Developing Authentic Family–School Partnerships in a Rural High School: Results of a Longitudinal Action Research Study

Kara Lasater

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to use an action research approach to improve family–school partnerships within one rural high school. The action research process occurred over three school years and involved multiple cycles of investigation. Each cycle of investigation involved an ongoing, iterative process of reflecting, planning, acting, and observing (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Data collection involved multiple iterations of surveys, focus groups, and interviews with parents and faculty members. Through the cycles of investigation, systems to support the development of family–school partnerships at the school were created, implemented, and refined. These systems involved proactive and ongoing communication with families, professional development for staff, ongoing data collection to monitor progress and improve school actions, and accountability and support from school administration. These systems, and the collaborative research process used to develop the systems, are discussed. Finally, areas of continued improvement—particularly related to the ideological development of school faculty—are identified and explored.

Key Words: family–school partnerships, trust, rural schools, high school, ideology, longitudinal action research, teacher professional development, continuous improvement process, systems, communication, community

Introduction

Union High School (UHS; pseudonym) is a small, rural school located in the Midwest. Like many rural schools (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Witte & Sheridan, 2011), Union was once considered the community pillar. For many families, Union was a source of pride and unity. Multiple generations of families were born and raised in the Union community and graduated from UHS. But over time, public trust in UHS seemingly eroded. Public disparagement on social media became more prevalent, and the school principal found himself spending more and more time meeting with parents to discuss their frustrations with the school. These frequent complaints left teachers and administrators feeling disrespected and demoralized and ultimately led to increased tension, hostility, and division between UHS families and faculty. This prompted school leadership to take action—not to improve test scores or improve public appearance, but to develop authentic partnerships with families that foster connections and cultivate a sense of community.

In 2015, I entered into a researcher–practitioner partnership with UHS to address this problem. The goals of the partnership were: (1) to examine the quality of family–school partnerships at UHS; (2) to use school data to craft family–school partnership systems; and (3) to provide ongoing professional development for Union faculty on the development of authentic family–school partnerships. In Lasater (2018), I discussed the researcher–practitioner partnership employed within this study—how it was developed, methodological and ethical considerations that arose throughout the partnership, and my unique positionality within it. This article is an extension of that work; its purpose is to describe the cycles of investigation used to examine parent and faculty perceptions of family–school partnerships at UHS and the school's ensuing actions aimed to improve family–school relationships. The findings of this study provide useful guidance for teachers and leaders working to improve family–school partnerships within their schools. Of particular importance is the need for schools to provide teachers with time and opportunities to critically self-examine their own beliefs, assumptions, and values that can support or hinder partnership development.

Trust in Schools

Like all public institutions, schools across the country experience more public scrutiny than ever before (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Diminished trust in public institutions is the result of larger economic, social, and political factors—factors which spurred the school accountability movement, created a more informed and critical public, and, ultimately, widened the gap between

families and schools (see Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Unfortunately, both educators and families may have reason to be distrustful.

While many teachers and leaders acknowledge the value of partnering with families, they also recognize that working with families creates challenges (Auerbach, 2010; Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010). Teachers and leaders are often reluctant to work with families due to the extra work involved in developing partnerships (Auerbach, 2010; Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010), concerns regarding families' capabilities and willingness to support their children's education (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Frank, 2005; Hill, Witherspoon, & Bartz, 2018), and fear of conflict that can arise as a result of working with families (Auerbach, 2010; Lazar & Slostad, 1999). Even more problematic is that educators' beliefs about parents' abilities to support their children (McDowall & Schaughency, 2017) and willingness to partner with parents (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010) are influenced by teachers' and leaders' perceptions of socioeconomic status (SES) and culture. Many educators demonstrate attitudes and beliefs that are based largely on stereotypical, deficit views of families, particularly families from poor and minority backgrounds (Gorski, 2016, 2018; Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2007). Deficit perspectives can lead educators to judge and blame families for their academic, social, and economic struggles and exacerbate educational inequities for students and families (Gorski, 2012; Hill et al., 2018; Lazar & Slostad, 1999). They also make it difficult for parents to trust educators.

However, parent behaviors may also contribute to the lack of trust between families and schools. According to Frank (2005), parents may express a desire for the school to show interest in their children while simultaneously interpreting the school's interest as a criticism of their parenting. They may also express a desire for frequent communication with the school, but only initiate communication with the school when a problem arises (Katyal & Evers, 2007). Even more problematic, parents sometimes advocate for their students by threatening and demanding that school personnel comply with their requests. This can lead teachers to fear and avoid relationships with parents (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Lasater, 2016). Ultimately, these types of parental behaviors can perpetuate the cycle of distrust.

The Promise of Family–School Partnerships

Fortunately, authentic family–school partnerships offer hope in the midst of eroding trust. Authentic partnerships are "respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups that value relationship building, dialogue, and power sharing as part of socially just, democratic schools" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 729). They have numerous academic benefits to students

(Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005), but perhaps more importantly, they are instrumental in the development of equitable, socially just schools (Auerbach, 2012; Theoharis, 2009). In contrast to the school–family relationships described above, authentic family–school partnerships are characterized by mutual trust and respect, caring relationships, social interaction, empowerment of families, inclusion, equity, and social justice (Auerbach, 2012; Bauch, 2001; Epstein, 2011; Theoharis, 2009).

The social connections, strong sense of place and belonging, deep historical roots in community, and intergenerational bonds that often exist within rural communities provide a strong foundation for building authentic partnerships (Bauch, 2001). But in order to capitalize on the advantages of the rural community, rural schools must enact programs, policies, and practices which support the development of authentic partnerships (Witte & Sheridan, 2011). Unfortunately, research on developing partnership programs, policies, and practices within rural schools is limited (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Research is needed that assists school leaders in crafting individualized partnership systems that support the vision and mission of their schools, cultivates trusting relationships between families and schools, and is responsive to the unique contextual needs of their students, families, schools, and communities (Auerbach, 2012). This article describes the collaborative research process used in one rural school to address this need and extends disciplinary knowledge on family–school partnerships within rural schools.

Union Case Description

Union High School is located within the town of Union (pseudonym), a small, rural community in the Midwest. Union is considered rural based on its small population (approximately 900 people) and geographic distance from the nearest metropolitan area (approximately 50 miles). Union School District (USD) is the only K–12 public school system in Union. USD consists of two schools: Union Elementary and Middle School (Grades PreK–8) and Union High School (Grades 9–12). The schools reside on separate campuses, and the superintendent is housed on the high school campus. UHS employs a total of 10 full-time teachers, three part-time teachers, one counselor, and one building administrator.

