked closely with the exiting principal and district personnel to establish important criteria for hiring the new principal. A parent SCC member spoke of the confidence the hiring process built: "As that process [hiring new principal] started, and a committee needed to be formed—that was the moment when the SCC was recognized and was actually functioning and doing something." Another parent member, when asked about an instance that built confidence, said,

Our principal is leaving, and we are having a new principal come in, and the School Community Council being involved in the selection committee for the new principal is hugely important. I don't know what could have a bigger impact on the school than a new principal, and we're going to be a part of that. That is definitely the answer I would have for that.

When asked what would increase confidence, the most common response at M3 was more parent involvement. A teacher SCC member discussed the challenges to greater parent member involvement in the M3 SCC:

I think we actually do have a couple of parents who are now at this time really willing to take on the responsibility and make it functional. I think it's—middle school in general is very difficult because it's just such a short period of time. The parents don't have a lot of vested interest in it. I think as far as the staff, it's just been so hard to get it up and functioning that it's just kind of a process that is not being used, because the process hasn't really been in place. I think there is certainly a willingness to allow that process to happen and encouragement of parental involvement. I think that we're just in a really stressed environment in our area, and it takes a toll on people's personal time to be able to commit to do that. And I also think that a lot of parents want to participate, but they don't really know how, and I don't think a lot of them have the skills or the confidence to be able to take a role like this on and really know what their role would be and how to function in that role.

The principal confirmed the perception when he said:

> I understand the law wanting to get parents involved, especially on the shared government and decision-making on the school level, because that School Community Council is where all the stakeholders are present and that is a very vital function. But most of my parents are so engrossed in the day-to-day survival mode that it's difficult for them to get here.

With those challenges, when asked what he thought would build confidence, the principal said, "I think the numbers of our parents. I need probably about three or four more good parents. That is [the SCC chairman's] and my goal, and then I think we will be set, and I think it's going to happen." The teacher SCC member who explained the challenges went on to say,

> I think that if the parents come on board that the school—the school probably isn't 100% on board because there hasn't been, like I said, the environment for them to go through the process, but I think that having opportunities for parents—to know that this opportunity is available and to be able to support and train them and make leadership opportunity available for them would help the SCC.

When a parent SCC member was asked what she would like to see happen to build the confidence that the SCC was really helping students, she replied:

> That's a tough one. Just more parent involvement. There are a thousand kids in that building, and right now the most involved parents in that school is maybe three. And that's not nearly enough representation. I would like to see more parents becoming involved and having a voice.

M3 was a fledgling SCC, and as such was a sharp contrast to the exemplary SCCs. Even as the M3 SCC was establishing itself, the experience of being a full participant in the process of hiring a new principal built great confidence. The desires of the SCC members also showed evidence that a deeper investment of time and energy by more parents in the SCC process would build greater confidence.

Discussion

If an SCC is to positively contribute to school leadership, it is essential that SCC members have confidence that their involvement will make a difference. As SCC members shared confidence-building experiences, common themes emerged. The first dominant theme that built confidence was full involvement in the decision making process, which required an investment of time, energy, and ample resources in the process of making decisions that would have an

impact on student achievement. A second theme that emerged was the importance of strong principal leadership dedicated to supporting the democratic process and maintaining focus on student achievement. These themes regarding middle schools are similar to the findings of Petress (2002), Johnson and Pajares (1996), and Talley and Keedy (2006).

Some have criticized the prominent role the principal plays in a site-based council (Malen & Vincent, 2008). Yet, confidence at all three schools was a direct result of principal actions. The principals were all strong leaders and had dominant roles in their respective SCCs. Even with the dominant role, SCC members felt a strong level of trust in the principals. As expressed at M2, there was a feeling that the principal was completely honest. "He gives us the good, the bad, and the ugly—everything." The prevalence of data provided by the principal informs the SCC members, so they understand the needs of the school. This demonstrates that the principal holds the key to empowering the SCC to make meaningful decisions.

In contrast, at M3, SCC members provided evidence of one practice that erodes confidence. Parents were asked to sign off on plans when they did not participate in the development of the plans. Disappointment was expressed as one member responded to a question about the implementation of a school program: "I wish I could tell you a lot about that. My exposure was 'here's the paper work, and we need you to sign it.'" The few active members of the SCC, including the principal, all recognized that the SCC provides an excellent avenue for increasing parent voice in the process, but work remains to build the confidence desired by participants.

The SCC process at the evaluated middle schools demonstrates the importance of full participation of all SCC members. SCC member confidence at the evaluated schools was built as the SCC members became fully engaged in the process of developing plans and taking action for the purpose of school improvement. A theme that emerged at the core of the SCC process was the need for balance between professional and democratic control.

The evaluation revealed an appreciation for SCCs introducing a type of democratic process into the evaluated public schools, and at the same time, the evaluation emphasized an appreciation for the knowledge and dedication of the professionals—the principals in particular. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer (2005) wrote about this balance between professional and democratic control, which provides insight for the SCC process:

> How can we reconcile democratic control of government with the technical nature of modern life? The former calls for decision-making by citizens or their elected representatives, the latter for decision-making by administrators or experts. If we delegate too much decision-making

authority to experts, administration and democracy conflict. We lose control. Yet if we delegate too little authority, we also find democracy weakened. To achieve our democratically chosen ends in a modern populous society requires some amount of administration, involving administrative, not democratic decision-making. To achieve those same ends in a technologically advanced society requires expertise. The average citizen normally lacks the time, knowledge, and experience necessary to understand certain technical matters.…Without delegation to experts, an inexpert public, possessing the will, would lack the way. The public understands this fact.…To reconcile democratically chosen ends with administrative expertise requires striking a balance—some delegation, but not too much. The right balance avoids conflict between democracy and administration.…How to strike that balance? That is the mystery. (pp. 102-103)

The three middle schools evaluated are striving to strike that balance. The SCCs are a key decision-making body for the schools, but to make the decisions they need to make, the SCC relies heavily on the expertise of the school principals. The evaluated SCCs each had school principals who demonstrated support of the democratic process by inviting participation, sharing data, and making proposals that could positively influence student learning. These principal practices were great sources of confidence. Malen and Vincent (2008) observe that the strength of professional control is intact regardless of the attempts to empower parents through school councils. The current evaluation does support the observation that the professionals do have great control over the decisions made, but in light of Justice Breyer's observation, the SCC does provide an important democratic balance to the professional control.

As demonstrated at M2, when the parent SCC members questioned the use of the writing software, the SCC did provide a venue for a more democratic process to take place. The writing software experience also demonstrated how the democratic process relies on expertise and data to inform the decisions. The parents each had a small view of the writing program through the lens of their own children and hearsay. Making a democratic decision based on the information they initially had would simply have been irresponsible. The principal did not possess the expertise on the writing program either, so he arranged to have the teachers who actually use the program to come and present. When the teachers presented to the SCC, they did not come in as individuals, but as representatives of a larger teacher group who used the program. The expertise and data brought by the teachers informed the democratic decision to continue the use of the program. The democratic influence also caused the teachers to consider and make adjustments based on the concerns raised.

The parent SCC members, as volunteers who spent three hours in an SCC meeting each month and with many other responsibilities, could not be expected to have a level of expertise to make the best decisions without reliance upon experts. The SCC members could question and even reject the proposal, but to make an informed decision the SCC relied heavily on the expertise of and data from the professionals. When professionals and citizens work together in deliberative problem solving, trust can be built and mutual cooperation can develop (Fung, 2004).

As SCC members, both professionals and volunteers, worked together to make a positive difference at their school, few things built confidence more than seeing their decisions result in greater student achievement. Student achievement, after all, is the primary responsibility of an SCC, but the common understanding is that a causal link between SCCs and student achievement is problematic (Malen & Vincent, 2008; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998a). Although the decisions made by the SCC may not cause improved student achievement, it is quite possible that the purchases and programs chosen by SCC decisions could have a measurable impact on student achievement. Deliberate research is called for to further examine the connections between SCC decisions and improved student achievement. It would be valuable to study more extensively various SCC decisions, the subsequent programs and practices used, and the resulting impact on student achievement.

Although limited to three middle school SCCs in the state of Utah, this evaluation demonstrated how confidence in the SCC process can be built as parents become fully involved in the democratic process and as administrators and professionals openly and honestly share their expertise.

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Maternal Management of Social Relationships as a Correlate of Children's School-Based Experiences

Anne C. Fletcher, Jill K. Walls, Angella Y. Eanes, and David R. Troutman

Abstract

We tested a model considering the manner in which mothers' use of their own social relationships and efforts to facilitate their children's school-based social relationships were associated with two distinct types of school-based competence: academic achievement and levels of stress experienced within the school environment. Fourth grade children (n = 311) and their mothers participated in interviews and completed questionnaires providing information on social relationships and school experiences. Structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses indicated a good fit for a model in which mothers' efforts to facilitate children's social relationships with peers were associated with lower levels of school-based stress, but mothers' efforts to maintain social connections with the parents of their children's school friends were linked with lower levels of objectively measured academic achievement.

Key Words: maternal, mothers, management, social, relationships, stress, closure, children, students, structural equation modeling, SEM, correlation, experiences, networks, facilitation, friendships, achievement, peers, parents

Introduction

Academic achievement is of critical importance in relation to children's overall well-being and success in life (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1996; Dubow,

Huesmann, Boxer, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2006). Yet time spent in school is characterized not just by academic achievement, but also by children's psychosocial adjustment and the nature of relationships children maintain within the school environment. In fact, various indicators of school-based adjustment including academic self-concept, experiences of classroom-related stress, relationships with peers and teachers, and participation in classroom activities are all interrelated (Harter & Whitesell, 2003; Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Lindahl, Theorell, & Lindblad, 2005; Mantzicopoulis, 2006; Sandstrom & Herlan, 2007), and relationships with school peers are important influences on children's attitudes toward and experiences within schools (Dubow et al., 2006; Fletcher, Hunter, & Eanes, 2006; Moulds, 2003). A comprehensive consideration of children's school-based adjustment must take into account the nature and correlates of both academic and non-academic aspects of what can be termed school-based competence.

Within School and Out-of-School Correlates and Predictors of Academic Achievement

Traditionally, research focused on the promotion of academic achievement among children has tended to fall into two categories. The first category focuses on within-school factors such as class or school size (Archibald, 2006; Englehart, 2007) and classroom factors such as teaching strategies (Douglas, Burton, & Reese-Durham, 2008). A second category of research focuses on out-of-school influences on children's academic achievement. For example, a large body of research has demonstrated that children's achievement is linked with parental involvement in educational experiences. In this vein, children's achievement has been demonstrated to be higher when parents attend school conferences (Ho & Willms, 1996), assist children with homework (Gonzalez & Blanco, 1991; Peng & Wright, 1994), and provide children with out-of-school enrichment experiences (Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000). Although research on parental involvement in and support of children's academic experiences has increasingly recognized the diversity of ways in which such involvement may be demonstrated (Fan & Chen, 2001), it has been remarkably consistent in its focus on links between parental behaviors and academic achievement, as opposed to other indicators of school-based success.

Parental Management of Social Relationships as a Correlate of School-Based Experiences

Despite the potential influence of social experiences on how children feel about and behave within school, little research has considered the manner in which parents both recognize the importance of social relationships as a

component of their children's school-based successes and utilize social relationships as strategies to help their children to succeed (academically and socially) at school. Sparse empirical literature has suggested that the emphasis parents place on social relationship formation and maintenance outside of the school environment may have benefits in terms of children's school-based competence (Carbonaro, 1998). Such a perspective also is supported by theoretical work emphasizing the role of social capital in the lives of children and their parents.

The consideration of social capital as an influence on children's social development was suggested by Coleman (1988) who introduced the concept of *social network closure*. Social network closure focuses on relationships among parents whose children are friends. When parents maintain relationships with their children's friends' parents, closed systems (closure relationships) are created. Such systems are characterized by what Coleman terms "social capital," defined in terms of individuals' abilities to benefit themselves from the values and behaviors of others with whom social connections are maintained. In turn, social capital should promote children's positive social development by allowing parents to access a broader range of strategies and information that can be applied to the parenting process. Coleman (1988) theorized that closure relationships would be associated with higher levels of child academic achievement largely due to their potential to facilitate communication about children and childrearing issues among parents. Interparental communication among families whose children are friends may be a source of information concerning what goes on at school and what strategies other parents are using to support children's academic successes.

