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Home-School Relationships: A Qualitative Study with Diverse Families

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This qualitative case study explored how families from diverse cultural backgrounds understood family involvement in the context of early childhood care and educational settings. Participants in the study included nine members from six families who had children enrolled in three early childhood care and education programs. The primary method of data collection included in-depth interviews with the parents of these children. A second data source was obtained through non-participant observations in each of the three programs. Findings revealed that the way families understand parent involvement is strongly influenced by issues of ethnicity, social class, level of education, and language. *Keywords: Diversity, Parent Involvement, Early Childhood Care, Case Study, Education Programs*

It is well-recognized that the foundation of children's development and learning depends upon the inter-contextual nature of relationships between families and schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lightfoot, 1978). Both systems share the responsibility for helping children acquire knowledge and develop lifelong skills in order to live successfully in society (Coleman, 1997). Family involvement in children's education is not a new concept and has long been a topic of interest among researchers, professionals working with families, and educators at all levels. A growing body of research indicates family involvement with schools results in mutually beneficial outcomes (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Connors & Epstein, 1995; Epstein, 2001). Further, Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, and Walberg (2005) documented that young children's potential to excel depends on the environment in which they learn and the interconnections they develop within these settings.

The current study is consistent with the National Standards for School Counseling Program's goal of providing research-based interventions to enhance students' personal/social outcomes (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005). Although research related to home-school interconnections takes into account the importance of positive relationships between these two systems, little indication of *how* the alliances might be built, supported, and sustained over time exists (Lightfoot, 2003).

Defining Family Involvement

One definition of family involvement is addressed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Standards stressing the importance of relationship between families and programs to enhance child development have been established. According to NAEYC (2010):

> Developmentally appropriate practices occur within a context that supports the development of relationships between adults and children, among children, among teachers, and between teachers and families. Such a community reflects what is known about the social construction of knowledge and the importance of establishing a caring, inclusive community in which all children can develop and learn. (p. 16)

Studies on families and their interactions with schools are often focused on mainstream family units and their participation in school activities (Dunn & Norris, 2001; Hara & Burke, 1998; Reynolds, 1991). Lawson (2003) reports these inquiries have used a school-based definition, which may not be the same as diverse families' definitions or perceptions of family involvement. Consequently, the voices of minority families have not been reflected in these investigations. This contention is also supported by Mann (2006) who found that diverse families have different perceptions of family involvement with schools compared to many teachers and administrators. According to Epstein (1992) and Swick (1997), family members representing a minority population are rarely consulted on important issues regarding their child's education. Epstein and Becker (1982), Lipman (1997), and Shunow and Harris (2000) have given voice to teachers' conceptions on home-school relationships; however, the meanings and practices related to school involvement of diverse families have not been sufficiently studied.

A challenge for professionals working with diverse children and their families is to honor different perspectives as legitimate. Gonzalez-Mena (1997) stated "understanding cultural differences is a subject that goes far beyond what holidays people celebrate and what foods they eat" (p. 11). Cultural continuity in school settings is critical to help children develop an authentic sense of self, which can provide them with a framework to understand who they are in their cultural setting (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). Counselors and educators working with diverse families may need to recognize the cultural background that shapes home-school relationships. Lightfoot (2003) explains:

> Although parent-teacher encounters are shaped by these interior autobiographical dramas, they are also guided by the larger social and cultural legacies that shape family-school relationships. These broader social forces resonate through the interpersonal and intrapsychic experiences of parents, teachers, and children. They reflect the historical legacies that have left a deep imprint on our collective unconscious and contemporary cultural preoccupations and priorities. There is a paradoxical sense of both old and new—of both historical legacies that are long and enduring and recent cultural imprint that are often faddish and elusive. (p. 29)

Educators hold a position of power. Thus, their willingness to facilitate the relationships between schools and their communities functions as a bridge to build the foundation for full equality, and justice in our society. Lightfoot (2003) noted, "We [educators, researchers, teachers, counselors, administrators] witness the dramas surrounding immigration, assimilation, and indoctrination in school settings" (p. 29). Embracing an approach that values all families' perspectives on school involvement may open and expand definitions of home-school involvement to include the views of diverse families. Learning from diverse families and valuing their backgrounds can lead to greater tolerance of diverse practices. Brooks (2004) adds when working with culturally diverse families there is a need for respect and appreciation of multiple perspectives on patience, sensitivity, effective communication, and flexible problem-solving skills.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how diverse families understand involvement in the context of home-school relationships, and what practices they use to enhance such involvement. Two primary questions guided this investigation:

1. How do diverse families engage in school activities and practices?
2. What type of involvement do diverse families want in their child's educational programs?