Between 2016 and 2018, total enrollment at Union High School fluctuated between 127 and 144 students. The racial makeup of students was White (92–95%), Native American (2–3%), African American (1–2%), Hispanic (1–2%), Pacific Islander (less than 1%), and multiracial (1–2%). In addition, 59%–62% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. During those three years, graduation rates ranged between 92%–97%.

The Union community is somewhat unique. In a town of only 900 people, there are two private, parochial schools accessible to USD families. One school is located directly within the city limits of Union and serves students in grades PreK–8. The other school is located approximately 10 miles outside of Union and serves students in grades PreK–12. While there are not overtly hostile relationships between schools, there are at times tensions that school administrators must navigate. For example, when disgruntled with their child's school, it is not an uncommon practice for parents to enroll (or threaten to enroll) their students in one of the other local institutions. This dynamic has created a school choice environment within the Union community, but only for families with the economic resources to access these choices.

In addition, there are clear economic divides within Union. On one side of the divide are families with relative wealth in the region. These families operate large, multigenerational farms or own local businesses, and many of these families enroll their children in the local parochial schools. Conversely, the other side of the divide is comprised largely of working class and low-income families. These families often work for the local business owners or farmers and enroll their children in USD. While relationships between families from various socioeconomic backgrounds are not antagonistic, the general perception exists that families with economic wealth have greater voice and influence within the school and community. This perception is consistently substantiated in the literature (Gorski, 2018; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and translates to "certain families" having the power and social capital necessary to leverage their interests, while others are unable to access these same privileges. Ultimately, these tensions contribute to mistrust and division within the Union community and challenge the development of family–school partnerships at UHS.

Positionality

My positionality within this study was unique and complex, and as a result, there were many ethical and methodological issues that arose throughout the researcher–practitioner partnership. An in-depth discussion of these issues is provided in Lasater (2018), and while I will not revisit all of these issues here, it is important to again describe my positionality. I was a former employee of the district, and I have close personal relationships with multiple members of the school staff, including members of the family–school partnership committee (described further in the "Year 2" section below). I also continue to live and raise my children within the district. In addition, as a university faculty member, my primary research interest centers on the development of family–school partnerships. I value family–school partnerships because of their potential to positively impact students and families; but even more importantly, I value

family–school partnerships because they create opportunities to build connection and develop a sense of belonging for all people. Thus, the improvement of family–school partnerships within the district was important to me on both a personal and professional level.

My role within the researcher–practitioner partnership was threefold. First, I was involved in all aspects of research design—including instrument development (e.g., surveys, interview protocols), data collection, and analysis. Second, I collaborated with UHS faculty to develop partnership systems during the family–school partnership committee meetings. The family–school partnership committee was tasked with supporting, monitoring, and improving the school's partnership efforts. I offered support and guidance during these meetings and actively assisted in the development of school partnership systems. Finally, I facilitated professional development with UHS faculty on the improvement of family–school partnerships.

Methods

This study utilized an action research approach that occurred in multiple cycles of investigation. Each cycle of investigation involved an ongoing, iterative process of reflecting, planning, acting, and observing (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Research questions used to guide this study included:
1. What are the perceptions of parents and faculty members regarding the quality of family–school partnerships at UHS?
2. What changes in practice could improve family–school partnerships at UHS?

For the purposes of this study, "parents" refers to any and all adults who assume caretaking responsibilities of students, and "faculty" refers to all certified employees at UHS.

Action research is the systematic investigation of contextually based problems of practice, and while the process is systematic, it is also complex and messy (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Unlike traditional research paradigms, which often involve a more linear process of design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, action research involves an "evolving methodology" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 96). In this study, insights from initial cycles of inquiry led to actions, and these actions dictated future methodological decisions, which in turn led to further action.

Data Sources

Multiple data sources were used to answer the research questions. These sources included multiple iterations of surveys, focus groups with the UHS

family–school partnership committee, and individual interviews with parents and faculty. Ravitch and Carl (2016) recommend this "strategic juxtaposition of multiple data sources to achieve greater rigor and validity in a study" (p. 103). Data collection began during the 2015–16 school year and continued through spring 2018.

All parents and faculty were invited to complete surveys. A letter was mailed to parents explaining the purpose of the study and the electronic nature of the survey. Parents who wished to participate but did not have access to email were prompted to contact the school office to request a paper-and-pencil version of the survey. The letter was then followed by an email to parents with a link to the survey. The link was distributed to faculty members via their school email.

The surveys were designed to garner participants' perceptions regarding family–school partnerships at UHS. Parents and faculty received two separate versions of the survey; however, the same items were addressed on both versions. The surveys were divided into five sections. The first section gathered participant demographic data. In the second section, participants were asked four items related to their beliefs regarding family–school partnerships (e.g., *on a scale of 1 [least important] to 10 [most important], how important do you believe family–school partnerships are to the success of students?*). On one item within this section, participants were provided a list of 20 items which are commonly identified in the literature as important to partnership development (e.g., respect, shared responsibility, perspective-taking, etc.). Participants were then asked to rank these qualities from most important to least important. These same qualities were then used in sections three and four.

Sections three and four of the survey consisted of Likert scale items. On each item, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements pertaining to family–school partnerships at UHS. The third section of the survey (15 items for parents, 18 items for faculty) asked participants to self-evaluate their efforts in relation to the partnership qualities identified in section two. An example parent item was: *I communicate frequently with the teachers and administration at Union High School.* An example faculty statement was: *The teachers and administration at Union High School respect parents.* While parents were asked to self-evaluate their individual partnership efforts, UHS faculty were asked to self-evaluate their collective partnership efforts. This was because the UHS administration (i.e., superintendent and principal) were primarily interested in understanding how parents and faculty viewed the partnership efforts of the school as a whole—not individual teachers.

Conversely, the fourth section of the survey asked participants to evaluate the partnership efforts of the other party. Parents were asked to evaluate

the partnership efforts of UHS faculty (18 items), and faculty were asked to evaluate the partnership efforts of UHS parents (15 items). After each item on sections three and four, participants were provided the opportunity to offer open-ended comments to further explain their responses. Finally, the last section of the survey included two open-ended items related to participants' beliefs about how family–school partnerships could be improved at UHS.

