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ABSTRACT
              This study used an ethnographic approach to evaluate the
impact of the South Dakota Head Start/Public School Transition Demonstration
Project on school climate and parent involvement, focusing on the impact of
family service coordinators. The demonstration group was composed of children
and families who received comprehensive Head Start-like services in addition
to educational services, and the comparison group consisted of children and
families who received only educational services. Eight family service
coordinators maintained routine contacts with families and schools and
provided services directly to families or through referral to other agencies.
Comprehensive services included health, parent involvement, social, and
educational services related to transition from preschool to the public
elementary school. Data were collected in the spring of each year since 1993
from 200 of the 425 children in 2 cohorts who have received services. Data
were also collected through structured interviews and participant
observation. Results suggested that the family service coordinators have been
instrumental in creating a more open climate in demonstration schools.
Parents have become more involved in their children's education, have
improved interactions with school personnel, and have become more comfortable
in the schools. Because the school climate has become more open,
demonstration parents/caregivers have had more input into policy and school
activity decisions than comparison parents/caregivers. (Contains about 66
references.) (KB)

Improving School Climate: Creating A

Circle of Communication Between

Educators and Families

Paper Presented at the American Education Research Association

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Chicago, Illinois

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Abstract

Comprehensive Head Start-like services have been provided in six different South Dakota schools through implementation of the South Dakota Head Start/Public School Transition Demonstration Project. In 1993 an ethnographic evaluation began generating data. Results indicate that family service coordinators have been instrumental in creating a more open climate in demonstration schools. Parents have become more involved in their children's educational experiences, have improved interactions with school personnel, and have become more comfortable in the schools. Since the school climate is more open, demonstration parents/caregivers have more input into policy and school activity decisions than comparison parents/caregivers.

Improving School Climate: Creating A Circle of Communication

Between Educators and Families

As participant observer of an ethnographic study, I have made numerous visits to schools. The first time I visited each school I noted that each school had a different "feel." I began to wonder what comprised this "feeling" and why did it vary among the schools. As with all ethnographic data, a theory began to develop as common themes emerged. The theory seemed to identify a separate and very distinctive "climate" in each school. The paper herein will describe what is meant by school climate and present a theory which explains why school climates in this study vary.

School climate is defined in the literature as encompassing four different areas: (a) ecology represents the physical and material features of school buildings; (b) milieu is comprised of the personnel in the school; (c) social system is defined as the ways in which the school interacts with the members; and (d) culture is comprised of the values, beliefs, and norms of the school system members (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993; Miskel & Ogawa, 1988; Owens, 1991). Culture is the area that is the most frequently researched and is identified as having the greatest impact on climate (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993; Miskel & Ogawa, 1988; Owens, 1991). Kowalski and Reitzug (1993) stated that culture shapes both the character and the climate of an organization. Essentially, climate is the commonly held interpretations of culture. Culture establishes normative behavior for the members of organizations, and climate is the perceptions of those norms.

Howard, Howell, and Brainard (1987) defined school climate as the schools' "atmosphere for learning...the feeling people have about school and whether it is a place where learning can occur" (p. 5). In other words, it is what it "feels" like in a school. Hoy and Miskel defined school climate basically as a school's personality (1982).

Climate is often referred to as being on a continuum of open to closed, based on the degree to which an organization interacts with its external environment (Hoy & Miskel, 1982; Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). External environments include communities, local governments, and state governments. Schools are generally considered to be very open institutions but vary in their willingness to encourage employee or organizational interactions.