Methodology

Research Design

To explore how diverse families understand involvement in the context of home-school relationships, and the practices used to enhance this involvement, a qualitative, case study research design was used. According to Yin (2003) a case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 13) and Merriam (2009) describes case studies as an in-depth examination of a bounded system.

This study took place in three early childhood care and education programs located in the mountainous west of the United States. After conversations with early childhood professionals and counselor educators, three sites for the fieldwork were selected. Sites were chosen based upon a high degree of (a) commitment to home-school relationship, and (b) student enrollments of different nationality and immigration status. The three programs selected were accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Participants

Participants were purposefully selected to generate information-rich cases that might offer understanding on home-school relationship practices (Patton, 2002). Administrators and directors of the three programs selected for the study were informed regarding the criteria- different socio-economic class, ethnicity, race, education level, immigration status and level of involvement. These criteria were used by administrators

and teachers to select nine members from six families of diverse backgrounds (six mothers and three fathers) for participation in the study. Participants completed a demographic survey before the interview process commenced. The education level of the participants interviewed ranged from those who were high school dropouts to those who had graduate degrees. Seven family members worked part-time or full-time in an array of positions ranging from blue collar to university professionals. Two of the participants interviewed were a stay-at-home mother and a stay-at-home father. The annual income of the families volunteering for the study ranged from under $10,000 to $40,000. Thirty-two percent of the families interviewed considered themselves Asian, 16% European, 16% Latin and 36% Euro-American (See Table 1; pseudonyms are used). The average interview lasted 1.5 hours.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants by Age, Gender, Nationality/Ethnicity and Number of Children

Name	Site	Age	Gender	Nationality	No. of Children
Kumeran	#1	31	Male	Asian	2
Mirrah	#1	30	Female	Asian	2
Jennifer	#1	35	Female	Euro-American	1
John	#1	43	Male	Euro-American	1
Stacey	#1	35	Female	Euro-American	1
Eugene	#2	43	Male	European	2
Katherine	#2	38	Female	European	2
Maria	#3	22	Female	Latin	1
Zheng	#3	35	Female	Asian	2

Each of the families selected received a letter of invitation, including the researcher's contact information. Families had a month to contemplate about the study, ask questions, and then decide whether to participate or decline. All the participants were 18 years or older and were not members of a protected class. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality of the participants was preserved. An IRB application was submitted and approved from the university's Human Assurance Committee previous to the data collection process.

Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were collected from two primary sources: a) interviews and b) observations. Seidman (2006) contends interviewing allows the researcher to more fully understand the lived experience of other people, and how they interpret meaning to that experience. Yin (2003) adds, "…overall interviews are an essential source of case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs" (p. 92).

Baker and Soden (1998) note that the major limitation for the methods used regarding family involvement research has mainly focused on teacher and parent retrospective reports, questionnaires, surveys or rating scales to assess family involvement rather than using interviews with family members. With these considerations in mind, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with open ended questions were conducted.

Interviews

Interviews with family members provided "the *hows* of people's lives (the constructive work involved in producing order in everyday life) as well as the *whats* (the activities of everyday life)" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 646). An open-ended, semi-structured interview guide was used and prepared in a way to ensure the same basic lines of inquiry were pursued with each person interviewed (Patton, 2002). The open-ended questions allowed participants the opportunity to share additional ideas of personal value related to the various aspects of family involvement practices. The cultural background of the family was explored during each interview as a topic of potential relevance to parent involvement practices.