The survey was administered three times throughout the study. The survey was first administered during the spring of 2016. The purpose of the initial survey was to better understand how stakeholders currently viewed family–school partnerships, to identify areas of needed improvement in regard to family–school partnerships, and to use this data to guide school actions for the 2016–17 school year. The survey was administered again at the end of the 2016–17 school year. The purpose of the second survey was to determine if the school's actions had improved parent and faculty perceptions of the quality of family–school partnerships at UHS and to guide ongoing actions for the 2017–18 school year. The final survey was administered at the end of the 2017–18 school year.

Focus groups were also conducted with UHS faculty members serving on the family–school partnership committee. Focus groups occurred toward the end of the 2016–17 school year. Focus group protocols were designed to elicit committee members' perceptions of the school's efforts to improve family–school partnerships and to garner new ideas that could assist in improving relationships with families. Example items included: *Describe the interventions within your school targeted at developing strong family–school partnerships*; *What is your perception of the effectiveness of these interventions*; and, *What are some ideas you have about improving family–school partnerships at Union High School*?

In-depth interviews were also conducted at the end of the 2016–17 school year with select parents and faculty members. The purpose of the interviews was to gather in-depth data related to parents' and faculty members' experiences developing family–school partnerships at UHS. Separate interview protocols were used for parents and teachers; however, similar underlying themes were addressed within each protocol. Example parent interview items included: *What are some ways that Union High School teachers and administrators could develop stronger relationships with you*; and *What are some challenges you face in establishing effective partnerships with the teachers and administration at Union High School?* Example teacher interview items included: *Describe your personal efforts at establishing effective family–school partnerships*; and *What are your concerns related to partnering with parents?*

Finally, I kept a research journal throughout the study that resulted in 25 single-spaced pages of data. The research journal served as another valuable

source of data that chronicled the ongoing research process, provided my rationale for various research decisions, and described my evolving thoughts, feelings, emotions, and ideas related to the study (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Participants

Survey participants included parents and UHS faculty. The demographic makeup of parent and faculty participants was similar across all three administrations of the survey; however, response rates for both parents and faculty declined with each administration. Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of participants across all three administrations.

A total of six faculty members who were serving on the family–school partnership committee also participated in one of two focus group interviews. The first focus group consisted of three teachers, each with less than three years of teaching experience. The UHS principal also participated in portions of this interview. The second focus group consisted of two teachers, each with more than nine years of teaching experience. One member of the family–school partnership committee was absent on the day of the focus groups. Thus, an individual interview was conducted on a separate occasion with this teacher.

Parent interview participants were identified by the school principal. The principal tried to identify parents from various backgrounds and family structures, with varying degrees of school-based involvement, and whose students likely had diverse experiences within the school. Ultimately, he hoped to develop a list of potential participants that might reflect parents with diverse perspectives and experiences related to family–school partnerships at UHS. Once the list was created, he contacted parents to obtain their permission for me to contact them. In cases where parents consented, he provided me their contact information. Seven parents consented for me to contact them regarding the interview. I contacted all seven parents, and a total of four families out of the seven agreed to participate in an interview. In two cases, two parents from one family participated in the interview resulting in six total parent participants.

Finally, five faculty members participated in in-depth interviews. The first interview was conducted with the committee teacher who was not present during the focus groups. The second interview was conducted with the school principal. The final three interviews were conducted with teachers who were not a part of the family–school partnership committee.

Table 1. Survey Participant Demographic Data as Percentage of the Sample

Characteristic	Parent Participants			Faculty Participants		
	First	Second	Third	First	Second	Third
	(*n*=34)	(*n*=28)	(*n*=18)	(*n*=15)	(*n*=13)	(*n*=6)
Age						
18–24 years	0.00	0.00	0.00	6.67	0.00	0.00
25–30 years	0.00	0.00	0.00	33.33	46.15	50.00
31–35 years	14.71	3.57	5.56	20.00	23.08	16.67
36–40 years	17.65	32.14	50.00	0.00	7.70	0.00
41–45 years	35.29	28.57	11.11	13.33	15.38	16.67
46–50 years	20.59	25.00	33.33	13.33	7.69	16.67
51–55 years	11.76	7.14	0.00	6.67	0.00	0.00
56–60 years	0.00	3.57	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
≥61 years	0.00	0.00	0.00	6.67	0.00	0.00
Sex						
Male	23.53	32.14	11.11	46.67	46.15	33.33
Female	76.47	67.86	88.89	53.33	53.85	66.67
Race						
Native American/Alaskan	2.94	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
White	94.12	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
Identified as "Other"	2.94	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Level of Education						
High school/GED	29.41	28.57	16.67	0.00	0.00	0.00
Trade school/Associate's	38.24	32.14	27.78	0.00	0.00	0.00
Bachelor's degree	20.59	35.71	33.33	53.33	61.54	66.67
Master's degree	11.76	3.57	16.67	33.34	30.77	33.33
Specialist's degree	0.00	0.00	5.56	13.33	7.69	0.00
Yrs. of teaching experience						
Less than 1 year				6.67	7.69	0.00
1–5 years				26.66	38.46	50.00
6–10 years				20.00	7.69	16.67
11–15 years				26.66	30.78	0.00
16–20 years				0.00	7.69	16.67
21–25 years				6.67	7.69	16.67
26–30 years				6.67	0.00	0.00
More than 30 years				6.67	0.00	0.00

Data Analysis

Analysis commenced upon data collection and continued throughout the duration of the study (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Survey data were analyzed at the end of each school year. Due to the low number of survey responses, quantitative survey data were analyzed descriptively. While this did not permit the statistical comparison of survey data, it allowed us to summarize existing data and identify areas of needed improvement as indicated by parent and faculty participants over time.

Qualitative data (which included data from open-ended survey responses, focus groups, and interviews) were analyzed using both initial and structural coding. Initial coding is an inductive approach to analysis which allows codes to naturally emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006). For example, through the process of initial coding, UHS administrators and I recognized that faculty participants often felt disrespected by parents. These responses were coded as "disrespect." Following initial coding, a cycle of structural coding was completed. During structural coding, a content-based phrase related to the research questions was applied to specific sets of data (Saldaña, 2013). For example, the code "area of needed improvement" was applied to participant responses that addressed areas of needed improvement related to family–school partnerships and was directly connected to both research questions.

Finally, dialogic engagement represented an important aspect of data analysis. Dialogic engagement involved ongoing, critical conversations between UHS administrators and me to discuss data. In these "data meetings," we identified patterns, discussed initial interpretations, and considered alternative explanations of the data. These conversations allowed us to consider multiple perspectives, challenge existing assumptions, and arrive at shared interpretations of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). These shared interpretations guided our evolving action plans.