The literature stated that students' social development and academic achievement depended on a positive school climate (Howard et. al., 1987; Zeldin, 1990). Of the eighteen factors which the effective schools literature identified as comprising a healthy school climate, two relate to interactions with external environments: (a) effective communications and (b) involvement in decision making (Epstein, 1995; Funk & Brown, 1996; Griffith, 1996; Huffman, Benson, Gebelt, & Phelps, 1996; Keith, T. Z., Keith, P. B., Quirk, Cohen-Rosenthal, & Franzese, 1996; Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 1996; Moore & Brown, 1996; Rogers Tracy, 1995; Rosenthal & Young Sawyers, 1996; Sanders, 1996; Thompson, 1996; Vacha & McLaughlin, 1992; Vickers, 1994; Zeldin, 1990). Howard et al. described effective communications as communications which "enhance

interpersonal relationships among and between faculty, students, and parents"

(1987, p. 10). Involvement in decision making offers students, faculty, interested

parents, and others opportunities to improve schools. All persons affected by

school decisions should be provided with opportunities to offer suggestions,

according to Howard et al. (1987) and Zeldin (1990).

Most research has addressed the relationship between school climate and

school personnel commitment (Howard et al., 1987; Kelley et al., 1995; Kowalski &

Reitzug, 1993; Riehl & Sipple, 1996) or the relationship between school climate and

change (Darling Hammond, 1988; Howard et al., 1987; Miskel & Ogawa, 1988; Zeldin,

1990). Seefeldt, Galper, and Denton (1996) in their study of the Maryland Head

Start/Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Project, however,

analyzed the relationship among school climate, parental characteristics and belief

systems, and parent involvement in school. Seefeldt et al. indicated that parents'

perceptions of school climate predicted how often parents participated in school

activities and how often parents volunteered in their children's schools. Seefeldt et

al. failed, however, to identify how the school climate differed between the

comparison and demonstrations schools and how the Maryland Head Start/Public

School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Project influenced school

climate.

Seldom has the relationship between school climate and the role of school-

family-agency liaisons been studied. Liaisons have been identified in the literature

as improving school communications between schools and homes (Allen,

Thompson, & Drapeaux, 1996; Berrick & Duerr, 1996; Chrispeels, 1996; Davis, 1989;
Fowler & Klebs Corley, 1996; Huffman et al., 1996; Montgomery Halford, 1996;
Lueder, 1989; Rogers Tracy, 1995; Sanders, 1996; Stallings, 1995; Zigler & Muenchow,
1992; Zigler & Styfco, 1993). Chrispeels described the functions of home-school
liaisons as people who "bring the school to parents who are reluctant to come to
school" (1996, p. 192). Simply having an "open door," according to Rogers Tracy, is
not enough to encourage family involvement (1995). As stated earlier,
communication and involvement are two characteristics of a healthy school
climate.

How do school climates differ between comparison and demonstration
schools? How does school climate relate to parent involvement in schools in the
South Dakota Head Start/Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration
Project? What is the impact of family service coordinators on school climate?
These are the questions which have guided the formation of the paper herein. We
will describe the context of the research project, analyze the data, and discuss the
results.

<p style="text-align:center">NTP as Context</p>

Head Start, a preschool program that has provided comprehensive services to
children and families for over thirty years, has recently been expanded into
selected elementary schools through implementation of the National Head
Start/Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Project (NTP). In
September of 1991, the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF)

awarded thirty-two grants to community based consortiums. The consortiums were responsible for designing and implementing approaches that would successfully support children and families as they left Head Start and began their early elementary (kindergarten to third grade) experience. The consortium partners are a local Head Start agency, local education agencies, and a local higher education institution.

In accordance with the Federal Register, each NTP site selected two groups of participants: (a) a demonstration group composed of children and families who receive comprehensive Head Start-like services in addition to the educational services provided by their local education agency, and (b) a comparison group composed of children and families who receive only the educational services provided by their local education agency (ACYF, 1991). The NTP is testing the hypothesis that providing continuous comprehensive services to former Head Start children as they move from kindergarten through third grade will maintain and enhance the early benefits attained by the Head Start children and their families (Kennedy, 1993). A second cohort of kindergarten children was added in the fall of 1993, and at the present, Cohort II children are in the third grade.