In the case of school-based friendships, closure relationships are likely to arise subsequent to the development of relationships among children (as opposed to community-based friendships, which may emerge as a result of pre-existing close relationships among parents; Fletcher, Bridges, & Hunter, 2007). It is likely that parents use closure relationships as a source of information regarding the school context rather than as a way to encourage and support their children's social experiences within school. Consequently, stronger closure relationships are likely to be linked with indicators of academic achievement as measured through objective indicators such as academic grades and standardized test scores. This premise is supported by research indicating that stronger school-based closure relationships are linked with indicators of academic competence that include higher performance on math achievement tests and a decreased likelihood of school dropout in adolescence (Carbonaro, 1998) as well as higher achievement test scores (Fletcher, Newsome, Nickerson, & Bazley, 2001) and academic grades (Fletcher, Hunter, et al., 2006) during the elementary years.

In contrast, parents may seek to influence children's school-based friendships not by developing relationships with other parents but by explicitly and intentionally facilitating and supporting their children's development of peer relationships. This approach is consistent with the work of Ladd and colleagues (Ladd, Le Sieur, & Profilet, 1993) and Mounts (2001, 2002) who have reported that parental efforts to support children's and adolescents' friendships are linked with a variety of positive behavioral outcomes. For example, direct efforts to support and facilitate children's friendships have been linked positively with both the quantity and quality of preschool-aged children's peer relationships (Ladd et al., 1993). During the adolescent years, parental knowledge about children's day-to-day peer interactions and activities and greater parental involvement in and knowledge of adolescents' friendships have been linked with a wide range of indicators of social competence and friendship quality (Knoester, Haynie, & Stephens, 2006; Mounts, 2001, 2002; Updegraff, Madden-Derdich, Estrada, Sales, & Leonard, 2002).

Clearly there is reason to suspect that children whose parents spend more time facilitating their children's friendships will perform better with respect to social challenges within the school environment. As a result, they are likely to experience lower levels of stress at school, because they will have at their disposal social resources to buffer them against the stressors inherent to the school environment. Although links between parents' efforts to support children's friendships and children's experiences of stress have not been examined prior to the current effort, children's experiences of stress are recognized as an important aspect of school-based adjustment, as more stress is linked with lower grades and lower academic self-concept (Lindahl et al., 2005). Sources of school-based stress may vary, but there is reason to think that a variety of stressors might be minimized by parents' efforts to facilitate children's friendships. Stressors likely include those that are directly impacted by parents' efforts to facilitate friendships (lower levels of stress within peer relationships) and those that may be indirectly impacted by parents' efforts (lower levels of stress in terms of relationships with teachers, stress related to academic tasks, and perceptions of academic competence). Such indirect effects are likely accounted for by the strong associations among these different sources of stress. For example, children who are skilled at dealing with peers are likely to utilize some of their social interaction skills within interactions with teachers. Children who have stronger relationships with peers will be more easily able to enlist the assistance of peers within the academic learning process. We propose that parents may take either (or both) of the two approaches discussed above in their efforts to support their children's school-based competence. Yet social network closure and friendship facilitation strategies are likely to be associated with distinct aspects of such competence.

In the current study, we sought to address research questions concerning the nature of associations between two distinct types of parental behaviors relating to the support and maintenance of social relationships and two aspects of school-based adjustment. Specifically, we asked (1) whether greater efforts by parents to form relationships and communicate with the parents of their children's school-based friends (stronger closure relationships) might be linked with greater academic achievement and (2) whether more efforts on the part of parents to support the formation and maintenance of children's friendships (greater friendship facilitation) would be associated with lower levels of children's stress experienced within the context of the school environment.

Description of Proposed Model

Based on the theoretical and empirical evidence reviewed above, we developed the model presented in Figure 1. This model predicts that stronger closure relationships will be associated with higher academic achievement. In contrast, we hypothesized that higher levels of friendship facilitation would be associated with lower levels of school-based stress. We tested this model using latent constructs for academic competence, school-based stress, and friendship facilitation and a single observed indicator of closure. Given empirical evidence suggesting ethnic, social class, and gender differences in children's school-based experience, we elected to control for these three demographic variables within the model.
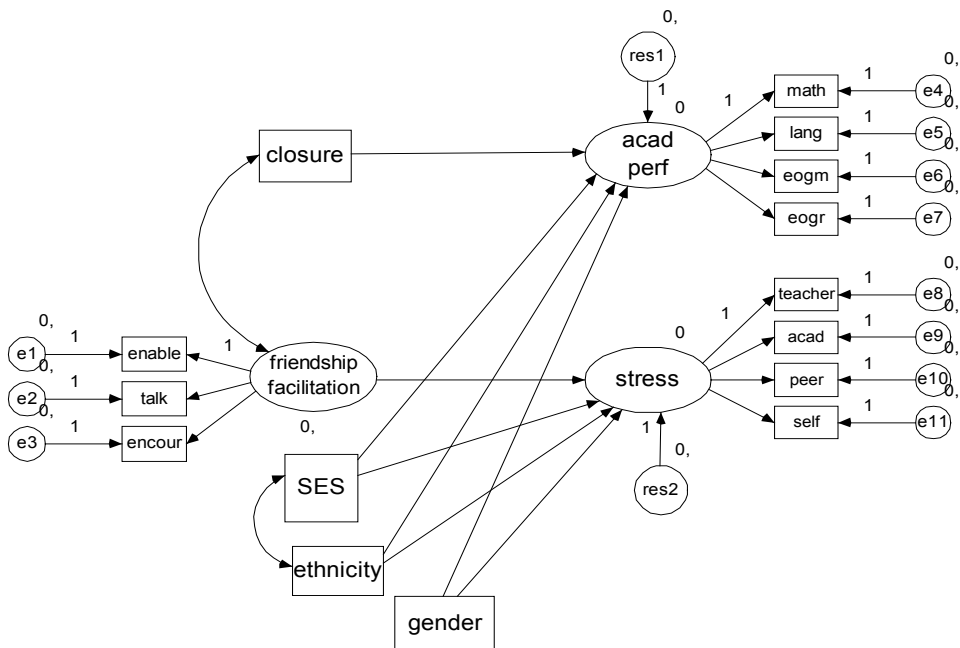

Figure 1. Initial model testing associations between parental management strategies and indicators of school-based competence.

Method

Participants

Participants were 311 fourth grade children and their mothers. Children were recruited from 37 classrooms in 9 public elementary schools in a single county in the southeastern U.S. Schools were targeted because they enrolled large percentages of the two ethnic groups of interest in the study yet were diverse with respect to both socioeconomic and community (rural, suburban, urban) composition. Participation was limited to dyads self-identifying as either Black or White (the two most prevalent ethnic groups within the region). The sample for the analyses reported here included children who reported having at least one friend at school. Children who reported having no friends within the context of school were excluded ($n = 35$). Children were between 8 and 11 years of age (Mean = 9.26, SD = .49). Sixty-four percent ($n = 200$) of dyads were White and 54% ($n = 166$) of children were female. No dyads self-identified as multiethnic. Social class of participating families was determined using the Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1975). Hollingshead scores ranged from 16 (unskilled laborers) to 66 (major business persons and professionals) with a mean of 44 (medium business personnel and minor professionals) and a standard deviation of 11.49.

Measures

Demographic Information

Mothers were asked to identify all household members and provide each member's ethnicity, age, gender, and relationship to the participating child. Mothers were also asked to provide information regarding the highest level of education they had completed and their current occupation. If the participating child's biological father was involved in the child's life, mothers were also asked to provide educational and occupational information for the father. This information was used to calculate social class scores using the Hollingshead (1975) method, which yielded scores that could potentially range from 8 to 66. The Hollingshead is a widely used measure of social class that takes into account a variety of characteristics of individuals and family units (e.g., education, employment prestige, family structure), making it preferable to single-indicator measures. Child gender was coded as 0 = female, 1 = male. Ethnicity was coded as 0 = Black, 1 = White.

School-Based Friendships

Children's school-based friendships were identified using the Social Contexts of Friends Interview, developed for the project. The Social Contexts of Friends Interview (Fletcher, Troutman, Gruber, Long, & Hunter , 2006) was

completed jointly by children and mothers. Children and mothers worked together to generate a list of no more than 10 of the participating child's closest non-sibling, non-adult friends. Mothers and children were asked to indicate each friend's ethnicity, gender, and the context(s) in which the friendship was maintained (e.g., school, neighborhood, extracurricular activities).

School-Based Social Network Closure

Using the list of friends identified during the Social Contexts of Friends Interview, mothers rated the closeness of their relationship with each friend's parents (Fletcher, Troutman, et al., 2006). Response options were 1 (*Never met*), 2 (*Met in passing*), 3 (*Know somewhat well*), and 4 (*Know well*). School-based social network closure was calculated as the average of mothers' ratings of their relationships with the parents of school friends from this Interview. Closure scores ranged from 1 to 4 with higher scores indicating higher amounts of closure within participating children's friendships. Given the individualized nature of parents' relationships with different friends' parents, this measure is not considered a "scale," and thus calculation of inter-item reliability indices across closure ratings for different friendships is not appropriate.

Maternal Friendship Facilitation

Children completed the Friendship Facilitation Strategies Questionnaire (Vernberg, Beery, Ewell, & Abwender, 1993) which assessed the extent to which mothers assisted their children in developing and maintaining relationships with same-age peers. Children indicated on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Very often*) how often mothers engaged in facilitation activities. The measure yielded three subscales that were relevant to the current project in terms of their focus on parental behaviors that supported children's access to and relationships with friends: enabling proximity to peers (seven items, sample item "drove you to a friend's house," alpha = .79), talking to offspring about friendships (five items, sample item "pointed out the qualities you should look for in friends," alpha = .74), and encouraging activity involvement (four items, sample item "encouraged you when the school sent notices of activities," alpha = .62). For each subscale, children's responses were averaged across items. Higher scores on each subscale indicated more friendship facilitation by mothers.

Academic Achievement

Children's academic achievement was measured using end-of-year grades in math and language arts (scored on a conventional 4-point scale) and End-of-Grade (EOG) achievement test scores in math and reading. EOG tests were required for all children enrolled in public schools in the state from which participants were recruited as a method of determining whether children met learning goals and promotion standards in these two subject areas. Parents

provided permission for researchers to obtain children's official academic grades and test scores from schools at the end of the academic year. Measures of academic grades and EOG scores do not constitute "scales," and thus measures of inter-item reliability were not calculated for these indicators.

School Related Stress

The School Situation Survey (Helms & Gable, 1989) was used to assess sources of school-based stress among children. Children completed the 34-item measure by indicating on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*Never*) to 3 (*Most of the time*) how frequently they experienced a variety of potentially stressful situations at school. The current study utilized scores from the four measure subscales that focused on specific sources (as opposed to manifestations) of stress, consistent with our interest in predicting overall levels of school-based stress and not differences in how it was expressed. These subscales included teacher interactions (six items, sample item "I feel that some of my teachers don't like me very well," Cronbach's alpha = 0.72), academic stress (three items, sample item "I worry about not doing well in school," Cronbach's alpha = 0.76), peer interactions (six items, sample item "Other students make fun of me," Cronbach's alpha = 0.69), and academic self-concept (four items, sample item "I feel that I learn things easily" – reverse coded, Cronbach's alpha = 0.72). For each subscale, children's responses were averaged across items. Higher scores indicated greater amounts of stress within the domain of interest. Descriptive statistics for all variables are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Background, Independent/Dependent Variables

Variables	*M*	SD	Range	N
Child gender	.47	.50	0-1	311
Social status	43.95	11.49	16-66	311
Math	3.13	.88	0-4	306
Language arts	3.14	.87	1-4	306
Math EOG	261.27	7.32	235-282	305
Reading EOG	256.27	8.67	232-280	305
Stress- Teacher	1.69	.72	1-5	310
Stress- Academics	2.56	1.12	1-5	311
Stress- Peers	1.64	.67	1-4.8	311
Stress- Self-concept	2.02	.86	1-4.5	311
Enabling proximity	3.15	.86	1.14-5	310
Talking to offspring	3.52	.94	1-5	310
Encouraging activities	3.03	.95	1-5	310
School-based closure	2.74	.86	1-4	311

Procedure

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for data collection was obtained prior to participant recruitment. Participating children were a subset of children who had been involved in an earlier, school-based study. Parents were contacted initially through letters distributed to all children in the nine participating schools and were asked to provide consent for their children's participation in the school-based study. Eighty-five percent of eligible children's mothers consented to their child's participation in the school-based portion of the study. A subset of children participating in the school-based study were then contacted and asked to participate in a home-based portion of the study. Children were considered eligible for the home interview if they self-identified ethnicity as either White or Black, resided with their biological or adoptive mothers, and were born in the United States.