Findings

This study involved multiple cycles of investigation that occurred over the course of three school years. The following sections describe the data collection events, key findings, and ensuing school actions that occurred during each school year (see Figure 1).
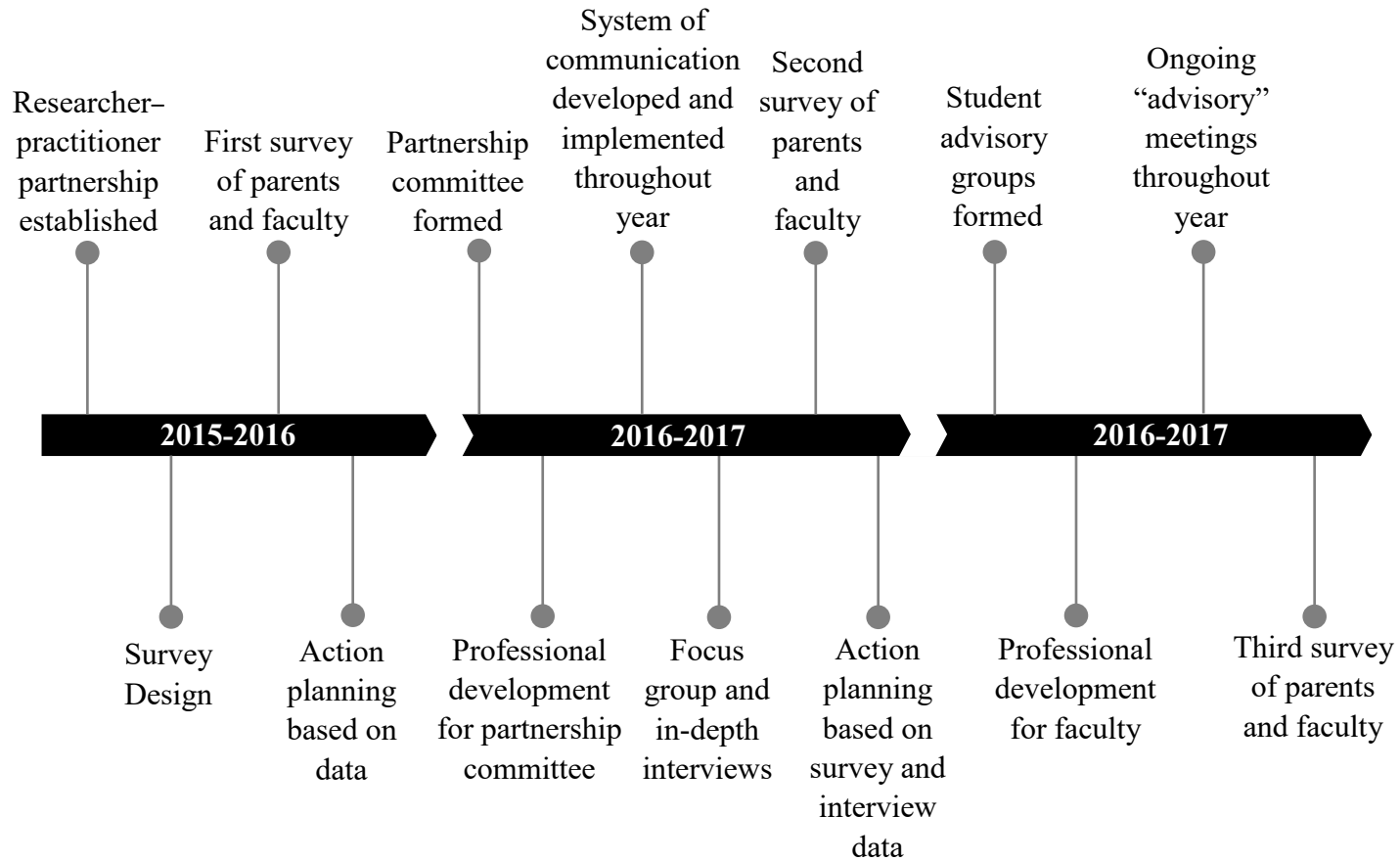
Researcher–
practitioner
partnership
established

First survey
of parents
and faculty

Partnership
committee
formed

System of
communication
developed and
implemented
throughout
year

Second
survey of
parents
and
faculty

Student
advisory
groups
formed

Ongoing
"advisory"
meetings
throughout
year

2015-2016

2016-2017

2016-2017

Survey
Design

Action
planning
based on
data

Professional
development
for partnership
committee

Focus
group and
in-depth
interviews

Action
planning
based on
survey and
interview
data

Professional
development
for faculty

Third survey
of parents
and faculty

Figure 1. Steps in the action research process at UHS.

Year 1: 2015–16 School Year

My initial discussions with UHS occurred informally. In the winter of 2015, I was speaking with the principal about parents' continued public disparagement of the school on social media. Parents seemed to use social media as an opportunity to air their grievances related to a variety of school issues, such as teachers' classroom practices, school policies, and hiring decisions. From the school's perspective, these comments were problematic for three major reasons. First, social media provided a platform and audience for parents to share their issues with the public, and unfortunately, they were often only sharing one side of the issue. This led to the pervasive spreading of misinformation and degradation of school faculty. Second, sometimes teachers and administrators were not even aware of parents' concerns until viewing them on social media. Thus, parental grievances were shared with the public without providing the school an opportunity to address the concern first. But most importantly, the principal considered these comments problematic because they were indicative of distrustful, negative relationships between UHS parents and faculty.

These conversations ultimately led to the formalization of a researcher–practitioner partnership between UHS and me (Lasater, 2018). It was hoped that through the researcher–practitioner partnership, systems could be developed and implemented to improve relationships between families and the school. As the UHS principal stated:

> The purpose is for us to get a better understanding of where we're at, where we need to go, and then developing an actual systematic approach to how we're going to try to get there and actually better our situation. And then be able to maybe have some type of data to track and tell us whether we are improving or not. Are our efforts and the things that we're doing working? Are they effective? Or are they not, and we need to try new methods?

We developed and administered the first survey to UHS parents and faculty during the spring of 2016. The UHS administration and I collaboratively analyzed survey data and identified three major findings.