Interview Questions

In consultation with early childhood professionals and counselor education faculty, an outline with guiding questions based on how the literature defines family involvement was developed. The guiding questions were piloted with two families. After conducting the first two interviews, researchers realized the guiding questions were driven by a *school-centric* (Lawson, 2003) definition of family involvement. Researchers also noticed the families interviewed for the pilot study were having some difficulty feeling connected to the questions asked. One of the mothers asked, "Am I responding to what you want to hear?" Another surprising observation from the two Asian families interviewed for the pilot study was that their understanding of involvement was more home-based rather than school-based. To gain a broader definition of family involvement, more consultation on this phenomenon was conducted. With input from two family therapists, counseling faculty, and two early childhood educators, the questions for the interviews were revised. Criteria that allowed more latitude with the definition of family involvement were then established.

In the new set of interview questions, participants were also asked about specific home activities in which they engaged together. Cognitively stimulating hands-on activities and family restrictions on watching television reflected important aspects of families' involvement at home and were examined carefully (Desimone, 1999). Family

involvement practices outside the home were also explored, including families' interactions with the school, trips to the library, museums, and the zoo.

Transcripts from Interviews

Interviews were tape recorded (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) and then transcribed verbatim. Each interview transcript was identified by site and date. Field notes from the interviews contained a section of raw data. A section of researchers' personal accounts of the interview process were used in the analysis as well.

Observations

As part of the process of gaining access to the setting and to enrich the interview process, the first author attended events organized by the programs with the permission from participants, staff, and administrators. This participation allowed the researcher to have visibility with personnel and families as well as to conduct non-participant observations in the settings. These observations served as another source of data collection for this study. Observation was focused on interactions between families, and interactions between families and staff. Patton (2002) explained "…through direct observation the inquirer is better able to understand and capture the context within which people interact" (p. 262).

Data Analysis Methods

Data were first organized and content analyzed for patterns and regularities. Yin (1989) says, "The arraying of events into a chronology permits the investigator to determine causal events over time, because the basic sequence of a cause and its effect cannot be temporally inverted" (p. 119). Merriam (1988) defines content analysis as "a systematic procedure for describing the content of communications" (p. 116). Written notes and comments were made by the researcher when patterns and regularities occurred. These patterns and regularities were sorted into thematic categories. To develop and prioritize the categories, four guidelines suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1981) were considered. First, frequent occurrence of an activity or mention of an issue indicated the need for a category. Second, Guba and Lincoln maintain some items are given more credibility by the various audiences, and some items are considered less credible. Comments and activities deemed credible and realistic by the participants were retained for categorization. Third, concerns and issues that stand out because of their uniqueness were noted. Guba and Lincoln explain, "While they may be the product of highly idiosyncratic perspectives, unique items probably ought to receive higher priority than others because they add interesting detail and proportion to the evaluator's perspective" (p. 95). Fourth, items facilitating inquiry pertinent to the study were placed into categories. According to Guba and Lincoln this type of category may "provide a unique leverage on an otherwise common problem" (p. 95).

Next, a coding analysis was conducted on the data that had been compiled into categories. The identification of themes using coding and sorting are important to the qualitative research process (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). While reviewing the transcripts

of the interviews comments were highlighted using different colored pens based upon categories followed by sorting similar comments into labeled file folders.

Coded data were then arranged into a matrix display format to present the information systematically. Two types of matrix display formats developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) were chosen to illustrate the data from this study: (a) Home-School Relationships; and (b) Families' Wishes and Wants for Their Children. The displayed data enabled the researcher to identify the recurrent themes and patters. A theme or pattern that emerged three or more times was considered significant in terms of proving insight about the two themes that emerged from this study. Additional sub-themes within the home-school relationships were also found and included (e.g., social respect, personal regard, and perceived competence). Themes and patterns not repeated three or more times were further examined to ensure their potential importance was not overlooked. According to Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994) three good reasons justify counting something that is found consistently in the data. First, counting gives researchers a general idea of what the data contains. Second, counting allows the researcher to support or verify an emerging construct or constructs. Finally, counting helps protect against researcher bias. After discussions with the committee who supervised the project, it was determined a theme or pattern that emerged three or more times would enable the researcher to make generalizations about the data. The matrices presented the data in a focused display enabling the researcher to make interpretations and draw conclusions. To accomplish this goal the researchers made sense of each interview and then compared across those accounts to identify themes (Colaizzi, 1978). The steps in this analysis were similar to another qualitative study conducted by Canfield-Davis and Jain (2010) and are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Within-and Across-Analytic Strategies for a Study of Family Involvement Practices

Strategy	Analytic Focus	Product
Analytic immersion in all	Within all interviews	Sense of experience of family involvement practices
Immersion in each interview	Within each interview	Identification of significant statements
Comparisons of significant	Across all interviews	Identify categories of statements common to all participants
Reconnections of significant statements to	Within and across all interviews	Identification of themes interviews
Organize categories of significant statements by themes	Set of significant statements	Essential structure
Return analysis to participants	Essential structure	Close the circle of authentication

Step 1: All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, including pauses in the discussion.