Home interviews took place in participants' homes or at a location of participants' choosing (in several cases, a university research laboratory; in one case, a public library). Interviews were conducted by two research assistants and took approximately 75 minutes to complete. Research assistants underwent extensive training prior to initiation of interviews and were monitored throughout the course of the project in order to assure data quality. Mothers signed consent forms for their own and their children's participation. Children provided verbal assent for their own participation. Mothers and children completed questionnaires and answered interview questions separately, then participated in the Social Contexts of Friends Interview together. All questionnaire items were read aloud to children. Items were read aloud to mothers if they appeared to have difficulty completing questionnaires. Mothers received $35.00 each as compensation for participation, and children received small gifts.

Analytic Strategy

Structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses were conducted with Amos (Version 7.0; Arbuckle, 1989; Byrne, 2001). Structural equation modeling is appropriate for this study because it allows for modeling latent or unobserved variables and offers a number of benefits not available in regression-based approaches. For example, an SEM approach provides parameter estimates that are computed with a consideration for measurement error associated with observed variables (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2006), whereas traditional regression analyses assume perfect measurement of observed variables (i.e., no measurement error). Analyses proceeded according to the following steps. First, measurement models for each latent variable were analyzed through confirmatory factor analysis to determine if individual scale items reflected their respective underlying latent constructs (as indicated by significant factor loadings).

Second, the structural model was evaluated by examining the chi-square statistic and two goodness-of-fit indices. The chi-square statistic is a basic fit statistic that tests the difference between the hypothesized model and the sample covariance matrix. Smaller, nonsignificant chi-square values indicate that the hypothesized model is not significantly different from the data, thereby indicating a good fitting model; however, large sample sizes have been known to artificially inflate chi-square statistics, resulting in a significant chi-square value (Byrne, 2001). For this reason, we also examined the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Browne & Cudeck, 1993) as an index of absolute fit and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Bollen & Long, 1993) as an index of comparative fit. Byrne (2001) has recommended cutoff values at or below .08 for RMSEA and above .90 for CFI as indicators of adequate model fit. Although missing data were few (approximately 2%) and unlikely to bias our results, we used full information maximum likelihood estimation (FIML) in order to maximize the amount of information available for analysis. FIML provides less biased parameter estimates than listwise deletion, pairwise deletion, and mean imputation techniques (Acock, 2005). An assumption of FIML is that data are missing completely at random (MCAR) or missing at random (MAR). Compared to deletion techniques (which drop cases that have missing data on one or more variables) or mean imputation (which substitutes the mean scale score for missing responses), FIML preserves statistical power by retaining cases with missing information and generating the most probable parameter estimates based on information from all variables in the model and taking into account measurement error. Also, because FIML allows for analyses based on a "full" sample, it reduces the chances of making a Type I or Type II error. (For more information on the benefits of FIML over other approaches see Acock, 2005; for a non-technical description of the method of maximum likelihood estimation see Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994.)

Finally, modification indices informed the estimation of additional paths to improve model fit. Modification indices are numerical estimates calculated in Amos that indicate places in the model where paths could be added to improve model fit. Specifically, by allowing for error terms with similar sources of measurement error to covary, the resulting observed scores are closer to participants' "true" scores on those measures, and this will often improve model fit. Amos does not provide modification indices when FIML is selected. To address this issue, we first computed a separate correlation matrix (with means and standard deviations) in SPSS using the variables specified in our model. This data matrix (with no missing values) was then uploaded into Amos and enabled modification indices to be computed. Modification indices were analyzed to determine if additional covariance paths should be specified in the final model.

Larger values (i.e., those greater than 4.0) were considered to be an indication that covariance paths should be considered; however, additional paths were specified only when it made sense theoretically. Final analyses were conducted using the original dataset (using FIML), not the correlation matrix.

Results

Bivariate Associations Among Model Variables

Correlational analyses were used to determine relationships among model variables. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients for all variable associations are presented in Table 2. Child gender was unrelated to independent and dependent variables with one exception: boys tended to report lower levels of stress related to academics. Social class and child ethnicity were associated such that White children tended to be from families with higher social class scores. Social class and child ethnicity were associated with all indicators of academic performance and stress. Specifically, being White or from a higher social class background were associated with higher math and reading grades, higher math and reading EOG scores, and lower levels of stress as assessed by all four subscales. Ethnicity was associated with two of the three friendship facilitation subscales. White children tended to have mothers who engaged in higher levels of enabling proximity to peers, but lower levels of talking to children about friendships. Children from higher social class backgrounds had mothers who engaged in higher levels of encouraging children's involvement in activities and lower levels of talking to children about friendships.

All measures of academic achievement were intercorrelated positively. Measures of stress also were intercorrelated positively such that higher levels of stress in one domain (e.g., academics) were associated with higher levels of stress in any other domain (e.g., self, peers, teacher). All friendship facilitation subscales were intercorrelated positively. Associations between academic achievement and stress variables indicated that children who experienced higher levels of stress in each domain tended to score lower on measures of academic achievement.

Closure and one friendship facilitation subscale (encouraging proximity to peers) were associated positively such that mothers with higher levels of school-based closure also had higher levels of encouraging children's proximity to peers. Closure was not associated with any of the stress variables. Higher levels of closure were associated with higher language arts grades, but no significant associations emerged between closure and any of the other academic achievement indicators.

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations Among All Model Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Closure	–														
2. Enabling	.28*	–													
3. Talking	-.06	.35*	–												
4. Encouraging	.11	.46*	.52*	–											
5. Math	.05	.10	-.07	.05	–										
6. Language arts	.11*	.13*	-.02	.03	.73*	–									
7. Math EOG	.08	.15*	-.12*	.06	.59*	.57*	–								
8. Reading EOG	.06	.12*	-.15*	-.04	.55*	.64**	.57*	–							
9. Stress– Teacher	-.02	-.16*	-.02	-.06	-.29*	-.31*	-.20*	-.29*	–						
10. Stress– Academics	-.01	-.14*	-.01	-.06	-.28*	-.26*	-.27*	-.31*	.41*	–					
11. Stress– Peers	-.09	-.26*	.00	-.11	-.27*	-.29*	-.17*	-.29*	.42*	.33*	–				
12. Stress– Self	-.11	-.21*	-.01	-.13*	-.43*	-.42*	-.38*	-.39*	.31*	.42*	.47*	–			
13. Child gender	.10	-.08	-.07	-.01	-.10	-.10	.05	-.01	-.08	-.15*	.02	-.00	–		
14. Social class	.21*	.10	-.12*	-.04	.41*	.46*	.36*	.42*	-.19*	-.22*	-.20*	-.24*	.06	–	
15. Child ethnicity	.34*	.22*	-.26*	.04	.37*	.39*	.37*	.42*	-.22*	-.15*	-.24*	-.22*	.02	.40*	–

Note: *$p < .05$.

Associations among measures of friendship facilitation, academic achievement, and stress revealed inconsistent patterns. Enabling proximity to peers was associated with higher reading grades, EOG reading scores, and EOG math scores, whereas talking with offspring was associated with lower reading grades, EOG reading scores, and EOG math scores. Encouraging children's involvement in activities was unrelated to all academic achievement indicators. Enabling proximity to peers was associated with lower levels of stress in all domains. Encouraging children's involvement in activities was associated with lower levels of stress related to self, and talking with offspring was unrelated to all of the stress subscales.

Validation of Measurement Models

We employed a confirmatory factor analytic approach to establish that our dependent variables—academic achievement and sources of stress—were distinct latent constructs. Confirmatory factor analysis in SPSS with principal axis factoring and varimax rotation confirmed that academic- and stress-related measures formed two independent clusters: academic achievement and sources of stress. Measurement models for academic performance, stress, and friendship facilitation were then evaluated simultaneously using Amos. We examined factor loadings from each observed variable to its respective latent variable. All factor loadings were significant and greater than .52, indicating that our measures reflected their respective latent constructs. Unstandardized and standardized factor loadings for the measurement models are presented in Table 3. Standardized factor loadings are equivalent to betas in standard regression models.

Analysis of Hypothesized Model Predicting Academic Performance and Sources of Stress

Our initial model (presented in Figure 1) was tested for overall fit. Model fit was borderline acceptable, $\chi^2 (61) = 202.80$, $p < .001$, CFI = .88, root mean square error of approximations (RMSEA) = .09. Modification indices were consulted to determine if the estimation of additional paths would improve model fit and also made sense theoretically. Based on modification indices, prior research, and theory, four additional paths were added to the original model. First, we added a covariance path between the error terms for end-of-grade scores in reading and math. We considered this path theoretically justifiable because measurement error from reading and math portions of the end-of-grade exam is likely to stem from a common source of bias (e.g., being sick during the week of testing would lower a child's scores on both portions of the exam). Second, we added a covariance path between the error terms for sources of

stress stemming from teachers and academics. Because teachers are the judges of academic success within the school environment, a common source of bias (e.g., characteristics of children) likely contributes to error terms for these sub-scales. Third, we estimated the covariance of ethnicity and closure, which have been found to covary in past research (Fletcher, Hunter, et al., 2006). Finally, we estimated the relation between sources of stress and academic achievement (in both directions). This seemed reasonable given that all measures of stress were correlated positively with all measures of academic achievement in bivari-ate analyses and that previous research indicates that children who experience more stressful school environments have lower academic performance than children who experienced less stressful environments. To preserve degrees of freedom and test the most parsimonious model, we omitted non-significant paths that were extraneous to the core hypotheses being tested (Kline, 1998). Gender was unrelated to sources of stress and this path was thus dropped from the final model.

The aforementioned adjustments improved the overall fit of the model. The final model (Figure 2) was a good fit to the data, $\chi^2 (80) = 217.60$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = .90; RMSEA = 0.07. All path coefficients for the structural model are presented in Table 3. Above and beyond demographic controls, higher levels of school-based closure were associated with lower levels of academic perfor-mance, $\beta = -.09$, $p = .03$ while higher levels of friendship facilitation were associated with lower levels of stress, $\beta = -.21$, $p = .00$.