First, there appeared to be a lack of trust between parents and faculty members. This was evidenced in multiple ways. In their open-ended survey responses, multiple parents provided comments indicating that the school had violated their trust. For example, one parent commented that the school was supposed to help her child with afterschool tutoring but never followed through on its promise. Another parent remarked that she routinely asked for more frequent communication from the school, but the school never provided it. Similarly, faculty member responses indicated that they were distrustful

of parents. Some faculty members believed parents expected them to take sole responsibility for educating their students and were unwilling to support the school's efforts. As one faculty member stated, "I don't think the parents want to do this [share responsibility]. The teachers and admin here try but don't always get much cooperation." In addition, 73% of faculty believed parents did not follow through on necessary actions or promises. Overall, it appeared that neither parents nor faculty members trusted the responsiveness or support of the other party.

Second, both parents and faculty members believed there needed to be improved communication between families and UHS. For example, one parent described the need for early communication (i.e., communication that occurred as soon as a problem was identified) from faculty:

> Teachers have a lot on their plates, but just a quick email when needed if students are slacking in class would be helpful to parents. Most parents are more than willing to work with their child if they are slacking or struggling, but they have to be aware of it before it is too late.

The need for faculty to communicate with parents while there was still time to correct issues was a sentiment expressed by multiple parents. Parent and faculty responses indicated that teachers relied primarily on formal opportunities to communicate with parents (i.e., parent–teacher conferences), but these events occurred at the end of the quarter when there was no longer an opportunity to rectify missed assignments or poor grades. Faculty members also recognized the lack of communication with parents, but one faculty member believed this was partly due to the nature of most parent–school interactions. According to the faculty member, "I believe we at times fear communication because we so often only hear from parents or patrons who have concerns or negative comments about the school." Based on parent and faculty responses, we believed any efforts to improve family–school partnerships at UHS needed to involve improved systems of communication.

Third, we recognized discrepancies between how parents and faculty members viewed themselves and how they were viewed by the other party. Overall, faculty indicated that they demonstrated specific partnership behaviors more than parents perceived they did. For example, 87% of faculty believed they established proactive relationships (i.e., relationships before problems arise) with parents; however, only 43% of parents believed faculty established proactive relationships. Similarly, 93% of faculty believed they initiated positive communication with parents, whereas only 44% of parents believed faculty initiated positive communication. Conversely, parents also believed they demonstrated partnership practices more often than faculty perceived they did. For example, 100% of parents believed they followed through on necessary actions or

promises related to their child's success, but only 27% of faculty believed this to be the case. Likewise, 100% of parents believed they established proactive relationships with faculty, but only 33% of faculty believed parents established proactive relationships. Ultimately, parents and faculty members seemed to agree that improved family–school relationships were necessary, but they often "pointed the finger" at the other party when explaining why there were issues between parents and the school.

Year 2: 2016–17 School Year

Based on analysis of data, the 2016–17 plan of action focused on developing a system of communication with families. Though the school already had one-way systems of communication in place (e.g., school website, administrator twitter announcements, and "blast call" alerts), it was recognized that there were no formal systems for two-way communication between families and schools. Similarly, there were no systems of communication in place that could facilitate the development of *relationships* with families. When communication occurred, it was typically negative—either teachers were communicating negative messages to parents (e.g., discipline issue, poor grades, etc.) or parents were complaining to teachers about something that was occurring in their classrooms (e.g., timeliness of feedback, willingness to provide extra help to students, etc.). As a result, increased positive communication was considered critical in the development of trusting, supportive relationships between UHS and parents.

To address these issues, a family–school partnership committee was established. This committee served three purposes: (1) to establish communication with *all* parents at UHS; (2) to monitor the school's partnership efforts; and (3) to develop and implement novel approaches to working with families. The family–school partnership committee consisted of the principal, school counselor, and five teachers. The school counselor and teachers were selected by the principal based on their leadership within the school. I also attended and participated in committee meetings.

At the beginning of the 2016–17 school year, the school administration and I created two systems to support the committee's work: a system of professional development for committee members and a system of ongoing communication with families. I was responsible for coordinating and implementing the professional development sessions. The training sessions oriented committee members to the various aspects of family–school partnerships (e.g., equity, trust, respect, communication, etc.) and introduced committee members to the use of attending, listening, and responding skills (see Lasater, 2018).

According to members of the family–school partnership committee, role playing was the most valuable aspect of the training. During each training session, committee members spent a portion of the time engaged in role play scenarios. The scenarios provided committee members opportunities to practice communicating with parents related to a variety of parental concerns. Though committee members reported feeling uncomfortable engaging in the role play exercises, they also believed role plays provided the most realistic way for them to practice attending, listening, and responding to parent concerns in a productive manner. Committee members and I met multiple times throughout the school year and continued using role playing as a way to practice navigating various conversations with parents.

At the beginning of the school year, committee members also began implementing the school's newly developed system of communication. This system involved proactive, ongoing communication between the school and parents and required committee members to establish personal communications with *all* families multiple times throughout the year. All UHS students and parents were divided among members of the family–school partnership committee. Before the end of the first quarter, all teachers were asked to establish at least one positive, personal communication (i.e., phone call or face-to-face meeting) with each of their assigned families. While there was no formal structure for this communication, I provided guidance during one of the initial professional development sessions on how faculty might approach this conversation. By the end of the school year, faculty established (or attempted) multiple phone or face-to-face contacts with each student's parents.

Finally, the committee also routinely met to monitor their progress and develop new ideas to connect with families. One of the teachers noted that it would be helpful to have positive information to share with families when making contacts. Thus, per his suggestion, an email chain was created among UHS staff to share positive information about students in a quick, real-time manner. The email chain served three important functions: (1) it made school staff more attentive to and aware of the positive things students were doing; (2) it allowed committee members to share with parents the positive things their kids were doing at school—which was different than the conversations many parents were used to having with UHS; and (3) it provided a way for staff to let students know they recognized their accomplishments.

At the end of the school year, data were again collected to evaluate the quality and value of family–school partnerships at UHS. All parents and faculty members were invited to participate in surveys. In addition, focus groups were conducted with committee members, and interviews were conducted with identified parents and faculty.

Overall, data indicated improved family–school partnerships at UHS. Both parents and faculty recognized the partnership efforts of the school and believed family–school partnerships were improving as a result. Multiple open-ended comments indicated that faculty believed the school had made "great strides" related to communication and the development of relationships with parents. One committee member described these strides by stating:

> What's really great about this school in particular is that all the teachers go out of their way to not only contact parents but to also, you know, if a student needs help, every single teacher in this building will come in early, will stay late, will make copies, will do all these things to try to make the kids successful, and I think parents appreciate that. And I think last year the problem was they probably didn't know a lot of that was going on. But I think with this committee, getting in contact with them and just being more open about what's actually happening, I think that's helping things, helping them realize what all we are doing for their kids, and I think that's also improving relationships in that way.