> Uh, yeah. I feel welcomed to sharing my ideas about if I think that something should be changed or if I'm not happy about something or if I want to congratulate them on something that has really been going well. I re…feel really open to just popping my head into Mark or Cleta's office and say "Hey, guys! How's it goin'" or, you know if they're sitting up front, they always ask about how things are going and, um, the transition that I made to Laramie was horrible. I didn't have family support. It was a different environment. I was used to a lot of older students, like, that was the population of the students at LCCC versus UW has a lot of younger students and the class size was different, you know, it was just a culture shock to be here and without family and, um, two friends is all I had here when I moved here. And it, it was horrible! And I remember coming in one day last semester and I was in tears over a class and Tracy just embraced me. She hugged me and really made me feel like this is the place that I can release, that I can connect to. Um, my clutch went out in my car and I didn't have anyone to call; I didn't have anyone to turn to. I called the daycare to say hey, we're late; this is what's going on. And I was quite frustrated about everything that's going on, so I'm in tears and Mark says, "Can I come pick you up? Can I take you to school? Can I pick you up from school?" And he was just, yeah; all he could do was express his desire to be there for our situation. Outside of school, I mean, he's willing to take off time to come get us, and I, I feel like this is a family more than a center.

Step 2: Initial transcripts were examined to identify general themes. Notations were made in the margins, and themes were highlighted using different colored pens. Words in bold letters were given added emphasis.

General Theme	
Home School Relationship	Uh, yeah. I feel **welcomed** to sharing my ideas about if I think that something should be changed or if I'm not happy about something or if I want to congratulate them on something that has really been going well. I re…feel really open to just popping my head into Mark or Cleta's office and say "Hey, guys! How's it goin'" or, you know if they're sitting up front, **they always ask about how things are going** and, um, the transition that I made to Laramie was horrible. I didn't have family support. It was a different environment. I was used to a lot of older students, like, that was the population of the students at LCCC versus UW has a lot of younger students and the class size was different, you know, it was just a culture shock to be here and without family and, um, two friends is all I had here when I moved here. And it, it was horrible! And I remember coming in one day last semester and I was in tears over a class and Tracy just embraced me. She hugged me and really made me feel like this is the place that **I can**

release, that **I can connect** to. Um, my clutch went out in my car and I didn't have anyone to call; I didn't have anyone to turn to. I called the daycare to say hey, we're late, this is what's going on. And I was quite frustrated about everything that's going on, so I'm in tears and Mark says, "Can I come pick you up? Can I take you to school? Can I pick you up from school?" And he was just, yeah, all **he could do was express his desire to be there for our situation**. Outside of school, I mean, he's willing to take off time to come get us, and I, I feel like **this is a family more than a center**.

Step 3: Initial transcripts were re-organized by the question asked, and then condensed, removing all of the extraneous irrelevant comments, phrases, and utterances.

General **Theme** Home School Relationship	I feel **welcomed** to sharing my ideas about if I think that something should be changed or if I'm not happy about something or if I want to congratulate them on something that has really been going well. **They always ask about how things are going.** The transition that I made to Laramie was horrible. I didn't have family support. It was a different environment. I was used to a lot of older students, like, that was the population of the students at LCCC versus UW has a lot of younger students and the class size was different, it was just a culture shock to be here and without family. Two friends are all I had here when I moved here. And it, it was horrible! And I remember coming in one day last semester and I was in tears over a class and Tracy just embraced me. She hugged me and really made me feel like this is the place that **I can release**, that **I can connect** to. My clutch went out in my car and I didn't have anyone to call; I didn't have anyone to turn to. I called the daycare to say we're late; this is what's going on. I'm in tears and Mark says, "Can I come pick you up? Can I take you to school? Can I pick you up from school?" All **he could do was express his desire to be there for our situation**. Outside of school he is willing to take off time to come get us. I feel like **this is a family more than a center**.