Table 3. Summary of Measurement Model and Structural Model Estimates in Figure 2 (Standard Errors in Parentheses; N = 311)

	Unstandardized coefficient	Standardized coefficient
Measurement Model Estimates		
Academic Performance → Math	1.00[a]	.83
Academic Performance → Language Arts	1.04 (.06)***	.87
Academic Performance → Math EOG	6.86 (.55)***	.68
Academic Performance → Reading EOG	8.69 (.64)***	.73
Stress → Teacher	1.00[a]	.52
Stress → Academic	1.62 (.22)***	.55
Stress → Peers	1.12 (.16)***	.63
Stress → Self-concept	1.68 (.23)***	.74
Friendship Facilitation → Enabling Proximity	1.00[a]	.59
Friendship Facilitation → Encouraging Activity	1.53 (.21)***	.81
Friendship Facilitation → Talking with Offspring	1.16 (.15)***	.62
Covariances		
Closure with Friendship Facilitation	.06 (.03)*	.13
Closure with Ethnicity	.11 (.02)***	.27
SES with Ethnicity	1.86 (.31)***	.34
Error Math EOG with Reading EOG	4.79 (2.21)*	.15
Error Teacher Stress with Academic Stress	.10 (.04)*	.18
Structural Model		
Closure → Academic Performance	-.09 (.04)*	-.09
Friendship Facilitation → Stress	-.20 (.05)***	-.21
Academic Performance → Stress	-.10 (.11)	-.14
Stress → Academic Performance	-.69 (.28)*	-.39
Residual for Academic Performance	.23 (.04)***	.17
Residual for Stress	.10 (.04)**	.25

Note: $\chi^2(80)$ = 217.60, p < .001; CFI = .90; RMSEA = .07.
[a] SEM analyses require one variable loading on each latent factor to be set equal to 1.00 to set the metric for that factor. This prevents significance testing for those variable loadings.
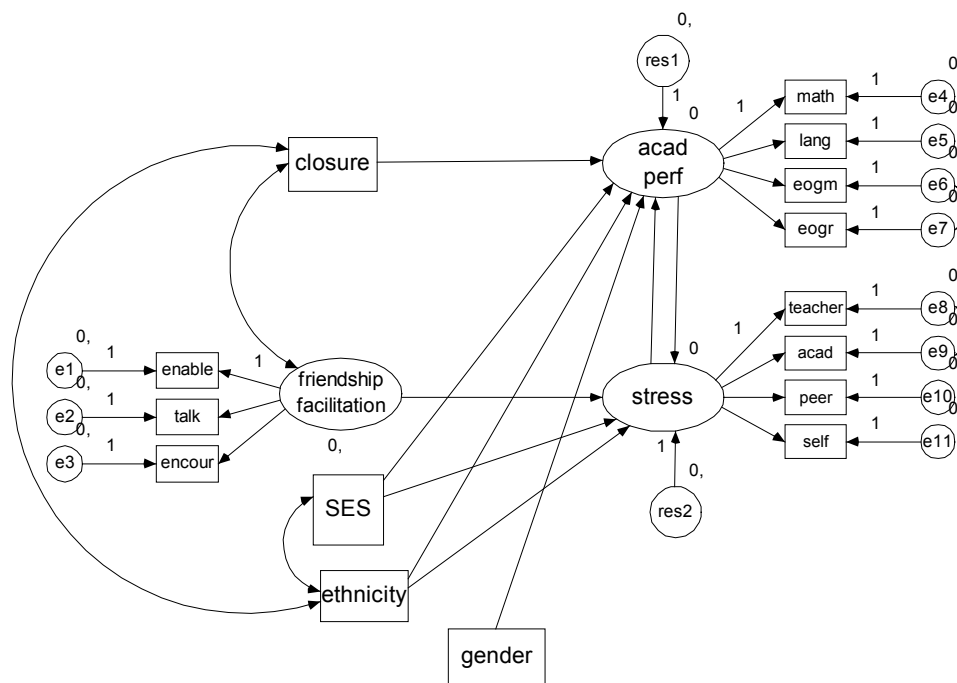* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Figure 2. Revised model testing associations between parental management strategies and indicators of school-based competence with additional parameters based on modification indices.

Discussion

SEM analysis of data for this project indicated that mothers' use of two distinct strategies to manage their children's school-based experiences were linked with separate factors indicative of success within the school environment. Parents' efforts to work with their children to facilitate positive friendship interactions (indexed in terms of enabling children's proximity to peers, talking to children about peer relationships, and encouraging children's activity involvement) were linked with children's reports of less stress in the school environment, with experiences of stress indexed in terms of stress experienced as a result of interactions with teachers, academic success, interactions with peers, and academic self-concept. Parents' efforts to facilitate children's friendship interactions were not associated with academic success. Surprisingly, parents' efforts to know and communicate with the parents of their children's school friends' parents were linked with *lower* academic performance as indexed in terms of academic grades (math and language arts) and standardized test scores (math and reading). Such interparental relationships were not associated with children's reports of stress experienced within the school environment.

The distinct nature of pathways connecting maternal relationship variables and different aspects of success within the school environment highlight the importance of two important and interrelated aspects of children's school experiences: academic and psychological. The explicit agenda of the elementary school environment is to provide children with academic instruction that maximizes their mastery of a key set of learning objectives. Children's mastery of such objectives is reflected in their academic grades and scores on end-of-grade achievement tests. Scores on such indicators are often examined in isolation and considered to be appropriate indicators as to whether academic "success" has been achieved. Yet successful adaptation within the school environment is also reflected in the extent to which children feel comfortable within this setting. Although our data indicated the interrelatedness of these two indicators of school success (a finding consistent with the work of Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006), their distinctness was highlighted by differences in the nature of their associations with distinct parental management strategies.

Previous work examining out-of-school correlates and predictors of children's school-based competence has tended to focus on the role of parents in explicitly supporting the academic agenda of the school (Gonzalez & Blanco, 1991; Grolnick et al., 2000; Ho & Willms, 1996; Peng & Wright, 1994). The current project was unique in that it focused on parents' efforts to use social relationships as a tool for promoting children's school success. We focused on two distinct types of parental use of social relationships to this end and found that these two different approaches were correlated with different child outcomes with accompanying differences in directions of associations.

Mothers varied in the extent to which they maintained meaningful social relationships with the parents of their children's friends. Such relationships have been termed "closure" relationships and have been proposed to promote the development of social capital within families (Coleman, 1988). We speculated that closure relationships would represent a source of information about academic requirements within the school environment and strategies for meeting such requirements and hypothesized that higher levels of closure would be associated with higher academic achievement among children. Our hypothesis was not supported. Instead, higher levels of closure relationships were associated with lower academic achievement among children. This finding may reflect the bi-directional nature of associations between parents' efforts to impact their children's educational experiences and children's academic success. Although it is generally true that parental efforts to support their children's educational experiences predict higher levels of child achievement (Jeynes, 2005), associations between parental involvement/support and indicators of academic achievement have sometimes been inconsistently observed (e.g., Grolnick

& Ryan, 1989). One explanation for such inconsistency may be that parents respond to concerns regarding their children's academic performance by increasing their efforts to support academic success. Parents whose children are struggling academically may use one another as sources of information about what is going on at school and what steps they need to take at home to support their children's success within the school environment. In this manner, parents may seek to manage their children's school experiences by themselves forming and utilizing social relationships with other parents as sources of support. Maternal use of such strategies would account for the observed negative associations between our measure of social network closure and children's academic achievement.

Parents, educators, and researchers (Austin & Draper, 1984) all recognize that success within the school environment encompasses both academic and social challenges. Yet mothers within our sample varied considerably in the extent to which they engaged in explicit efforts to promote the social competence of their children. Specifically, mothers varied in the extent to which they engaged in friendship facilitation—efforts by parents to provide opportunities for children to form and maintain positive peer relationships and "coach" children as to the best ways to negotiate such relationships. Friendship facilitation represents an explicit effort on the part of parents to support their children's social development. Within our sample, it was associated with lower feelings of stress on the part of children within the school environment. We suspect that mothers' who engaged in higher levels of friendship facilitation had children who were able to more successfully negotiate their interactions with peers and were then able to utilize their relationships with peers as sources of academic and social support while at school.

We had initially hypothesized we would find support for a model that linked mothers' use and promotion of social relationships (formation of closure relationships, facilitation of children's friendships) with higher levels of adjustment within the school context but with different types of maternal efforts associated with different indicators of school-based adjustment. Our findings, although unexpected in some ways, still suggest the importance of mothers' actions with respect to their own and their children's social relationships as strategies that may be utilized to shape children's experiences at school. It is important to note that we did not find that mothers' efforts were unassociated with indicators of child adjustment. Instead we found that mother's efforts to support their children's friendships were associated with lower levels of stress experienced at school, but that mothers' own social relationships (with the parents of their children's school friends) were linked with lower levels of academic achievement. We propose that these findings both suggest that mothers look to social relationships (their own and their children's) as tools they might use

to support their children at school. Yet the manner in which these strategies are applied and their associations with indicators of school-based competence are complex.

Findings reported here expand our current understanding both in terms of the range of ways parents may support and promote their children's school success and the manner in which such success is defined. Yet the data and analyses that have yielded these findings are not without their limitations. Despite our efforts to recruit a sample that was as diverse as possible with respect to factors including social class, family structure, and community of residence, this sample was, in the end, one of convenience. Of particular concern is that it represented only two ethnic groups, that all participants resided in the southeastern section of the United States, and that all participants were enrolled in public schools. Accordingly, findings cannot be generalized to other ethnic groups, regions or the United States, or school types.

This project involved analysis of cross-sectional data. Accordingly, we are only able to state definitively that there are contemporaneous associations between parents' efforts with respect to their own and their children's social relationships and indicators of well-being at school, but not that parents efforts shape children's experiences at school or that children's experiences at school shape parental behaviors. Further research on this topic should focus on analysis of longitudinal data and testing of models that consider the reciprocal nature of associations between parental behaviors and indicators of child adjustment as each unfolds over time.

Analyses were also limited by the fact that indicators of both friendship facilitation and school stress were reported by children themselves. Accordingly, it is possible that the association between the latent constructs modeled by these indicators is due in part or in entirety to shared source variance. In such a case, children who were predisposed to view the school environment as stressful/non-stressful might also be predisposed to view their parents as engaging in fewer/more (respectively) efforts to support their interactions with peers. Further work in this area should take into account reports of both parents and children in operationalizations of friendship facilitation. It is difficult to say the same for the measure of school stress, as children are in a unique position to recognize and report upon their own psychological well-being in a given setting. Fortunately, our measures of closure and academic achievement are not limited by issues related to shared source variance, as closure relationships were reported by parents themselves and measures of academic achievement were reported by teachers.

Finally, the findings we have reported here are also limited by the lack of explanatory mechanisms available within the model we have tested. Our intent

here was merely to determine whether different efforts on the part of parents were linked with distinct aspects of success within the school environment. However, limitations within our data prevented us from explicitly testing the mechanisms that might explain these differences. We have speculated that the association between closure and academic achievement may be explained by parental concerns regarding their children's academic performance. We suspect that the association between friendship facilitation and children's perceptions of stress are explained by actual levels of competence within peer relationships. However, no measures of these potential mediating constructs were available within our data set.

Despite these limitations, the findings reported provide a window into a heretofore unconsidered manner through which parents may potentially influence and be influenced by their children's school-based experiences. By recognizing that successful adaptation within the school context involves both academic achievement and psychological comfort, and by acknowledging that parents may utilize diverse strategies with the intent of supporting such adaptation, we have expanded current understanding concerning both the manner in which parents may seek to exert influence on children's school experiences and potentially explained why previous conceptualizations of parental involvement have sometimes been only weakly associated with child outcomes in this arena. We suggest that social relationships represent a critical source of support to both parents and children alike and that efforts to promote children's success within the school arena must not overlook the existence of such relationships. Parents clearly recognize the potential importance of these relationships and appear to use them in their efforts to promote their children's school-based success. Educators and researchers would do well to recognize such efforts and incorporate an understanding of them into their conceptualizations of parental involvement in schooling.

To this end, schools may wish to consider developing ways to make social connectedness an increased part of children's and parents' school experiences. For example, school conferences might be used as an opportunity not only to discuss children's behavior and achievement, but also provide parents with information concerning the identities of children's school friends and the nature of their relationships with these individuals. Parents might also be provided contact information for classroom parents, and school functions might be structured so as to encourage the formations of social connections among parents. Finally, schools might provide a setting through which information can be filtered to parents regarding the importance of friendships in their children's lives and ways in which parents can effectively support the development and maintenance of such relationships.

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Facilitating Family Involvement in Early Intervention to Preschool Transition

Yanhui Pang

Abstract

Active family involvement and important family roles in the early intervention to preschool transition have been mandated by laws, recognized by the position statements of professional organizations, and validated through evidence-based research. In order to involve families in this process, reduce stresses, and conquer the challenges families may encounter, professionals who serve families in this process should seek to fully understand families' needs and priorities and to establish collaboration with them to design appropriate transition goals and effective strategies. The application of a conceptual framework of family systems theory and family-centered practices can fulfill this task. The purpose of the study is two-fold: to review literature on family involvement in the transition from early intervention programs to programs for three-year-olds from a perspective of the conceptual framework of family systems theory, thus providing a good view of the needs, priorities, strengths, and weaknesses of families from diverse backgrounds; and to describe family-centered practices for developing quality transition services that meet families' diverse needs, thus smoothing the transition process.