Multiple committee members indicated that they were learning more about students and their families through the system of communication. As one teacher described, "I've actually had some really good conversations with people, good feedback…kids that probably would have flew [sic] under my radar, I feel like I have a little better insight to them." Ultimately, faculty believed the school's efforts created intentionality and accountability for ongoing communication with families, and they believed increased opportunities for dialogue would eventually lead to more trusting relationships with families.

Improvements were also recognized on the parent surveys. For example, 76% of parents believed the school practiced positive communication with families, compared to just 44% from the previous year. Multiple parents also indicated they appreciated the efforts of the faculty to improve communication and relationships. As one parent commented, "This survey is fantastic. I think that family–school partnerships have improved significantly and will continue to improve in the near future. Thank you."

However, areas of needed improvement were also identified. First, it was recognized that systems were needed within the school that involved *all* faculty—not just those serving on the committee. On the parent surveys, multiple parents indicated that they believed school administration and *some* teachers worked to establish family–school partnerships; however, they believed these efforts were not consistent across the entire faculty. In addition, interviews with non-committee faculty members indicated that they had minimal to no contact with parents. Two non-committee faculty members indicated that because

there was minimal communication between families and schools, students often miscommunicated information between the two parties, which further contributed to problematic family–school relationships. This perspective was also shared by parents. When asked about the frequency of the school's communication, one parent stated:

> I cannot say they communicate frequently at all. Other than parent–teacher conferences, I guess I'm at a loss for how or when they would communicate with us. My information is channeled through my child. That is not the most advantageous for the district or families. It could be given incorrectly, in the wrong context, or spun to fit the individual wants of that student, and that doesn't lend to anything positive.

Moving forward, it was important for partnership efforts to establish consistent expectations for all faculty regarding frequent, ongoing communication with families.

Data from committee members and parents further indicated that phone calls throughout the year demonstrated the school's willingness and desire to connect with families; however, they also reported the conversations were sometimes awkward because they seemed to lack a clear purpose or focus. Parents and faculty desired a system of communication that was more authentic and purposeful. Parents also desired a system of communication that included their students. During the interviews, three parents indicated that their students had difficulty connecting at school. As one parent described,

> Sometimes kids just need maybe a little nudge or something or maybe even just a reminder that, "you're not just taking up space here. We want you to be a part. We want you to feel a part. We want you to know that you're accepted."

These parents believed their children would benefit from a caring adult who routinely checked in on them throughout the year.

In addition, faculty responses on all forms of data collection indicated that parents who appeared disengaged from educational processes presented challenges to partnership development. Multiple committee members reported that they had trouble contacting some parents despite multiple attempts to communicate and despite using multiple avenues to connect (e.g., phone, social media, etc.). The teachers seemed to believe that this was particularly the case with parents who were accustomed to negative communication from the school. Multiple teachers reported that they were unable to initially contact parents, but once the parents became aware that the phone call was not negative (i.e., their children were not in trouble), the families immediately returned the school's phone calls.

Data also indicated that some faculty members assumed parents did not value or care about their children's educations. When describing the barriers associated with attendance at parent–teacher conferences, one teacher stated, "Some parents just don't value the importance of education." Unfortunately, the belief that parents did not value education further fueled distrust and conflict between families and the school, as one parent described:

> We would get, say every semester, we would get a report card, and she would have "F, F, D, D." I'm like, "Where's the phone call?" So we'd come to school, and they're like, "Well we can't call every kid. Most parents don't even want to know. Most parents don't care." I was like "well put me on a list that cares!"

The parent was describing an experience that had occurred years earlier; however, it was indicative of problems between UHS faculty and families, particularly related to faculty beliefs about parents. Ultimately, UHS administration and members of the family–school partnership committee believed that faculty needed to spend more time learning about parents, reflecting on school beliefs and practices that perpetuate negative family–school relationships, and developing new ways to build partnerships with disengaged parents. These findings guided school decisions for the 2017–18 school year.

Year 3: 2017–18 School Year

Between Years 2 and 3, UHS experienced an administrative change. The former superintendent of Union School District retired, and the former UHS principal was hired as his successor. Thus, when the 2017 school year started, it was with a new superintendent and principal in place.

Year 3 partnership efforts began during summer 2017. School administration (i.e., new superintendent and new principal), the partnership committee, and I analyzed and discussed Year 2 data. Based on the data, student–teacher–parent advisory teams were created to facilitate more meaningful communication between parents and the school. Unlike the previous year's efforts, advisory teams consisted of all core members of the UHS faculty (the music and art teacher were not involved in advisory because they split their time between the middle and high schools). The advisory teams served two purposes: (1) to provide more authentic opportunities for families and schools to interact; and (2) to assist students and families in short- and long-term goal setting. Ultimately, we hoped advisory meetings would facilitate parent–faculty interactions which would help establish better rapport, increased communication, opportunities to build trust, and overall stronger relationships between families and UHS. We also hoped that advisory meetings would connect each student with at least

one "mentor" in the building who regularly monitored the student's overall academic, social, and emotional development.

Each advisory teacher was assigned approximately 10 students. During the first month of school, teachers met individually with students and their parents to discuss student goals and parental expectations. Teachers also initiated multiple phone conversations with parents throughout the year to continue to build relationships and support student progress. Teachers completed logs of their communications with parents and were expected to share those logs with the principal.

Year 3 also involved professional development for teachers who were not a part of the partnership committee. A total of two half-day sessions were held within the first quarter of school. These sessions mirrored the professional development provided in Year 2; however, as there were only two sessions, there were fewer opportunities for faculty to discuss progress, role play scenarios, troubleshoot problems, or engage in critical self-reflection and dialogue.

The final survey administered at the end of the 2018 school year resulted in the smallest return rate from both parents and faculty. Only 18 parents and six faculty members completed the survey. There are many possible reasons for the lower response rate. This was the third time parents and faculty members were asked to complete the survey. It is possible that participants understood the time requirement of the survey and were not willing to participate a third time. It is also possible that the timing of the survey was problematic. The survey was administered during the last two weeks of school. This is typically a busy time in schools, so it is possible that other school activities interfered with survey completion. It is also possible that the new principal did not emphasize the importance of taking the survey to faculty. Historically, teachers were asked to complete the survey at the end of a faculty meeting. This did not occur during the final administration.