Step 4: Specific themes, and topics within those themes, were identified, and coded using colored pens.

Trust Wishes/Wants Personal Regard	I feel **welcomed** to sharing my ideas about if I think that something should be changed or if I'm not happy about something or if I want to congratulate them on something that has really been going well. **They always ask about how things are going.** The transition that I made to Laramie was horrible. I didn't have family support. It was a different environment. I was used to a lot of older students, like, that was the population of the students at LCCC versus UW has a lot of younger students and the class size was different, it was just a culture

Trust Personal Regard	shock to be here and without family. Two friends are all I had here when I moved here. And it, it was horrible! And I remember coming in one day last semester and I was in tears over a class and Tracy just embraced me. She hugged me and really made me feel like this is the place that **I can release**, that **I can connect** to. My clutch went out in my car and I didn't have anyone to call; I didn't have anyone to turn to. I called the daycare to say we're late; this is what's going on. I'm in tears and Mark says, "Can I come pick you up? Can I take you to school? Can I pick you up from school?" All **he could do was express his desire to be there for our situation**. Outside of school he is willing to take off time to come get us. I feel like **this is a family more than a center**.

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing is a "process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Peer review was conducted with a colleague familiar with the research topic. The peer examiner was requested to scan some of the raw data and assess whether the findings were plausible based on the data (Merriam & Associates, 2002). This process was followed by discussions regarding the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations. In the process of debriefing, the meanings were explored along with the basis of interpretations clarified (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Discussions with peers helped to clarify key ideas about practices of family involvement in diverse families with young children and work through the categories and themes found in the data to have a sense of emerging findings, as well as biases, and implications of the study.

Data Triangulation

Using multiple methods of data collection and analysis allowed the examination of different aspects of family involvement practices. Member checks entailed informal discussions to check the researchers' perceptions of what was said by participants. The member checks were a critical piece from a researcher perspective. Through this triangulation process, first author was able to get to know some of the participants in a more intimate way. She was invited to their homes, they shared their food with her, their fears and accomplishments since living in this country, and this probably was the turning point in the relationship to permeate the boundary of researcher to co-participant. The member checks also provided participants with the opportunity to react to the findings and interpretations.

Having the perspectives of more than one investigator is another way to triangulate in qualitative research. Perspectives of peers and advisors were helpful to clarify both writing and thinking about research. Discussions with early childhood and counseling faculty members helped to clarify key ideas about practices of family

involvement in diverse families with young children. Debriefing with a peer provided the researchers with the opportunity to work through the categories and themes found in the data to have a sense of emerging findings, as well as researchers' biases, and implications of the study. Observations were analyzed using the same diagnostic strategies as the interviews and then treated as another source of data and integrated to the final analysis of themes.

Trustworthiness

In this study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) conventional criteria for trustworthiness was used. According to Cho and Trent (2006), this criteria lie in the category of transactional validity. Cho and Trent stated, "In seeking trustworthiness, the researchers attend to research credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability" (p. 322). In accordance with the conventional criteria suggested for trustworthiness outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the first author maintained a research journal and used multiple sources of information including non-participant observations and peer debriefing. All of the data sources were discussed with the research team and then integrated into the final analysis.

Results and Discussion

Two themes emerged from this study: (a) home-school relationships, and (b) families' wishes and wants for their children. Additional sub-themes within the home-school relationships were also found and included: social respect, personal regard, and perceived competence.

Home-School Relationships

School counselors' goals focus on improving the emotional functioning of all students (ASCA, 2005; Education Trust, 2005). Communication plays a critical role in helping families and professionals coordinate the shared responsibility of children's well-being. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological framework, communication is indispensable between the various settings in which children develop. Bryk and Schneider (2002) provided the construct of relational trust as a framework to understand the day-to-day social interactions between professionals and families. Relational trust refers to "discernment of the intention of others-that is the interpretation one person makes of another's behavior" (p. 21) based on the daily interactions among people involved with a common purpose such as children's well-being. Relational trust has four components: social respect, personal regard, perceived competence of the participants, and perception of basic integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Social respect. Social respect involves viewing others as being one's social equals, as having equal worth. It is shown through interactions "marked by a genuine sense of listening to what each person has to say and taking this into account in subsequent actions or conversations" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 12). This is a bi-

directional transaction in which each party needs to feel that others value her or his contributions.