Key Words: family-centered practices, family systems theory, early intervention, transitions, Chinese, case study, preschool, children, disability, exceptionality, developmental delays, extended families, services, therapists, professionals

Introduction

The early intervention (EI) to programs for three-year-olds transition is a critical process not only for young children with developmental delays and their families, but also their service providers (Lovett & Haring, 2003). Since transition was introduced in the P.L. 99-457 Education for All Handicapped Children Act Amendments (now called IDEA 1986), there has been an increased number of evidence-based studies concerning this transition (Adams, 2003; Bruns & Fowler, 1999; Fowler, Hains, & Rosenkoetter, 1990; Fowler, Schwartz, & Atwater, 1991; Hains, Rosenkoetter, & Fowler, 1991; Hamblin-Wilson & Thurman, 1990; Hanson et al., 2000; Hemmeter & Schuster, 1994; Hoover, 2001; Johnson, 2001; Ladwig, 2003; Lovett & Haring, 2003; Pinnock, 2003; Rice & O'Brien, 1990). Division for Early Childhood (DEC, 1993) also issued a position statement about the importance of transition because it brings many opportunities to children and families, although it also presents them with many challenges and stressors. Issues worthy of consideration in the transition process include increasing the connection between the EI program and the receiving program, relieving the stress associated with the transition procedure, and improving the quality of services to smooth the transition (Ladwig, 2003; Lovett & Haring, 2003; Pinnock, 2003; Rice & O'Brien, 1990; Rous, Hemmeter, & Schuster, 1994).

As IDEA 1986 mandated that families should be involved in the transition process, families' roles have been strengthened every time IDEA was reauthorized, in 1990, 1997, and again in 2000. The multifaceted roles families play in transition include acting as guides and decision makers who provide professionals information about the child and family and set up appropriate transition goals and objectives (Bruns & Fowler, 1999); families also play roles as collaborators, problem solvers, parent supporters, and evaluators/assessors (Pang, 2008). However, not every family is the same in their desire to make decisions or solve problems independently or to support other families, so finding different families' comfort zones in the transition process is critically important. Bruns and Fowler's (1999) study indicated that some families may be more active in acquiring information about their "legal rights or providing information about their child's needs to teachers or administrators coordinating the transition, while others may opt to share or hand over most responsibilities to specific professionals and participate only in legally mandated meetings and procedures" (p. 26). Some families exchange information with professionals, assist in locating resources for their children, and take a leadership role in transition planning. Other families, however, may remain passive in the transition meeting. Families also can play a role as professionals' ally, sharing experiences and expertise with the professionals (Bruns & Fowler, 1999).

Since families' important roles have been validated through evidence-based research studies (Bruns & Fowler, 1999; Pang, 2008), what needs to be considered is how to facilitate families playing roles in decision making, designing goals and objectives, embedding the transition related goals into daily activities, and utilizing family resources in the transition process. The purpose of the study is two-fold: to review literature on family involvement in the transition from early intervention programs to programs for three-year-olds from a perspective of the conceptual framework of family systems theory (Turnbull, 2000; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2005), and to describe family-centered practices in the transition process for developing quality transition services.

Applying Family Systems Theory to Understand Family Involvement in EI Transition

Introduced by Turnbull (2000) and Turnbull et al. (2005), the conceptual framework of family systems theory addresses family characteristics, interactions, functions, and life cycle stages. There are three levels of meaning in family characteristics: the characteristics of the family as a unit, including the family size, cultural background, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and educational attainment; personal characteristics, such as the nature and age of onset of the exceptionality, family member health, and coping style; and special challenges such as family poverty, parents with disabilities, and substance abuse (Turnbull, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2005). Family interactions are the processes in the conceptual framework that include the marital subsystem (interaction between spouses), parental subsystem (interaction between parents and children), the sibling subsystem (interaction among siblings), and the extended family subsystem (interaction between the nuclear and extended family). Family function refers to family needs such as affection, self-esteem, socialization, education, recreation, daily care, spirituality, and economic stability (Turnbull, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2005). Only when they understand family needs can service providers render appropriate services and policymakers revise policies to meet family needs. In the family systems framework, family functions are the output.

Family life cycle, also known as transition, represents the change families experience over years, such as changes in family characteristics, functions, and life roles (Turnbull, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2005). Examples are the birth of a child with an exceptionality; the transfer from the intensive care in the hospital to the home, from the EI system to programs for three-year-olds, from preschool to kindergarten; providing sexual education, expanding self-determination,

and developing independence in adolescence; and identifying post-secondary education and employment opportunities and seeking supported living options in adulthood, all of which can be categorized as either an expected or unexpected transition (Turnbull, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2005). The expected transition is what a family has planned, such as a typically developing child transferring from preschool to kindergarten, while the unexpected transition can be anything that happens unexpectedly to the family, like the child staying in the hospital for intensive care after birth, or the child being unable to attend school for a full day due to health issues.

Family Characteristics

In the process of transition, family characteristics such as family socioeconomic status, cultural background, the nature and severity of the exceptionality, and any special challenges the family has experienced (e.g., family members' health, family member with disabilities and/or substance abuse) should be considered. For example, the nature of the disability is an issue that can cause stress in transition. The more severe the disability is, the more stress the family may experience and the more they may be concerned about their child's adjustment to a new environment. Families whose children have mild or less severe disabilities may be less worried, because they are more confident that their children are better prepared for the new program (Hanson et al., 2000; Hoover, 2001). Family cultural background is also a factor that influences family transition experiences. For example, some Asian families may not feel comfortable sharing their needs, wants, concerns, or priorities with professionals. They may prefer that professionals play a dominant role in transition planning and decision making, although they would like to embed the transition related strategies in their daily living. As mentioned earlier, recognizing a family's comfort zone and promoting their participation in transition planning to the maximum is the professionals' mission. Professionals must respect family preferences and incorporate them into service provision, understanding that each family has its own strengths, needs, and expectations.

Families of different educational attainments may show different levels of satisfaction with transition services. Hamblin-Wilson and Thurman's (1990) findings showed that the most educated parents are most satisfied with the information and services they received, while Pang's (2008) study indicated the opposite—that families with higher educational attainment are more likely to show dissatisfaction with the information and services they received. This, however, may imply that the respondents of higher educational attainment require more from professionals and are more critical with the service delivery method and the quality and quantity of services provided (Pang, 2008). It may

also imply that it is more challenging to meet the expectations of this group of parents compared to their counterparts with lower educational attainment (Pang, 2008). The author of the current study believes that the different findings between these respective studies (Hamblin-Wilson & Thurman, 1990; Pang, 2008) derive from the participant families' different ethnic backgrounds. In Hamblin-Wilson and Thurman's study, the majority of the participant families were Black, while all of the participant families in Pang's study were Caucasian. The Caucasian families with higher educational attainment may have higher expectations about the quality and quantity of the services provided in transition, compared to their Black counterparts. The author also points out that Pang's study was conducted 18 years later than Hamblin-Wilson and Thurman's study. In those 18 years, IDEA was revised several times, and each time it was revised, family rights were strengthened. Families, especially those with higher educational attainment, become more aware of their rights by 2008, which may have led to higher expectations of professionals and services.

Family Interaction

According to the conceptual framework of family systems theory, family members interact with each other, and each one of them also gains independence. The interaction between and among family members reflects cohesion, while the independence shows the independent level each family member has (Turnbull, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2005). Families from different cultural backgrounds may have different family interaction styles. For example, in many Asian families the nuclear and extended families remain so close that sometimes three generations live in one household. Although this tradition is changing as time goes on, it is still not rare to see the grandparents help take care of the grandchildren in some Asian families. In the transition process, each individual family member may be affected, as each of them will devote a certain amount of time to get information, participate in discussion, seek services and/or help, and each of them will carry some responsibilities in helping the child to generalize skills across programs and prepare for the new program emotionally, financially, and psychologically. Hoover (2001) reported that the make-up of a family system, especially the interaction between spouses, affects the transition process. While marital conflicts may lead to a stressful transition, if both mother and father are in a good relationship, both of them can provide input and collaborate with professionals in the implementation of strategies to promote a smooth transition. In some families, grandparents, aunts, and uncles are also involved in providing input. Siblings can help as well in that they can model and assist in practicing some basic social, behavioral, and functional skills. In fact, siblings learn "critical social skills from each other, such as

sharing, negotiation, and competition" (Xu & Filler, 2008, p. 61). For children with established disabilities or at high risk of developmental delays, transitions may pose challenges for the whole family (Rice & O'Brien, 1990). This also reflects the social systems theory (Boss, 1988) that when one family member experiences stress, the other family members' experiences are also affected.

Family Functions

Family function refers to family needs such as affection, self-esteem, socialization, education, recreation, daily care, spirituality, and economic stability (Turnbull, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2005) Without understanding family function, service providers could hardly deliver appropriate services. For example, one of the critical issues in transition is that many families feel dissatisfied with their transition experiences as they are shifted from "known" to "unknown" service providers (Hanson et al., 2000). Although familiar with EI personnel, families often lack communication and contact with the receiving preschool service providers. So, family members aspire to communicate with the receiving agency staff and favor the team model services they received in the EI system (Hanson et al., 2000). They may express their needs for receiving relevant information ahead of time, participating in transition planning, and maintaining contacts with the EI professionals after transition (Lovett & Haring, 2003).

In order to meet these families' needs, Hoover (2001) recommended a "mentor mother" and a support learning group, from whom families can gain resources and support. Families feel more comfortable when sharing family stories with expert families who share similar experiences with them, and they get the most emotional support from other families rather than professionals (Pang, 2008). Hanson and colleagues (2000) suggested a key person or guide who can provide families informational, emotional, and educational support. Hoover (2001) also recommended a checklist on which everyone's responsibility in the program is listed. This way, parents can follow the checklist and check when something has or has not been completed in the transition process.

Hains, Rosenkoetter, and Fowler (1991) recommended four phases in facilitating families' participation in transition planning. In Phase I, professionals should develop a sense of sensitivity to each family's need for information and support as well as the family's readiness for transition planning. In Phase II, professionals are expected to help the family prepare for IEP (Individualized Education Plan) activities and encourage them to collaborate with professionals in making decisions or determine themselves where to place their child. Phase III emphasizes enhancing communication between the family and the receiving agency staff. Phase IV states that professionals provide parents opportunities to evaluate their involvement in transition and their child's adjustment in the new program.

Family Life Cycle

Family life cycle represents the changes/transitions a family experiences over the years, such as changes in family characteristics, interaction, and function (Turnbull, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2005). There are two types of changes/transitions, the expected and unexpected. One expected change or transition is the transfer from kindergarten to elementary school when the child reaches the school age, and usually it is planned so that everybody in the family prepares for it financially and emotionally. On the other hand, the unexpected transition refers to some changes that a family does not plan or expect (Turnbull, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2005). It happens suddenly as a surprise. The birth of a child with an exceptionality is such an event in a family life cycle. Emily Pearl Kingsley (1987) described it as an unexpected, unplanned trip to Holland. Imagine that your family plans a vacation trip to Italy, but it turns out you accidentally board a plane to Holland. You feel upset, unprepared, and lost. Although later on you find there is some beautiful scenery in Holland as well, you still regret that you don't get a chance to see the beauty of Italy. Every time someone else talks about the trip to Italy, your heart is broken because you know you will never get there (Kingsley, 1987). Daniel (1993) described this transition as mountain climbing and regarded parents as learners whose movements are tenuous and faltering at the beginning despite the support of experts, but who later on will progress and may move ahead of experts.

Having a child with an exceptionality may bring many unexpected issues, such as being enrolled in a special class when transferring to elementary school, getting access to sheltered employment and group living homes after graduating from high school, and addressing the child's sexual and social needs. For many families the transition from EI to programs for three-year-olds is the first major transition they experience and may be the most challenging one, especially for those whose children have severe or multiple disabilities. There are many issues that professionals and the family as a whole have to plan ahead of time such as transportation and placement issues. Many times families feel stressed because their child lacks many of the basic skills required in center-based settings, such as potty training skills, sharing, turn taking, and basic communication skills. As mentioned earlier, the more severe the disability is, the more stressed the family may feel before transition. In order to relieve the transition-related stress, professionals should notify the family ahead of time that the child will transition out of the EI program at age three; provide families alternate placement options and show them these placement alternatives before transition; encourage families to make final decisions about the placement and transition goals themselves, or help them make decisions if families

prefer. This way, the family will feel they are prepared for transition and expect it to happen instead of feeling unprepared or overwhelmed with so many issues and paperwork when the transition comes.