<div align="center">SDTP as Context</div>

South Central Child Development, Inc., which provides Head Start services to children and families in a sixteen county area in south central South Dakota, is the grantee for the Head Start/Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Project (SDTP) within the state. Consortium partners are nine local

education agencies located throughout the South Central Child Development, Inc. (SCCD) service area and the University of South Dakota's Educational Research and Service Center. The Educational Research and Service Center (ERSC) conducts an independent evaluation of the SDTP through a contractual agreement with SCCD. Of the nine local education partners (school districts), four are SDTP demonstration sites only, three are comparison sites only, and two that contain multiple elementary buildings serve as both demonstration and comparison sites.

The SDTP sites are located primarily in rural nonadjacent counties. Butler Flora et al. (1992) defined rural and nonadjacent counties as counties that do not have places of 2,500 or more population and are not adjacent to a metropolitan county. Two South Dakota sites are located in less urbanized nonadjacent counties. Less urbanized nonadjacent counties are counties with an urban population of 2,555 to 19,999 and not adjacent to a metropolitan county (Butler Flora et al., 1992). The majority of the population are Caucasian Americans (60%-75%) with Native American children and families the majority of the remainder (20%-35%). About one-fourth of the families in the area could be identified as low-income recipients, and single parents head about one-third of the households.

The elementary schools vary in size and composition of students. Some schools include pre-school through high school, some are only kindergarten through fifth grade, and some have primarily Native American students. School sizes range from about fifty students to about 600. On the average, about 225 Cohort I students have received services and about 200 Cohort II students continue to

receive SDTP comprehensive services. Of the children enrolled in the SDTP, 110 Cohort I and 90 Cohort II students are part of the NTP Core Data Set. The NTP Core Data Set is collected in the spring of each year.

<div align="center">Comprehensive Services as Context</div>

Comprehensive Head Start-like services are provided to SDTP demonstration participants by eight family service coordinators (FSCs). The FSCs provide the services either through referrals to local and regional agencies or through direct service. The FCSs maintain routine contacts with families and schools in an effort to improve communication between homes and schools, help families gain access to needed resource/service agencies, assist teachers/administrators to develop relationships with service providers, and provide other support as needed and/or possible that will allow parents/caregiver to enhance their role in their children's school experience. All the comprehensive services are provided at no cost to the demonstration families participating in the SDTP. During the 1996-1997 school year, limited social services have been extended to include at-risk students outside of Cohort II. The at-risk students are usually referred to the FSCs by principals, teachers, or counselors.

Delineation and descriptions of the comprehensive services are taken from the Head Start Transition Project Parent Handbook (South Central Child Development, Inc. 1996). The comprehensive services can be broken down into the following four components:

1. The health component consists of vision, hearing, and growth assessment

screenings, biennial physical exams, assessments of children's immunization status, support for bringing immunizations up-to-date, dental exams and limited follow-up appointments, mental health consultations (when deemed appropriate or necessary), and nutrition. The nutrition component is subdivided into assessment of children's dietary habits and dietician referral if necessary, provision of milk to children in the demonstration site classrooms, and limited dollars for actual developmental appropriate "hands-on" food activities in the classroom.

2. The parent involvement component is comprised of (a) monthly home visits which focus on meeting the needs of the families, (b) family support plans which are developed based on needs assessments, (c) monthly parent meetings, (d) involvement of parents on SDTP governing board, (e) locating resources to meet family needs, (f) resource information provided to parents at home visits, and (g) encouraging the cooperative relationship between parents/caregivers and schools.

3. The social service component, while smaller in scope than the other components, is of vital importance to families at or near the poverty level. The component consists of providing resources guides/materials, and assisting parents/caregivers in locating needed resources.

4. The education component consists of the transfer of information from Head Start to the public schools (with parents'/caregivers' permission), training teachers in the use of developmentally appropriate classroom practices (DAPs), and transition plan development which includes teachers, parents, and FSCs.