Nevertheless, Year 3 survey results were analyzed and used to gauge school partnership efforts. Data suggest faculty members overwhelmingly believed they practiced most aspects of family–school partnerships, and they collectively believed parents demonstrated the qualities less. For example, 100% of faculty believed they encouraged open, two-way communication with parents, whereas only 25% of faculty believed parents encouraged open, two-way communication. This may suggest that at least some faculty members continued to distrust and blame parents for negative family–school relationships. Due to the low number of faculty responses, results of the faculty survey were interpreted cautiously.

Parent responses on the third survey were somewhat mixed. Some parents reported having positive relationships with faculty, whereas other parents

continued to express concerns related to the school's communication and follow-through. Similar to the first survey results, parents consistently indicated that they demonstrated the qualities of family–school partnerships more than faculty. For example, 100% of parent respondents indicated that they shared positive communications with UHS faculty, whereas only 40% of parent respondents believed faculty communicated positively with them.

A new sentiment expressed in the third survey was that parents sometimes felt communication from the school was rehearsed and insincere. Multiple parents reported that faculty members proclaimed to want improved family–school partnerships but then made parents feel unwelcome at school. As one parent remarked, "I feel too often the actions don't match their words," and as another parent commented, "Often, I feel they just don't want to hear from parents."

Discussion

For three years, faculty and I worked to establish family–school partnerships at UHS, with each year leading to increased communication and connection with families. Vital to this work was the development of partnership systems within the school. These systems involved proactive and ongoing communication with families, professional development for staff, ongoing data collection to monitor progress and improve actions, and accountability and support from school administration. However, improving family–school partnerships at UHS was not simply about developing and implementing systems; it was about adopting a philosophy about how families and schools should work together to support students. This philosophy involves authentic connection, dialogue, and communion with families (Allen, 2007; Christenson, 2004; Freire, 2018) and the pursuit of equity, inclusion, and social justice for families (Auerbach, 2012; Epstein, 2011; Theoharis, 2009).

Despite the school's efforts, some families at UHS did not believe faculty genuinely embraced this philosophy, and this belief plays a critical role in the development of trust. As Bryk and Schneider (2002) state:

> Relational trust diminishes when individuals perceive that others are not behaving in ways that can be understood as consistent with their expectations about the other's role obligations. Moreover, fulfillment of obligations entails not only "doing the right thing," but also doing it in a respectful way, and for what are perceived to be the right reasons. (p. 21)

In order to build trusting partnerships, schools must fulfill parents' expectations of their roles, *and* parents must believe that the schools' intentions

for fulfilling these expectations are genuine. While parents at UHS recognized the school's efforts to improve partnerships, they questioned the sincerity of these efforts. As one parent stated, "The overall tone I get in communication is forced and rehearsed and just words." It seems that while faculty were proclaiming to want partnerships with families, parents continued to feel that they were not welcomed as full partners in educational processes. A conversation between two parents illustrates this perspective:

Mom: Sometimes, the school, they don't want the parents that involved. "This is our school. This is the way we're doing it. This is the way we're gonna' run it. End of story." You know? So sometimes if we have questions or if we just want to understand why is this happening or what does this mean or what are we doing, this sounds really harsh, but sometimes you almost feel unwelcome as a parent because you're trying to just, you know, understand what's going on with your kid. And like I said, we've ran into that….I feel like if my kid is involved in anything, school, sports, church activities, whatever it may be, I just feel like as a parent, that's my responsibility to know where my kid is, what he's doing, what he's involved in, where he should be, and I want to be comfortable going and talking to the other adults who are a part of that.

Dad: ….But I think what you're saying, too, is that, sometimes maybe in the public system, parents might not feel welcome in certain things, and that might be a movement across the board that teachers know more than the parents know.

The conversation between these parents illustrates the connection between authenticity and trust (Auerbach, 2012; Tschannen-Moran, 2004)—parents continued to feel unwelcome at UHS, which made the school's partnership efforts seem insincere. Thus, in the midst of intentional efforts to improve family–school partnerships, the seemingly insincere efforts of UHS faculty may have damaged, rather than repaired, parents' trust in the school.

The reality is, educators' attitudes and beliefs play a critical role in partnership development (Wanat, 2010). In fact, without certain core beliefs (e.g., all parents have the ability to support their children's development and learning), educators cannot build meaningful partnerships with families (Henderson et al., 2007). Further, when educators start with deficit views of families, it is even more difficult for them to accept responsibility for changing their own practices in ways that can improve family–school partnerships (Beneyto, Castillo, Collet-Sabé, & Tort, 2019). Unfortunately, UHS administrators and I did little to cultivate a partnership philosophy within faculty. Instead, we

implemented systems and mandated activities that assumed this philosophy already existed—an assumption that, in hindsight, was undoubtedly problematic. Many educators are reluctant to partner with families (Auerbach, 2010; Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Hill et al., 2018; Lazar & Slostad, 1999); they may also hold deficit views of families that undermine the development of authentic partnerships (Patterson et al., 2007; Ullucci & Howard, 2015). While schools may claim to value partnerships, their actions do not always reflect an authentic desire or attempt to invite families into educational processes (Epstein, 2011; Gordon, 2012).

Authentic partnerships are first and foremost "a matter of intention and moral commitment, as followed by a seeking out of opportunities to enact that commitment" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 750). As such, rather than immediately developing systems that required faculty to engage in partnership activities with families, UHS administrators and I should have attended more to the ideological work necessary to create partnerships. Ideological work involves the critical self-examination of identity, values, assumptions, beliefs, prejudices, and social positions, as well as an awareness of how these various aspects of self influence one's perspective (Gorski, 2018; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Smiley & Helfenbein, 2011). Engaging faculty in "ideological work" represents a missed opportunity for partnerships at UHS, as action research could have served as a useful mechanism to transform teachers' perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes about families (Beneyto et al., 2019). Had we engaged in this work first, faculty may have more authentically embraced the notion of partnerships. They might also have created systems that reflected a more authentic commitment to partnerships. For example, the systems created at UHS did not empower families to participate in school decision-making; yet, sharing power is essential to the development of authentic partnerships (Auerbach, 2010; Olivos, 2012). Perhaps families did not believe faculty genuinely wanted partnerships with families because historical power structures remained largely intact.