Jennifer, a Euro-American mother, shares that she has had some "great" conversations with the directors and teachers of the Program. This bi-directional communication has been "incredibly respectful," as each party seeks input from others. Jennifer describes a real exchange of information and brainstorming about strategies. She describes the wonderful process and expresses, "I feel like it's a real partnership in that respect." Maria, a Latin single mother, adds,

> I feel welcome to share my ideas if I think that something should be changed or if I'm not happy about something, or if I want to congratulate them on something that has been going really well.

On the other hand, John and Stacey, a Euro-American couple, stated, "We have no say," and described a meeting with the representatives of the Program during which John and Stacey outlined their expectations with the leaders of the Program. They report being given "a piece of paper" stating what their son does in class, and they reviewed this report thinking that basically the teacher "didn't show us anything." They left the meeting wondering what the teacher had shown them, as there was nothing on the report that they didn't know about. They describe their lack of connection within the classroom, since they were not invited to "watch anything that happens in the classroom." For John and Stacey the worst part is the disconnection from the school and from their son. They state,

> We're left behind from him. And he's left behind from education. That's why we're feeling closer to ... take him out of that school.

Families' perceptions of general invitations, opportunities and demands from school determined their degree of involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). It is clear that John and Stacey did not feel respected or treated as equals, or that they had some knowledge regarding their son's development and learning. They did not feel welcomed or invited. Therefore, they did not become involved. According to Gonzalez-Mena (1997), when parents do not feel respected and do not perceive the care of professionals working with their children, they disenroll their children from care and education. During member check meetings John and Stacy shared their decision to withdraw their son from the program.

Personal regard. Personal regard requires professionals to behave in ways that reduce families' feelings of vulnerability or dependence. Actions professionals take to minimize families' feeling of vulnerability will affect the level of trust they develop with schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Further, willingness "to extend themselves beyond what is formally required" (p. 126) will increase the trust in the professionals and programs. Maria illustrates this process:

> And I remember coming in one day last semester and I was in tears over a class and Mary [the program secretary] just embraced me. She hugged me

> and really made me feel like this is the place that I can release, that I can connect to.

Further, Maria adds,

> The teachers have always been supportive in asking about my school and how *I'm* doing. I guess it's really hard being a parent in college so I think that they were really sensitive to that and they understood that this is my situation. And I think they did everything that they could to, to help make it better for me. So, it's amazing. I love this Center. This has just been a wonderful experience for us.

In contrast, John and Stacey expressed that they felt vulnerable in the presence of their child's teacher. They did not feel the professionals at the program acknowledged what they needed; for them, this was a signal of a lack of personal regard. Stacey explains that the teacher does not respect her, does not call her [Stacey] by name, and during a meeting with the teacher Stacey began to ask a question and the teacher responded that she had to finish as the next family had arrived. Stacey describes her frustration that she and John are not given information and do not know how to obtain information about what their son is doing in class. She states,

> We're locked in the dark again. We feel like we're the ones left out. They are not willing to show me what he [their son] is talking about. It's like this forbidden wall.

Perceived competence. Families' perceptions are influenced by the way we, teachers, counselors, administrators and researchers, treat them. Comer (2001) suggests family involvement increases when professionals are inviting and supportive in their relationships with families. Jennifer offers,

> The school said we need some help with this and I happened to have some flexibility in my schedule and so I said, "Okay I'll come in and help."

Maria describes how she feels invited and welcomed by the teachers:

> Being involved in the classroom has really helped. It helps me to get to know the kind of kids that she's around and it helps me appreciate her learning abilities and where she's at in her stage so I can kind of compare and contrast what we're doing at home and what she's doing at school. I feel like it's been a pretty good involvement with the Center that I've had. And the teachers are really welcoming. They welcome me on trips they take. The teachers have been extremely helpful in making that connection open and allowing for the parents to come in and to spend time. They make it definitely a comfortable setting.