Theoretical Framework

The study described herein was designed to provide descriptive and interpretive data on the implementation of the NTP in South Dakota. Data will be used to "explain" or assist in understanding the quantitative results of the NTP Core Data Set. The NTP Core Data Set is comprised of standardized assessments which are administered yearly to the children and the children's parents, teachers, and principals at all thirty-one sites.

The process of program implementation in South Dakota as well as the problems and solutions to those problems are issues we are concerned with. A phenomenological perspective will help us to understand the experiences of the actors (families and school personnel) involved in the SDTP. Understanding the experiences will provide insight into what the SDTP means to families and teachers. Interpretivism maintains that human phenomena can best be understood as social constructions of meaning (Greene & McClintock, 1991). "One individual's perceptions of meaning in a given setting is likely to differ from another's, and representing both is needed for an understanding of the whole" (Greene & McClintock, 1991, p. 14). Understanding the meanings participants from different SDTP sites attach to certain events will help us to understand the experiences of all the participants as a whole.

Ethnography has been chosen as the framework because of its holistic approach. The "whole view" will help understand the intended and unintended consequences of various interaction patterns occurring as a result of SDTP

implementation. According to the research, ethnography can offer implicit or explicit explanations to account for interaction patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Fetterman, 1989; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1979, 1980). Greene and McClintock (1991) and Knapp (1995) suggest that comprehensive collaborative services for children and families should be studied within an ethnographic framework. Greene and McClintock (1991) proposed that the problems of previous Head Start research arose from the quantitative methodologies and the narrow focus on IQ and academic achievement. Multifaceted programs such as Head Start and the SDTP vary across settings and benefits differ among participants.

Ethnographers are being used more frequently in educational evaluation than they have been used in the past (Greene & McClintock, 1991; Hess, 1992; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, 1984; Worthen & Sanders, 1991). According to LeCompte and Goetz, the reasons for the increase are due to the growth of educational ethnography and the limitations of quantitative research designs (1982). Hess states that the strength of ethnographic research lies in its descriptions of local situations (1992). Descriptions of policy implementation explain how policies are implemented, why actors in the implementation process are acting as they are, and why policies are or are not successful (Hess, 1992; Peshkin, 1993).

Data Generation

Ethnographic data collection techniques, both interactive and noninteractive strategies, are used at the SDTP site. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) describe

ethnographic data collection methods as being on a continuum of interactive to noninteractive. Pelto and Pelto define interactive strategies as methods which involve interactions between researcher and participant (1978). Noninteractive methods are less obtrusive and less reactive (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Interactive strategies used in the SDTP ethnographic study are participant observations, structured interviewing, and unstructured interviewing. Noninteractive methods used are content analyses of human artifacts.

The structured interviews utilize protocols developed at the SDTP site and are unique to the site. The protocols evoke open-ended responses and are given once yearly to demonstration and comparison participants. Utilizing comparison participants assists in searching for disconfirming evidence. Since only one ethnographer generates the data, the structured interviews help to compare responses across SDTP sites. Firestone and Herriott suggest that using a single investigator and standardized "instruments" increases reliability of the study (1984). The number of people interviewed each year has varied as the SDTP moves through the school system. About 300 structured interviews have been recorded since SDTP implementation.

Unstructured interviews take place as need or opportunity presents itself. Unstructured interviews help clarify what I have observed or define the meaning of events that have taken place in the sites. The interviews are usually recorded as part of the field notes and expanded on after leaving the field.