Applying Family-Centered Practices to Facilitate Family Involvement in EI Transition

Family-Centered Practices

Family-centered practices are not a new concept. Rather, as Bruder (2000) summarized, it has had a long history since the 1960s when it was first used as a descriptor of service delivery. The current set of practices has been refined, validated by research, and strengthened by the reauthorization of laws (IDEA 86, 97, 00, 04) and the issuing a position statement by the Division for Early Childhood (1993). Another factor that promoted the formation and application of family-centered practices in EI was Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Theory, which proposed that a child develops through bidirectional interaction with the environment in which he/she lives. That is, not only does the environment influence the child, but also the child affects the environment. The theory defined layers of environment where the child lives and which affect the child, including the family environment, such as the makeup of the family, family socioeconomic status, cultural background, and beliefs; family relationships with outsiders like friends, teachers, church members, and community members; and the larger culture, traditions, and influence from mass media (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The interaction between young children and the environment is a cornerstone in their social, emotional, cognitive, and communicative development (Baird & Peterson, 1997). Environmental changes over time affect the family as well as the child. For example, an economic crisis may cause a reduction in federal funding allocated for service delivery, which leads to a cut in service hours, so one service provider must serve more families. The child also changes its surrounding environment. A child born with developmental delays causes families to deal with many unexpected issues, such as fighting for services and insurance. According to ecological theory, the family is viewed as a whole unit, so a child cannot be isolated from his/her family or home environment, and the community, school, and societal environments are seen as combined to affect a child's development. Thus, the interaction between the family and service providers and teachers cannot be neglected.

According to Dunst's (1995) interpretation, family-centered practices regard the family as the center of service delivery; family concerns, priorities, strengths, and needs should be taken into account, and families should be

served as a whole, meaning not only the need of the child with an exceptionality but also that of each family member should be considered, every family member should be informed about options and involved in service delivery, and family cultural differences should be respected (Baird & Peterson, 1997; Bruder, 2000; Dunst, 1995; 2002). Such family-centered practices should be applied to the EI to preschool transition. If every family member is notified of the available services before transition, the family can choose which service plan will work better for them as a whole. If families are invited to visit the multiple programs available, each family can make a decision about where to send their child ahead of time. This way, family stress will be reduced and family members may be relieved that all of their concerns are being addressed.

Many times family members feel dissatisfied with transition services due to the fact that family-centered practices were not implemented. Hanson and her colleagues' (2000) study suggested that one of the critical issues that led to unsatisfactory transition experiences was treating "transition as a discrete event or task to be completed or in some cases just formality, rather than a process" (p. 284). Some service providers regarded transition as solely paperwork (Hanson et al., 2000), preparing a series of documents before the transition meeting and asking families to sign the paper at the meeting, rather than working together with families to design the optimal transition plans. The limited choice of alternative options for future placement is also an issue that makes some families dissatisfied. Many families interviewed noted that they were given no choices or few options for the type or location of their child's preschool services (Hanson et al., 2000). Service providers without training in family-centered practices tend to "use their own family values and experiences as a roadmap for interacting with families, with little regard to their [families'] individuality and background" (Mandell & Murray, 2005, p. 77).

The following is a story that applies family systems theory in understanding family concerns, priorities, and resources, and family-centered practices in serving a family and their child with an exceptionality in the transition process. (Note: All names used are pseudonyms.)

Vignette—Dandan's Family

Dandan Liu is a loving, sensitive, and intelligent three-and-a-half-year-old little boy with autism, who transitioned from an EI program about six months ago to a local preschool program. Dandan's autism led to his language delay and behavior problems. Both of his parents are first generation immigrants to the U.S. from China. The parents received higher education in the U.S., and his father works in a public university while his mother stays at home with Dandan and his sister. Dandan was sent back to China after he was born, and he stayed with his grandparents

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for two years. When he was brought back to the U.S. at age two, he was enrolled in an EI program. An Occupational Therapist (OT), a Speech-Language Pathologist, and a behavioral support staff person were assigned to work with the family. Each of the professionals came to the house once a week for about half an hour. As both of Dandan's parents are well educated and know English well, no interpreter was needed. The parents and professionals communicated pretty well. However, the parents were still uncomfortable in sharing all of their concerns with the professionals. There were some things that they felt were private and didn't like to share with others. For example, the professionals offered to connect them to an "expert" family whose little boy also has autism. Dandan's family was reluctant to do that. They also rarely gathered together with other Chinese families who live close by in the same community. One of the concerns the family has is that people may gossip about Dandan's disability, which might harm their son's future, thinking, for example, nobody would like to play with him or it might be hard for Dandan to find a girlfriend when he grows up.

As Dandan was pretty delayed in both English and his native language at two years old, the family decided to only teach him Mandarin instead of bilingual education, mainly because they believed the bilingual instruction would further confuse him. Also, as the grandparents came to visit Dandan's family periodically and the grandparents only speak in Mandarin, Dandan will have more chances to use Mandarin, his native language. Later on, after Dandan could communicate his basic needs in Mandarin, the parents would consider teaching him English. The professionals completely accepted Dandan's family's decision. Therefore, the speech-language pathologist did not directly instruct Dandan, as she did not know his language, and there was no speech pathologist in Dandan's area who knew Mandarin. Rather she mainly guided the mother, who stays at home all the time with the children, and shared with her strategies on how to stimulate Dandan's language development. The OT also embedded some language instruction technique in the occupational therapy. For example, the OT asked Dandan to tell her the name of an object before she gave it to him. For his behavioral issues, such as running wildly about and having a hard time sitting down and concentrating on tasks (e.g., playing with toys or listening to a story) for more than two minutes, the behavioral support person recommended gradually increasing the requirement of quiet reading time and playing time with his sister, who is one year younger than Dandan. The OT suggested the mother use his favorite toy, Thomas the Train, to get his attention, ask him to say the word "train" before giving it to him, and also that she reinforce him in sharing toys with his sister at play. The father was also requested to get involved in playing and working with Dandan after work, as were the grandparents when they came to visit. The practice of taking turns, sharing, and sitting down quietly and focusing on a story or doing some coloring are critical skills in center-

based programs after transition, and the practice of these skills with his little sister at home really speeded up Dandan's adjustment to the new program after transition. So, as everybody in Dandan's family was involved in working with Dandan, family concerns and priorities (e.g., mastering Mandarin first) were considered when designing goals and strategies, and family resources were utilized in the implementation of the strategies.

As Dandan's mother was very concerned about her son's adjustment to a new English-speaking environment since Dandan was not speaking English at all and could only understand a few words in English, finding an appropriate school for Dandan after he exited the EI program remained a hard task for the team. Accompanied by the professional team, Dandan's family visited almost every available preschool program before they made the final decision. Currently, half a year since Dandan was placed in the preschool, he has made good progress in language development: he can speak some short, simple English sentences such as "I want water" and "I want to play ball," and he can understand some simple commands in English, although he is still far behind in expressive language development compared to his same age, typically developing peers. Once in a while, Dandan still has some behavioral issues such as grabbing toys from peers, wandering around and talking during the story time, refusing to transition from one activity to another, and biting to get what he wants. Fortunately, Dandan's family and the EI professionals who used to serve them still keep in contact with each other. The EI professionals still provide suggestions when the parents ask. Dandan's family invites these professionals to celebrate their traditional festivals. The close relationship established between the EI professionals and Dandan's family makes the family feel the service providers are old friends who know them well and still support and care about them after transition.

In Dandan's story, the family's resources were well used such that every family member was involved in the service delivery including both the parents and grandparents. Although Dandan's father was busy, he was also involved in working with Dandan whenever he had some time, as were the grandparents from both sides of the family when they came to visit. This reflects the concept contained in family systems theory (Turnbull, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2005) that the interaction between the nuclear and extended family determines the support the nuclear family receives from the extended family. According to Dandan's family's Chinese cultural background, grandparents play an important role in raising grandchildren, and many times the nuclear and the extended family remain in an intimate relationship and sometimes stay together. This is true in Dandan's family in that grandparents came to stay once in a while, and they provided a lot of support both financially and emotionally,

which greatly relieves Dandan's nuclear family from stress and anxiety (Hoover, 2001). For example, Dandan's grandparents from both sides helped take care of the grandchildren and did the housework when they visited periodically. The grandparents were trained to use daily household materials to teach Dandan vocabulary. The grandparents also visited some preschool programs along with Dandan's parents and discussed which program they preferred for Dandan. The parents considered the grandparents' opinions when making the final decision. In the traditional Asian family, the elders are decision makers, and even the adult children consider their parents or grandparents' opinions.

Family concerns and priorities should be considered, and families and professionals should collaborate when designing transition goals and plans (Dunst, 1995). For example, given Dandan's language delay, the family and professionals agreed to teach Dandan Mandarin only, as it was believed that bilingual instruction would further confuse him, and he was more exposed to Mandarin at home. Dandan's family was trained to use the materials available at home, such as Dandan's favorite toys, to practice his verbal communication skills. For Dandan's behavioral issues, the professionals suggested the family use his favorite toys to encourage quiet play for several minutes with his sister and reward him or praise him whenever he did so. Appropriate transition goals and plans were also set up according to Dandan's current level of development. For example, as mentioned in the vignette, Dandan was instructed to take turns and share when playing with his little sister. Developing these basic social skills surely smoothed his transition to a center-based classroom and reduced his confusion and frustration.

Families' cultural differences should be respected in the transition process (Baird & Peterson, 1997; Bruder, 2000; Dunst, 1995; 2002). When Dandan's family showed their reluctance about sharing information with professionals and connecting with other families, the professionals respected their decision and asked the family to take the lead in deciding which information the family wanted to share and which services they wanted to receive; the professionals collaborated with Dandan's family and utilized the information they obtained from the family and through observation to design transition goals and intervention strategies and to implement those strategies. As grandparents can play a very important role in raising and educating the grandchild, the grandparents from both sides were included on the transition team and were trained to help Dandan practice language skills and reduce his challenging behaviors. Since in Chinese culture disability is considered to be a sin or a source of family shame, Dandan's family regarded Dandan's autism as something bad that they did not want to share with outsiders (Pang, 2008). Even with the professionals, the family did not want to share some details such as his very severe tantrums or

other behavior issues like self-injury. They considered these to be their private issues and were reluctant to leak the news to an "outsider" such as a neighbor, friend, or professionals; they would rather internalize these issues. Such privacy and cultural differences should be understood and respected (Pang, 2008).

Each family should be encouraged to make final decisions about the intervention strategies they want to adopt, the child's placement, and transition goals (Dunst, 1995). Dandan's family decided to teach him only Mandarin before immersing him in a bilingual environment. Since there was no speech pathologist in the area who knew Mandarin, the speech pathologist trained the parents and grandparents to help Dandan practice his Mandarin skills. The professionals worked together with Dandan's family to help Dandan learn and practice some basic social skills with his little sister, which also helped reduce his behavior problems such as suddenly grabbing toys from peers. The professionals on the IEP team informed the family of all possible preschools in their area and arranged multiple visits to several preschools when the family showed interest. Dandan's family made the final decision about which school Dandan would attend.

Dandan's family had communication needs and needed support from professionals, but they also intended to protect their family's "privacy," meaning there were certain things that they were unwilling to communicate to professionals. Professionals can ask open-ended questions to obtain information about a child like Dandan's needs and strengths, his likes and dislikes, the make-up of the family, and the role the family feels comfortable playing in transition (Pang, 2008). Based on family needs and wants, professionals can work together with the family in designing goals and intervention strategies, embedding the strategies in daily family activities, and involving all possible family members in implementing the strategies (Bruder, 2000; Dunst, 1995; 2002). After a child transitions to a new environment, the EI professionals should provide follow-up contacts checking the status of the child and the family. This makes the family feel that their long-time, intimate relationship with the EI personnel does not end abruptly, and they still can get support from the EI service coordinators (Adams, 2003; Bruns & Fowler, 1999; Hains et al., 1991; Pang, 2008).

Conclusion

Through Dandan's story, family systems theory was applied in collecting information about family characteristics, such as family background and resources (parents' educational attainment, English language abilities, grandparents being around), Dandan's strengths (being loving and smart) and weaknesses (his

language limitations, social skill deficiencies, and behavior problems), his likes (Thomas the train set is his favorite toy) and dislikes (quiet play and sharing); the interaction among family members (the grandparents from both sides have a very good relationship with Dandan's parents); the family function (Dandan's family has communication needs and need for training so that the family can help Dandan practice language and social skills and monitor his progress in these areas); and family life cycle (almost every member in Dandan's family experienced challenges but to different extents during transition due to Dandan's special needs; Hanson et al., 2000). Dandan's family was prepared for certain issues in transition such as the placement after transition, as they visited every possible preschool ahead of time and decided where to send Dandan; however, there were other issues for which they still did not feel well prepared, such as Dandan's language skills, for Dandan didn't speak English at all when he first entered preschool. Therefore, there were still some issues that made the family feel anxious, intimidated, and worried during transition.