There is continued work that must be done. Part of this work involves the inclusion of parents, community members, and school support staff in the school's partnerships efforts, as each of these stakeholder groups plays a critical role in the development of authentic partnerships (Olivos, 2012; Theoharis, 2009). UHS's plans for the future include: engaging faculty in ongoing, critical self-reflection related to their attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about families; expanding the partnership committee to include parents, community members, and school support staff; expanding opportunities for faculty to interact with their advisory students and parents; and creating systems that empower parents to engage in school decision-making. While there is much work to be done, I am reminded that "reculturing schools is an ongoing, unfinished

process" (Auerach, 2012, p. 46). With each year that UHS demonstrates its commitment to reculturing the school toward authentic family–school partnerships, it offers the hope of restored trust, connection, and belonging within the Union community.

References

Allen, J. (2007). *Creating welcoming schools: A practical guide to home–school partnerships with diverse families*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Auerbach, S. (2010). Beyond coffee with the principal: Toward leadership for authentic school–family partnerships. *Journal of School Leadership*, *20*(6), 728–757.

Auerbach, S. (2012). Conceptualizing leadership for authentic partnerships: A continuum to inspire practice. In S. Auerbach (Ed.), *School leadership for authentic family and community partnerships* (pp. 29–51). New York, NY: Routledge.

Barley, Z. A., & Beesley, A. D. (2007). Rural school success: What can we learn? *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *22*(1), 1–16.

Bauch, P. A. (2001). School–community partnerships in rural schools: Leadership, renewal, and a sense of place. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *76*(2), 204–221.

Beneyto, M., Castillo, J., Collet-Sabé, J., & Tort, A. (2019). Can schools become an inclusive space shared by all families? Learnings and debates from an action research project in Catalonia. *Educational Action Research*, *27*(2), 210–226. doi:10.1080/09650792.2018.1480401

Blackmore, J., & Hutchison, K. (2010). Ambivalent relations: The "tricky footwork" of parental involvement in school communities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *14*(5), 499–515. doi:10.1080/13603110802657685

Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Christenson, S. L. (2004). The family–school partnership: An opportunity to promote the learning competence of all students. *School Psychology Review*, *33*(1), 83–104.

Epstein, J. L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools* (2nd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Frank, D. B. (2005). Everything to help and nothing to hinder: Grandiosity, ambivalence, and boundaries in the alliance between parents and the school. *Schools: Studies in Education*, *2*(1), 194–214.

Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (50th anniversary ed.). New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

Gordon, M. F. (2012). Creating organizational cultures of family and community engagement: The impact of district policies and practices on school leaders. In S. Auerbach (Ed.), *School leadership for authentic family and community partnerships* (pp. 133–150). New York, NY: Routledge.

Gorski, P. C. (2012). Perceiving the problem of poverty and schooling: Deconstructing the class stereotypes that mis-shape education practice and policy. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 45*(2), 302–319. doi:10.1080/10665684.2012.666934

Gorski, P. C. (2016). Poverty and the ideological imperative: A call to unhook from deficit and grit ideology and to strive for structural ideology in teacher education. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 42*(4), 378–386. doi:10.1080/02607476.2016.1215546

Gorski, P. C. (2018). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement.* Austin, TX: SEDL.

Henderson, A. T., Mapp, K. L., Johnson, V. R., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family–school partnerships.* New York, NY: The New Press.

Herr, K., & Anderson, G. L. (2015). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Hill, N. E., Witherspoon, D. P., & Bartz, D. (2018). Parental involvement in education during middle school: Perspectives of ethnically diverse parents, teachers, and students. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *111*(1), 12–27. doi:10.1080/00220671.2016.1190910

Katyal, K. R., & Evers, C. W. (2007). Parents—partners or clients? A reconceptualization of home–school interactions. *Teaching Education*, *18*(1), 61–76. doi:10.1080/10476210601151573

Lasater, K. (2016). Parent–teacher conflict related to student abilities: The impact on students and the family–school partnership. *School Community Journal*, *26*(2), 237–262. Retrieved from http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx

Lasater, K. (2018). Using the researcher–practitioner partnership to build family–school partnerships in a rural high school. In R. M. Reardon & J. Leonard (Eds.), *Making a positive impact in rural places: Change agency in the context of school–university–community collaboration in education* (pp. 233–256). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.

Lazar, A., & Slostad, F. (1999). How to overcome obstacles to parent–teacher partnerships. *The Clearing House*, *72*(4), 206–210.

McDowall, P. S., & Schaughency, E. (2017). Elementary school parent engagement efforts: Relations with educator perceptions and school characteristics. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *110*(4), 348–365. doi:10.1080/00220671.2015.1103687

Olivos, E. M. (2012). Authentic engagement with bicultural parents and communities: The role of school leaders. In S. Auerbach (Ed.), *School leadership for authentic family and community partnerships* (pp. 98–114). New York, NY: Routledge.

Patterson, J. A., Hale, D., & Stessman, M. (2007). Cultural contradictions and school leaving: A case study of an urban high school. *The High School Journal*, *91*(2), 1–15.

Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2016). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Semke, C. A., & Sheridan, S. M. (2012). Family–school connections in rural educational settings: A systematic review of the empirical literature. *School Community Journal*, *22*(1), 21–47. Retrieved from http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx

Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R. (2017). *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Sheldon, S. B. (2007). Improving student attendance with school, family, and community partnerships. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *100*(5), 267–275.

Sheldon, S. B., & Epstein, J. L. (2005). Involvement counts: Family and community partnerships and mathematics achievement. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *98*(4), 196–206.

Smiley, A. D., & Helfenbein, R. J. (2011). Becoming teachers: The Payne effect. *Multicultural Perspectives*, *13*(1), 5–15. doi:10.1080/15210960.2011.548177

Theoharis, G. (2009). *The school leaders our children deserve.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Tschannen-Moran, M. (2004). *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Ullucci, K., & Howard, T. (2015). Pathologizing the poor: Implications for preparing teachers to work in high-poverty schools. *Urban Education*, *50*(2), 170–193. doi:10.1177/004208 5914543117

Wanat, C. L. (2010). Challenges balancing collaboration and independence in home–school relationships: Analysis of parents' perceptions in one district. *School Community Journal*, *20* (1), 159–186. Retrieved from http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx

Witte, A. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2011). *Family engagement in rural schools* (R2Ed Working Paper No. 2011–2). Retrieved from the National Center for Research on Rural Education website: http://r2ed.unl.edu/resources/downloads/2011-wp/2011_2_Witte_Sheridan.pdf

Kara Lasater is an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Arkansas. She has experience working in nonprofit and K–12 public education. Her research interests include the development of family–school partnerships, educators' use of data, and effective preparation of school leaders. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Kara Lasater, University of Arkansas, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, 119 Peabody Hall, Fayetteville, AR 72701, or email klasater@uark.edu