I spend on the average of two days per week in the field for about two to four

months each year "shadowing" FSCs as they go about their work. I shadow the FSCs to learn what they do, how they do it, why they do it, problems they encounter while implementing the SDTP, and solutions they develop for the problems. Participant observations are scheduled in advance and are rarely unannounced, as recommended by the literature (Agar, 1986; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1979, 1980). Unscheduled observations are limited to impromptu visits at the schools during the time spent shadowing FSCs. Restricting observations to scheduled visits prevents my knowing a "typical day in the life of a FSC," but it would be impossible to observe the family service coordinators any other way. On an average day, a FSC may visit between eight to ten different homes, numerous community agencies, and one or two schools. It would be next to impossible locate FSCs over the vast sparsely populated area they cover. Several FSCs travel from fifty to one hundred miles round-trip every day.

Sketchy notes are taken during convenient times in the field. Notes are never taken during home visits, because I feel it would be distracting and take away from the conversational quality of the visit. Note taking is also not done during school visits for a number of reasons: (a) I am very often an active participant in the classroom food activities that are presented by FSCs, (b) note taking and preparing food at the same time are impossible, and (c) note taking is distracting to students. My goal is to be as unobtrusive in the classrooms as possible.

One of the times note taking is possible in the field is when I ride with FSCs.

As stated earlier, there is a considerable amount of travel time between home and school visits due to the sparse population of South Dakota. The time spent in FSCs' cars traveling between homes, agencies, and institutions allows time to build rapport with FSCs and provides opportunities for spontaneous interviews. The presence of FSCs allows me to check the accuracy of my observations and meaning assigned to the observations. The field notes are expanded to include descriptions, observations, and personal reflections when I return home.

The collection of artifacts includes journals written by FSCs at my request, written communication between schools and parents/caregivers, printed materials distributed by community agencies, and printed materials distributed by FSCs to families and schools. Journals help provide insight into program implementation and help to understand the perspectives of FSCs.

I use the HyperRESEARCH computer program as a tool to help make sense of the data (Researchware, Inc. 1994). It facilitates data reduction through coding procedures and theory development through the use of bolean statements. Data analysis began with the onset of data collection and is ongoing. Common themes emerge when datum incidents are assigned a descriptive or directional code, as suggested by the literature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Datum incidents may be as small as one sentence or as large as several paragraphs.

Data are triangulated through multiple data generation methods and multiple data sources. According to the literature, triangulation is useful to

discover and corroborate the meaning assigned to lived experiences by the actors

(Adler, P. A. & Adler, P., 1994; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Janesick, 1994; LeCompte &

Preissle, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Smith & Robbins, 1984).

<u>Restricted Access</u>

The spread-out nature of the South Dakota site, inclement weather, and

graduate student status of the ethnographer have restricted time in the field. I was a

graduate student and only able to work part-time on data generation from June,

1993, until the fall of 1996. At that time, I was hired full-time. Multiple data

generation methods and length of the study help to compensate for reduced time in

the field. I have not been able to move past the "outsider" status in all the

communities, especially in the Native American community. Research debates

whether one is ever able to gain "insider" knowledge of these communities

(Stanfield, 1994).

<u>Perspectives of Co-Authors and Bias Checks</u>

The article herein represents the combined efforts of the co-authors. The

multi-disciplinary backgrounds of the co-authors enrich the ethnographer's

interpretations and serve to check biases of the ethnographer. The disciplinary

backgrounds of the co-authors in early-childhood education, elementary education,

special education, teacher education, program implementation, and educational

evaluation combine with my background in sociology and research to enhance

"Verstehen" or understanding (Weber, 1904/1949). As ethnographer, I have been

primarily responsible for the design and implementation of the ethnographic study.

The paper herein uses the "I" voice of the ethnographer as well as the "We" voice of the co-authors. The use of "active voice," "first person," and "present tense," are consistent with ethnographic research (Adler, P. A. & Adler, P., 1994; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Greene & McClintock, 1991; Hess, 1992; Janesick, 1994; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, 1984; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Spradley, 1979, 1980; Worthen & Sanders, 1991).

I utilize an additional bias check during data generation that is suggested by the literature (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Kirk & Miller, 1986; Spradley, 1979; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The bias check involves recording my feelings and assumptions as "observer comments" in a journal. The journal serves to document my thought processes during data generation and helps me to "know" and to "understand" my perspectives, logic, and assumptions.