However, family-centered practices were applied to design transition goals and intervention strategies that addressed these family concerns, priorities, and expectations. Dandan's family was considered the center of the service delivery system during transition. Every family member, including Dandan's little sister, was involved in the transition process. Through the free play with his sister, for example, Dandan practiced basic social skills such as turn-taking and sharing, corroborating Xu and Filler (2008)'s report that siblings learn critical social skills from each other. The family's resources were taken advantage of to the maximum possible extent when delivering services. For example, the grandparents from both sides of the family were involved in helping Dandan practice language and social skills whenever they were visiting. As both Dandan's mother and father spoke well in both Mandarin and English, they helped Dandan practice Mandarin skills during and after transition and turned to professionals when there was an issue or question. Dandan's family's cultural differences were respected and appreciated (Dunst, 1995; 2002); they performed the roles and shared information with professionals to the extent they felt comfortable doing so (Bruder, 2000). The story of Dandan's family is a good model showing that the application of the conceptual framework of family systems theory helps professionals understand a family, while family-centered practices provide a good method of facilitating family involvement in transition.

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Book Review of the *Handbook of School–Family Partnerships*

Matthew Ringenberg

Key Words: school–family partnerships, family, schools, education, systems theory, ecological theory, Bronfenbrenner, parents, involvement, diversity, Christenson, Reschly, families, handbook, book review

Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn once described President Harry Truman as "right on all the big things [even] if he was wrong on the little ones." The *Handbook of School–Family Partnerships*, published by Routledge in 2010, merits similar, but slightly higher, praise than our former president received. The *Handbook* succeeds in the "big things," and while it has some shortcomings, none of those shortcomings are central issues in the discussion of school–family partnerships. This is a valuable compilation of writings highlighting the conceptual, empirical, historical, and practical issues related to involving families in children's education and advancing the associated research agenda.

This review, like the *Handbook*, is divided into three sections. First, a critique is provided of the overall text, its value, and its compilation. Second, each chapter, in order, is discussed both for its overall content and its particular merits. Finally, a summary highlights the place of this *Handbook* in the context of schools' efforts to involve families meaningfully in the education process.

A handbook should be judged by its utility, readability, conceptual coherence, and perhaps most importantly, by what its authors promise. Based on those criteria, the *Handbook of School–Family Partnerships* is a success. The editors, Christenson and Reschly (2010), claim that this book is "appropriate for researchers, instructors, and graduate students" (p. i) in multiple related fields. This reviewer would like to add school administrators and teachers to that list. Clearly several chapters are not written for school personnel, particularly for

those individuals who are not research-savvy. However, the *Handbook* provides many evidence-based suggestions for improving the learning environment and guidance on where to find more information. Because school personnel were not identified by the authors, later comments about a specific chapter not being appropriate for school personnel should not be taken as criticism, but rather as guidance for the reader.

The prescribed audience will find the *Handbook* readable. Generally speaking, the writing is of high quality. However, its readability is also due to the efforts of the editors. Most importantly, the editors selected writers with valuable experience and detailed familiarity with their subject matter. It appears that having selected and successfully recruited noted authors, they chose not to constrain those authors in their writing.

As one of the contributing authors, Carlson, noted, "there is a remarkable consensus across the chapters in this volume" (p. 407). It is remarkably coherent for an edited book, in spite of the editors' assertion that the authors were given great freedom in the structure and content of their chapters. This is perhaps a result of the editors' selection process. The authors often draw upon similar theories or refer to similar practice strategies as the foundation for their discussions. Prominent examples include Bronfenbrenner's Developmental/ Ecological Model, the EcoFIT intervention model, the resiliency literature, and the strengths perspective. Although this results in some redundancy, the overall effect is positive. The repetition gives the reader a common yet broad knowledge base and perspective from which to understand the content.

Balancing that convergence are remaining differences in terminology and conceptualization. Some authors focus on the older and more specific construct of parent involvement (in their children's education) while others focus on school–family partnerships and still others on family, school, and community partnerships. As the authors often note, these differences are not simply semantic. Fortunately, most of the authors, per encouragement from the editors, have taken pains to define their terms, providing needed guidance to newer professionals in this field.

There are three recurring issues which, if addressed differently, would result in a stronger text. First, it would have been helpful to include brief introductions to each of the three sections of the *Handbook*: Theoretical and Empirical Bases of Partnerships; Partnerships Across Development; and Driving the Research Agenda to Inform Policy and Practice. The rationale for the location of some chapters is less obvious than others and having an overarching view of what each section is presenting would alleviate some of that confusion. Second, in light of the fact that this text is designed for researchers, a more consistent use of effect sizes or at least addressing effect sizes linguistically (e.g., modest

effect size) would provide readers with greater specificity in understanding the size of relationships discussed. Finally, several authors utilize the term "diversity" in an inaccurate manner. Diversity is a contextual term meaning variety. No one is diverse in an absolute sense. One only adds diversity when one is different from the norm or most common characteristic of a group. Thus, an African American student in a largely White school is contributing to the diversity of that school, but the same student in a largely African American school is not. More than once, diverse was used as a synonym for people of color.

Section I: Theoretical and Empirical Bases of Partnerships

In chapter one, Downer and Myers provide an important foundation and context to more fully understand the chapters that follow. Most significantly in the context of this *Handbook* are their definitions of key terms and descriptions of basic assumptions of Brofenbrenner's Developmental/Ecological Model as it is applied to school–family partnerships. The definitions are clear and straightforward, allowing a reader who is not familiar with either the model or General Systems Theory (from which it emerged) to understand the basic theoretical ideas on which much of the rest of the *Handbook* is based. Additionally, they address how this model helps explain the development of school–family partnerships over time, how the model is relevant to current political and demographic trends, and how it may be best used to structure future research.

Downer and Myer's overview is followed by Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, and Ice's presentation of a "model of the parent involvement process" (p. 38). This model is of great potential use to researchers and could be used to link the results of disparate studies into a more comprehensible whole. The authors provide research-based support for some of the proposed relationships and theoretical support for most of the rest. However, it would have been helpful in some places for the authors to more clearly delineate evidence-based support from theoretical propositions.

In spite of an unfortunate opening paragraph in which the authors rely on an online dictionary definition to begin their conversation about relationships, Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods provide a very readable and conceptually strong exploration of many of the essential concepts involved in school–family partnerships in chapter three. For example, when discussing "trust" (p. 66), the authors first reference supportive research to establish relevance. They then explain how trust potentially evolves and how it transitions from an element of social capital (a relational construct) to human capital (an internalized quality). This chapter also builds nicely on chapter one, using several of the defined constructs (e.g., mesosystem) and expounding further on them.

Chapters four and five are devoted to discussing diversity and cultural distinctions among and between families and the implications for school professionals, and to a lesser degree, researchers. Too often, highlighting diversity is lauded as a positive without an informed and meaningful discussion of how people are different and what the implications are. Okagaki and Bingham avoid these pitfalls in chapter four. They identify critical issues (e.g., literacy development) in which parents of different cultural backgrounds meaningfully differ, give specific examples to support their assertions, and root the discussion in relevant research. An example of one of these cultural differences is how low socioeconomic status (SES) families emphasize literacy skills as compared to middle class parents. Low SES parents gave greater emphasis to basic literacy skills (e.g., learning the alphabet) while middle class parents tried to expose children to literacy activities (e.g., parents reading to children) and emphasized enjoyment of reading. In chapter five, Hill tackles the broader topic of culturally based worldviews. Although she is not able to be as specific in her examples, Hill also addresses content that is critical for teachers and administrators to understand. For example, African American families send their children to an educational system mostly administered by White professionals. Within that setting, African American "authoritarian and no-nonsense" (p. 107) discipline often strikes White teachers as overly harsh. Hill offers beneficial explanations for that discipline, such as its rootedness in African culture, spirituality, and the realistic assessment of parents that their children are less likely to be given "second chances" for inappropriate behavior.

Section II: Partnerships Across Development

Dearing and Tang, in chapter six, structure their discussion of the home learning environment around a conceptual model of that environment. This model is largely compatible with the model of the parent involvement process proposed in chapter two, albeit more specific. Throughout the chapter each of the major constructs is explored in detail, with cross references to theoretical underpinnings and past research. This chapter is designed primarily for researchers. However, Dearing and Tang emphasize key, research-supported constructs in a manner that school professionals will find useful, suggesting how to engage parents and to encourage them in effectively supporting their children's learning at home. One example is that when parents both teach reading skills and share book reading, their children have better long-term outcomes than those parents who only do one or the other.

Reynolds and Shlafer present the results of a study of the Chicago Child–Parent Center Program (CPC) and generalize those results, along with some

related research, to communicate how parent involvement is and is not beneficial in preschool. They are very careful in their conclusions to clarify the manner in which parent involvement is beneficial (as an indirect effect) and the limitations of parent involvement research (e.g., lack of consensus in defining parent involvement). This chapter provides useful information for researchers and theorists. It may be more difficult, however, for school professionals to utilize directly.

In chapter eight, Ginsburg-Block, Manz, and McWayne discuss a three factor model of family involvement that is empirically derived and verified. The factors are home-based involvement, school-based involvement, and home–school communication. This chapter has several strengths worth noting. The authors are very specific in describing the effect sizes of the relationships between family involvement and parent outcomes, child academics, and other relevant child behaviors (e.g., school attendance). Moreover, specific cultural differences regarding the types of family involvement most closely related to positive outcomes are discussed, along with empirical support and plausible interpretations.

Although Webster-Stratton and Reid address how to improve school readiness broadly, chapter nine is more an in-depth case study of one particular program, the Incredible Years Parent, Teacher, and Child Training Series (IY). The level of program detail provides the reader a very clear picture of IY and provides anyone who is considering such a program with enough information to make an informed decision about it. This clarity is facilitated undoubtedly by one of the authors also being the developer of IY. The authors provide empirical support for most of their assertions. In other cases, they appear to be speaking from relevant experience. These two, combined, result in a convincing case for the program, however it would be clearer to distinguish between empirical and anecdotal evidence and to also address effect sizes.

Stormshak, Dishion, and Falkenstein present the EcoFIT Model in chapter 10, an intervention approach that targets the entire family. As implied by the name EcoFIT, the model is flexible. As the authors explain, "we tailor our interventions with children and families to fit their current family circumstances" (p. 231). The idea behind this strategy, that treatment is more effective when individualized, both makes intuitive sense and is supported by intervention research. However, the strength of the program is also a challenge to explain parsimoniously. An intervention that varies substantially based on individual circumstances is by nature diffuse. The authors partially overcome this challenge by explaining the philosophy behind the EcoFIT Model and the core components of it and by providing one or two strong examples. Additional examples to illustrate other nuances of the model would have gone even further in overcoming those challenges.

In chapter 11, Albright and Weissberg provide a broad overview of existing programs designed to promote social and emotional learning in children. Examples of social and emotional learning include improved self-esteem and pro-social behavior. This chapter includes two very helpful tables, one listing specific programs, another specifying the qualities a program should have. Unfortunately, in some parts of the chapter the authors rely on generalizations that are only beneficial to someone entirely new to this field of study.

McNeely, Whitlock, and Libbey begin by identifying their goals for chapter 12: defining school connectedness; explaining its relationship to school–family partnerships; and finally, identifying the circumstances in which it fosters positive outcomes. Using the authors' stated goals as criteria for judging, this chapter is a success. Of particular interest is the discussion of how to define school connectedness. Many researchers offer definitions focused on students' quality of performance or behavioral measures that result from feelings of affiliation with the school. A second school of thought treats social connectedness as a psychological state. The authors present a convincing argument for the latter definition and use it effectively throughout this chapter.