Results

The atmosphere in most demonstration schools was described as being more "comfortable," "open," and "non-threatening." The dominant interpretation that demonstration parents/caregivers used to account for changes in school climate was the belief that schools are "more open to parents because of the Project." While the atmosphere differed among the demonstration schools, it seemed to be based on the degree to which the schools utilized the FSCs. Schools which utilized FSCs to a greater extent were described by parents/caregivers as being more open.

There was widespread agreement among the parents/caregivers that "parents feel more comfortable in the classrooms," and are "more apt to talk to the teachers."

Implementation of the SDTP and the work of FSCs have helped parents/caregivers feel more welcome in the classrooms and in the schools. Before the SDTP was implemented in demonstration schools, parents felt that teachers thought parents "were invading their territory." Since school environments are more "parent friendly" demonstration parents/caregivers have increased their involvement in the classrooms and in the schools.

Home School Link

The demonstration parents/caregivers saw their mode of behavior and positive change in school climate as a direct result of the SDTP, encouragement offered by FSCs, and the activities planned by FSCs. During home visits FSCs encourage parent/caregiver to become involved in the schools, and during school visits FSCs encourage school personnel to involve parents/caregivers in the classrooms and in the schools. Family service coordinators also help teachers and principals arrange classroom or school activities that involve parents/caregivers.

As stated earlier, at home visits FSCs also explain school materials that are sent to the parents/caregivers and serve as liaisons between the homes and schools. In their function as liaisons, FSCs make parents/caregivers aware of classroom/school activities and holidays, bring concerns of parents/caregivers to school personnel, and bring concerns of school personnel to parents/caregivers. Especially in their contacts with families without telephones, FSCs provide an invaluable service for both families and schools.

Communication to schools. As "links," FSCs provide parents/caregivers with

insight into what happens inside classrooms. Parents/caregivers enjoy the "reassurances that FSCs provide," the "assistance in talking to the teachers" plus the "second perspective of the classroom situations" offered by FSCs. "Some parents have very negative feelings about schools and feel that teachers are not treating their children fairly," stated one FSC. The second perspective helps parents understand classroom situations better. Often teachers only relate negative comments to parents/caregivers about their children. Parents/caregivers enjoy hearing positive remarks from FSCs and regard FSCs as "advocates" for their children.

"Being afraid to talk to the teachers" was a common awareness among the parents/caregivers. Family service coordinators help allay that fear by being more accessible to parents than the teachers and by offering encouragement. Some of the parents have become alienated from schools for one reason or another and require continued reassurance and urging by FSCs to visit schools. A quote from a parent whose child attends a demonstration school represents an example of how some parents/caregivers have become empowered because of the SDTP.

I found out that it is ok to walk into the school and talk to the teacher. I used to think that the parents could only come in when asked. I called the school the other day and talked to the teacher to ask her something. I would not have done that before.

Parents/caregivers stated that it was not easy to trust everyone with their concerns. The rapport that FSCs have built up between themselves and the

parents/caregivers provides that cushion of comfort parents/caregivers need to express their concerns both school related and non-school related. A quote from a FSC journal demonstrates how FSCs operationalize their liaison function and encourage parents. She said:

> One parent filled me in with everything that's wrong about...school. I could be a springboard for her to sound-off, but every item she talked about would have to be dealt with by classroom teachers or the administration. I hope parents don't think I'm avoiding helping them, but many times I encourage them to express their opinions to school administrators....It seems they'll speak freely to me in their homes, yet feel hesitant to express their opinions to the school.

Communication to homes. The dominant interpretation that school principals and teachers use to account for positive changes in school climate was the belief that "communication between homes and schools is facilitated because of the FSCs and the SDTP." There was widespread agreement between demonstration principals and teachers that they "know parents better" and that parents/caregivers are "observing their children more," "more aware of what their children are doing in school," and "spending more time with their children."

Both teachers and principals have utilized FSCs to help them understand students' behaviors. Teachers who are concerned about certain children ask FSCs whether they note any change in home situations that might initiate such behavior.

The FSCs then try to draw conversations with parents/caregivers to where they can mention the concerns and see what reactions the parents/caregivers have.

Family service coordinators are also utilized by schools to address children's tardiness, children's negative behavior, and school recommendations. "Parents are sometimes more receptive of taking the advice from FSCs," was a common perception of principals from demonstration schools. The following excerpt from a FSC journal illustrates how a principal has utilized a FSC's connection to a home:

> Mother works a variety of work shifts and the child goes to school and doesn't know where to go after school. The principal and I have talked about the problem but the problem seems to be getting more serious. The principal called and asked if I would talk to the parent and encourage the mother to send a note when the child is to go someplace other than home. It has become more responsibility than the school should have to assume.

All parents do not always understand materials that teachers and principals send to the homes. Family service coordinators, in their role as the communication link, help provide answers to the parents or let teachers or principals know of the problems so that they can address the issues. One teacher stated, "She [FSC] has come to me with parent's concerns, like one [parent] didn't understand inventive spelling, so I addressed inventive spelling in a newsletter and talked to parents about it at a monthly parent teacher meeting." When principals are aware of issues, they can solve the problems before the situations "get blown out of proportion." Principals agreed that parents often do not seek the principals until they are very

upset or angry. By then, the issues that could have been easily solved much earlier are difficult to deal with.

An example of why a communication link is needed is provided in the following cite from a parent who was asked what her opinion was of communication from the school. She said, "I get them but often I just throw them away, because I don't understand them." During home visits FSCs often explain materials sent home from the schools, add additional pamphlets to support the materials, and ask parents if they need additional information. This service is especially helpful for families who speak English as their second language.

Differences Between Comparison and Demonstration Families

Parents/caregivers whose children attend demonstration schools participate in classroom/school activities more frequently than parents/caregivers whose children attend comparison schools. Comparison parents/caregivers stated that they usually visit the school "about three to four times a year," whereas demonstration parents/caregivers stated that they usually visit the school "three to four times a month." Activities that the parents/caregivers participated in also varied between comparison and demonstration sites. Parents whose children attend comparison schools have visited schools for "parent-teacher conferences and school-wide activities [e.g., Christmas concerts and basketball games]," while parents whose children attend demonstration schools have visited schools for "parent-teacher conferences, school-wide activities, helping in classrooms, eating with their children, chaperoning field trips, helping in school libraries, attending parent

organizations [e.g. Parent Teachers Association and Parent Teacher Organization], and participating in school fund raising events.

Comparison parents/caregivers seemed less informed and less comfortable with schools than demonstration parents/caregivers. Comparison parents/caregivers agreed that school administrators seldom asked for their opinions on important school policy and activity decisions. They also seemed unsure of how to make their wishes known or whether their wishes even mattered; "They do what they want anyway not what the parents want."

Summary

Demonstration parents ("we feel welcome") and demonstration teachers and principals ("parents are welcome") made sense of their experiences in similar ways, and they shared a rationale for why the situation was as it was ("Project has helped"). It is these areas of shared meaning which give the demonstration parents/caregivers, principals, and teachers a sense of commonality and unity to their experience. These beliefs contributed to coordinated interaction in an aura of understanding among teachers, principals, and parents. To the outside observer the beliefs appeared to function in rule-like fashion and lent the schools' and demonstration parents'/caregivers' activities a programmed character.