Kaiser and Stainbrook convey an array of useful information in chapter 13 regarding how families and schools can work together to support children with disabilities, primarily disabilities associated with communication skills in preschool children. Noteworthy among that information are a brief history, the use of the overarching Collaborative Communication Model, and thought-provoking explorations of issues such as naturalistic interventions, dosage, and the generalization of skills. However, when discussing empirical support for the interventions, the authors are sometimes unnecessarily vague, providing only a statement that an intervention is recognized as effective rather than any specifics as to how. Unlike most of this *Handbook*, this chapter is probably of greater use to practitioners than researchers.

In chapter 14, Lohman and Matjasko tackle the issues of adolescent developmental tasks and how parents and schools can work together to increase their chance of success. They cover a variety of interrelated issues including sleep patterns, brain development, alcohol and drug use, various types of relationships, identity development, and gender and ethnic differences. The entire discussion is framed in the context of systems theory. Lohman and Matjasko do an exceptional job of explaining subtle yet meaningful developmental issues and distinctions in very accessible language. For example, "For low-income inner-city boys, school engagement was greater when parental monitoring was high; but for girls, school engagement depended on both high parental monitoring and high family cohesion" (p. 314). Finally, they consistently support their assertions with relevant research.

Section III: Driving the Research Agenda to Inform Policy and Practice

Chapter 15 is particularly relevant to school professionals. Mapp and Hong have a two-fold purpose to both convince readers that the idea of "hard-to-reach parents" (p. 345) is a myth and to promote ideas about how to cultivate relationships with those who have been categorized as such. The most convincing argument they make to debunk that myth is the distinction they draw between viewing families as either assets or deficits. To further illustrate their assertions, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association is effectively used as a case study. Unfortunately, the authors undercut the strength of their argument by the repeated use of universalizing language such as "all families care deeply about their children's education" (p. 347) when "nearly all" is more accurate and still debunks the myth.

In chapter 16, Dunst and Trivette discuss different types of help-giving practices and their relationships to several measures of parent, family, and child functioning, as informed primarily by their own research. One enlightening result of their study was the identification of two clusters (presumably informed through factor analysis) of helping behaviors: relational practices such as affirming, and participating practices such as empowering. Several tables at the end of the chapter nicely supplement the text in the results section.

Smrekar, Cohen-Vogel, and Lee present a typology of school–family relations in chapter 17. The four-model typology is based on how schools attempt to engage parents in the educational process. Overall they provide clear expectations of all four models: Cooptation, Management, Engagement, and Coalition. This is further clarified by useful tables and detailed examples. Two minor issues detract from an otherwise very informative chapter. First, a clearer distinction could be made between the Engagement and Coalition models. Second, Accelerated Schools are described differently in the text and Table 17.2.

Chapter 18 is entitled "Future Directions in Family-School Partnerships," and Carlson aptly identifies important trends as well as topics that have been neglected (e.g., clearly defining "family"). However, this chapter may be even more valuable as a history of cultural ideas leading up to the present and how those ideas shape professional interaction with families. Just a few examples include the shift from modernism to postmodernism, how early social work practice foreshadowed systems and ecological theory, and why it matters that 40% of students but only 17% of teachers are people of color.

In chapter 19, Beretvas, Keith, and Carlson outline for researchers a variety of interrelated research analysis methods and strategies, most utilizing structural equation modeling (SEM). To a reader entirely unfamiliar with SEM this

will be difficult reading, although this is simply the nature of the topic and in no way the fault of the authors. The authors stick largely to the conceptual aspects of SEM and their application to analyzing school–family partnerships. They rightly refer readers to other sources for specific programming issues. As someone with a modest familiarity with SEM, I found the explanations to be clear, succinct, and highly instructive. In fact, this chapter could be used as a brief planning guide for using SEM, regardless of specific content.

The final two chapters are each devoted to summarizing broad themes and suggesting emerging trends or visions for the immediate future. Weiss and Stephen, in chapter 20, address broad structural problems that make the formation of strong school–family relationships difficult. For example, the fragmentation of programs nationwide is partially due to how money is allocated at the federal level through multiple small bills that typically are passed in isolation from one another. In spite of solid writing, it is a little challenging to follow all the specific programs and policies they discuss—a fact that actually supports the authors' point. To conclude the chapter the authors discuss how research, practice, and policy could ideally converge.

In the final chapter, Tolan and Woo address the needs of high stress, low income schools; highlight some key generalizations, such as the need to emphasize the quality of parent–teacher interactions over quantity; and give examples of successful programs. Furthermore they address the shifting needs of children as they move through the educational process. Uniting these disparate pieces of information is the overarching goal of shifting the mindset of all involved from deciding whether parents and schools should partner to how they should partner. Ideally they would like to see a future in which families and schools view their respective roles only in the context of each other, as they are naturally viewed through the lens of systems theory and ecological theory.

Conclusion

Christenson and Reschly identified three purposes for this volume: reviewing current theory and research; advancing the momentum of evidence-based interventions; and delineating the next steps for research, policy, and practice. The first and third are certainly achieved in the *Handbook*. This volume is quite thorough in addressing theory and research in both breadth and depth. Additionally, the third section of the *Handbook* provides many theoretically rooted and empirically informed recommendations for future research, policy, and practice. The second purpose, advancing momentum, is harder to judge, only because success is defined by how others respond to this volume. However, if the ideas in the *Handbook* are implemented, school–family partnerships will

be more cohesive, more affirming, and—most importantly—more effective in propelling children to greater academic success.

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Book Review of *Preparing Educators to Engage Families: Case Studies Using an Ecological Systems Framework*

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Key words: family, engagement, ecological systems framework, book review, parents, involvement, diversity, Harvard Family Research Project, case studies, teacher preparation, preparing educators, engaging families, practices

Preparing Educators to Engage Families: Case Studies Using an Ecological Systems Framework is in its second edition. The first edition was entitled *Preparing Educators to Involve Families: Theory to Practice.* Notable in the second edition's title is the word change from *involving* families to *engaging* families. The change in wording is important, as involvement often implies one-way communication from the school toward the family, and engagement denotes a much richer concept in which a reciprocal and dynamic relationship exists between schools and families. Specifically, the book presents family engagement as a shared responsibility of parents, educators, and community entities. Such shared responsibility is co-constructed over time (birth to adulthood) and across a variety of contexts. These contexts go beyond the home and school to include a broader group including community centers, libraries, after-school programs, faith-based institutions, and so on.

The casebook is authored by Heather Weiss, Holly Krieder, Elena Lopez, and Celina Chatman-Nelson. Three of the authors are currently or were previously associated with the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP). The lead author, Heather Weiss, is the founder and director of HFRP. The authors' experience and background in carrying out research on family engagement brings unique and authentic perspectives to the casebook. The authors' membership

in the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Research Network on Successful Pathways Through Middle Childhood provided the data sources for the book's development. The research data was based upon a longitudinal mixed method study of about 400 low income children from the elementary grades (K–5) located in three separate sites across the country. In particular, research from one case study of a "subsample of 23 early grade children and their primary caregivers, teachers, and schools" provide the basis for most of the cases (Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman-Nelson, 2009, p. xiii).

The authentic cases represent critical issues and dilemmas faced by families and educators today. The families featured in the cases are those whom are traditionally left underserved by schools: low income, ethnic minorities, and culturally and linguistically diverse. The focus on diverse families allows for the examination of issues such as race, culture, and class divisions and their resulting impact on school–family relationships.

Theoretical Perspectives

The book uses a framework of family engagement based on research from HFRP. The framework is composed of three key components: (1) Family engagement is a shared responsibility between the home, school, and community and is shaped by communication and interactions between these groups. Some families will find it easier to interact with schools than others and not all families interact in the same way; (2) Family engagement is ongoing throughout a child's lifetime and varies over time. Research shows that families can play a significant role in children's education and have many positive effects; and (3) Family engagement takes place in a variety of settings/contexts including the home, school, and community (HFRP, 2005). The book emphasizes the fact that family engagement is best studied within a variety of contexts and settings rather than viewed as a series of isolated events.

The casebook is 164 pages in length with a total of 10 chapters. Five of the chapters present theoretical perspectives related to family engagement, and five chapters contain 12 case studies tied to the theoretical perspectives presented. A total of seven theoretical perspectives about family engagement are presented throughout the book. They serve as lenses by which the case studies are to be analyzed. These perspectives include: children's motivation to learn; the impact of developmental disabilities on families; the social executive functioning model for managing children's lives; community support for learning; school-based family support; ecological understandings of children's developmental pathways; and the relationship between families, time, and learning.

The authors further organize the book's 10 chapters into five parts which directly correspond to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory framework: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Such organization allows the reader to further examine interactions among and between systems which may directly or indirectly influence children and families over time. For example, some case studies ask the reader to consider immediate contexts which directly impact children such as relationships between adults who teach and nurture children. Still other case studies consider economic policies (e.g., welfare) and their indirect impact on children's lives.

Teaching Cases

The race/ethnicities of the families included in the cases are Mexican American (immigrants), African American, Caucasian, Native American, and Cambodian (refugees). All involve students struggling academically and/or socially and need their families to be meaningfully engaged with the school.

Most of the featured families are also in need of community support to provide additional resources that can strengthen families' parenting skills and resources. Common to almost all cases presented is the deficit thinking that occurs by school personnel in their view towards poor minority families. Educators often view such families as unable or unwilling to positively impact their children's education. Also depicted throughout the cases is the inadequate communication and collaboration occurring between home, school, and community as well as the cultural mismatch taking place between immigrant families and the school.

The dilemmas faced by families in the cases are compelling and reflect real life situations which impact education. They include engaging families in placement decisions related to bilingual and special education; motivating disengaged students to learn; linking families in crisis with appropriate community agencies for support; supporting low income, single parent families struggling to balance work and parenting; effects of race and class on students' school experiences; and consideration of how immigrants' and refugees' homeland and neighborhood contexts shape family engagement in schools and aspirations for higher education.

The teaching cases are particularly rich in detail due to the wide variety of character perspectives presented. The perspectives include those of the student, his or her teachers, parent(s), grandparent (s), principal(s), and/or social service representative(s). All educators will gain deep insight into families' thinking and be led to the realization that families often bring a unique perspective to school problems that differs greatly from the school's viewpoint.

The complicated nature of the cases and the related theoretical perspective takes the reader well beyond simple solutions. Readers must think at a high analytical level in an effort to fully comprehend the complexity of the cases and the intertwining issues.

Utility

The book is very relevant for today's educators as increasingly more and more students come from culturally and linguistically diverse families. As many as one in four children under the age of 18 have a parent who is a recent immigrant (Russell, 2010). School personnel are challenged to help all of their students be successful and to meaningfully engage all families. Therefore, it is imperative that educators (both practicing and preservice) and school leaders purposely examine their own individual and collective assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, practices, and behaviors towards culturally and linguistically diverse families and students. Such examination may reveal beliefs and biases toward poor or ethnically diverse families that create barriers to family engagement.

This book would serve as a useful reflection and discussion tool within an educator preparation program or a book study with practicing educators in a campus or district setting. It is designed to promote deep reflection, rich dialogue, and collaborative problem solving about key issues that confront diverse families resulting in their exclusion from schools. Such discussion is especially needed for those educators who may have little to no experience working in diverse settings with underserved families or those educators and schools who are currently unsuccessful in their attempts to meaningfully engage families in the school community.

A major strength of the book is that the authors designed the text to be a teaching tool. For readers unfamiliar with case methodology, the introductory section of the text includes a helpful section on how to use the casebook and the case method. Readers will find the discussion questions provided for each case invaluable. They follow a sequence specifically designed to promote a thought provoking group discussion and to ensure a thorough analysis of the rich dimensions within each case.

Conclusion

Professors, in particular, seeking a compelling and interesting text regarding family engagement should consider *Preparing Educators to Engage Families*. It can enhance existing courses or serve as a stand alone text for a specific course on family engagement. Students will find the text invaluable in terms of how

they will learn to respect all families and better understand other points of view, and they will learn to view families from a strength perspective as opposed to a deficit perspective. The strength perspective regards all families as having something valuable to offer their children, schools, and community.

The Harvard Family Research Project describes its mission as "to improve practice, intervention, and policy to support children's successful development from birth to adulthood" (Weiss et al., 2009, p. 160). Thoughtful readers of the text will be moved to support this mission. They will feel compelled to become advocates for all families and strive to improve their school's family engagement practices, intervene differently and more effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse families, and carefully examine and revise school polices to support families.

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