With the comparison school personnel and parents/caregivers we see a different meaning system. To the school personnel their schools are "open to parents," yet to the comparison parents the schools are "not very open" and "not receptive of suggestions" from parents/caregivers. What comparison

parents/caregivers perceive and what the school personnel think parents/caregivers perceive are two very distinct and different realities. The shared belief of comparison parents/caregivers that "schools don't want parents or parents' opinions" functions to constrain school-related activities of the parents and helps to perpetuate teachers' negative attitudes of the parents. A shared belief of comparison teachers is that "parents are uninterested in their children's education." The belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as parents avoid involvement because they don't feel comfortable in the schools.

Discussion

Even when comparison school personnel believed they had a "friendly school climate," perceptions of parents/caregivers disagreed. Why do perceptions vary? Why do school climates vary? Our discussions will enlarge on our developing theory and answer the questions.

Perceptions vary because of the lack of communication between comparison school personnel and parents/caregivers. Without having FSCs as the communication link, comparison parents/caregivers are left to interpret the schools' "personalities" based on what their children tell them or on their past educational experiences. The literature indicated that parents' perceptions of school climate predicted how often parents volunteered in their children's schools (Ames, 1993; Seefeldt, 1996; Zeldin, 1990). Since comparison parents/caregivers perceive a negative climate in their schools, they are less involved in their children's

educational experiences and have less input into academic and activity decision making.

Another important dimension of home-school communication is its relationship to the academic success of children. The literature identified home-school communication as an important factor in the academic success of children (Bianchi, 1984; Vickers, 1994). Schools sometimes inappropriately assume parents will understand their messages, which has an adverse effect on home-school communication, according to Vickers (1994). Vickers added that educators are often unaware of how families differ in their interpretations and responses to school communications (1994). Parents are seldom apt to call schools for clarification and simply disregard or become irritated at the communications. Participants in our study related similar perceptions. Parents/caregivers disregarded school messages they could not understand.

Our theory, which is still evolving, suggests that school climates vary because schools vary in their degree of interaction with external environments. School climates were more open in demonstration schools which utilized FSCs to the greatest extent. In contrast, comparison parents/caregivers perceived their schools as not very open. Our theory corresponds with Halpin and Croft's study (as cited in Hoy & Miskel 1982) which suggests that climate is on a continuum of open to closed. The theory suggests that FSCs in their role of liaisons have helped improve communication and interactions between schools and homes, increase parent/caregiver involvement in the educational experiences of their children, and

strengthen parents'/caregivers' roles in school policy and activity decision making. The literature on school-home liaisons found similar positive results regarding the effects of liaisons on parent-school interactions and communication (Allen, Thompson, & Drapeaux, 1996; Berrick & Duerr, 1996; Chrispeels, 1996; Davis, 1989; Fowler & Klebs Corley, 1996; Huffman et al., 1996; Montgomery Halford, 1996; Lueder, 1989; Rogers Tracy, 1995; Sanders, 1996; Stallings, 1995; Zigler & Muenchow, 1992; Zigler & Styfco, 1993).

Significance of Study

In identifying an evolving theory on school climate, we hope to predict regularities in school personnel and parent/caregiver behavior. It is our goal to utilize the theory to stimulate and guide further research. While still in an embryonic stage, the theory can be useful. Theory, according to Hoy and Miskel (1982, p. 20), is "a set of interrelated concepts, assumptions, and generalizations that systematically describes and explains regularities in behavior in educational organizations." By describing the behavior of the teachers, principals, and parents in the SDTP, we can predict how other school personnel and families will act in similar circumstances.

As stated earlier, home and school interactions and communication, parent involvement, and parents' roles are improved through FSC efforts to bridge the communication gap between homes and schools. According to participants in the study, children in the SDTP should have a greater chance for academic success than

children in comparison schools. Improved communication should improve children's educational success and ultimately their life chances.

Understanding the perceptions of parents/caregivers will help researchers, practitioners, and policy makers interpret SDTP implementation results, problems, and provide suggestions for future programs. Learning what the context of SDTP has meant to parents/caregivers is fundamentally important to all SDTP participants.

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