When the invitations to visit the schools originated from the professionals working with children, families perceived these invitations as a sign of trust. They felt valued. The invitations also demonstrated the competence of the professionals. Families seemed to be more willing to be involved, and give their time, even if their working schedules were busy. Stacey states,

> Once again, the curriculum is what SHE says. We have suggestions. Why don't we come in and teach an art class? There's so many things we could've offered. They're unwilling to accept any changes, any alterations that come from the outside are unwelcome. It's as if she says, "I don't need any more ideas."

Families in the study valued open and daily reciprocal communication. They wanted to be not just informed, but they desired to have their perspectives heard. These findings bring some light to our understanding of the complexity of families' perspectives and perceptions on home-school involvement with respect to social respect and personal regard and perceived competence. In addition the results show how issues of ethnicity, culture, social class, language, and immigration influence families' perceptions of trust, competence and reliability in the professionals that work with their children, and how these factors influence family involvement in their children's program.

Families' Wishes and Wants for Their Children

Parents in this study demonstrated interest in how the programs can support family members and families as a unit, the development of resilience, the support of their family resources and identify some strategies for professionals working with families to establish supportive networks and relationships with other families.

Families in this study hoped for everyday communication with professionals that allowed them to have a sense of how the day went for their children. This exchange of information can occur before or after school. Informal interaction can facilitate building relationships, and provide opportunities to share information about the needs of the families.

Parents believed they were supported when they received daily updates from the professionals at the Center. Eugene, a European professional father states that as a parent receiving information "was invaluable" and "amazing". Just having "some nugget, some little kernel" of his child's experiences that could be understood and shared with his child was important. He realizes that receiving this kind of information is "incredibly burdensome" and "would probably require more staff, and more time." Jennifer also wishes for daily information and states that parents "do like to get a report from the teachers at the end of the day." She is disappointed that daily reports are so difficult to get, and it is a "reality of being a teacher in a classroom with lots of kids" that parents do not get these reports. She notes that the end of the day "is the busiest time of day", and the teachers are "completely strapped and they're tired", and because they have focused on the kids it is "very hard" to provide the amount of information that parents want on a daily basis.

Families also wanted more assistance and connection with school programs through implementing and supporting daily routines. Katherine believes there is a "connection between the general philosophy and approach" towards children, but notes that it is an "indirect approach." She states that having a more direct tactic would strengthen the "connection between activities at school and at home." Jennifer provided a specific example, as she explains that her child was struggling to see the importance of brushing his teeth, and wondered if "encouraging him to" brush his teeth at school "might actually help him understand that everybody has to do this", and that daily hygiene is important. Jennifer suggests that connecting both home and school activities could be helpful for children and parents.

Families also wanted to have more informal interactions with other families that would provide opportunities to create relationships and friendships with other families in the programs. Katherine regrets not having the opportunity to talk to other parents when she picks up and drops off her child at school. She notes this lack of connection even though she received a list of parents and phone numbers. She suggests having potlucks on a regular basis as an opportunity to see and talk to other parents. Maria further explains her belief that parents want to be involved with the school and involved in the children's lives. She explains that meeting other parents is "really wonderful" and it is helpful to know who the parents are of the children are, and having these connections "really makes it feel like a community at the Center."

Programs can support and facilitate a social cohesion between families, and community, empowering them and supporting the development of their social capital. The coming together of families and children can provide opportunities for addressing parenting practices, health and social issues, as well as building stronger links between programs and parents. Programs that provide opportunities and spaces for families to connect can support the desires and efforts to maintain social relationships. In the three programs that participated in this study, there was no space other than the entrance or hallways where families could meet without interruptions. Providing the space can enable families to form acquaintances and friendships with other families. Maria, who is a student, shares that it "would be really nice" to have a computer space available for her as it would allow her to do homework and be close to her children. Having informal meeting spaces and time allowed families to share information and knowledge, talk about concerns, and seek help. This also leads to the sharing of common interests. This strategy was identified as particularly supportive for families who felt they were isolated in the community. Katherine shares that celebrating birthdays offers her times to meet with other parents, and that more time "outside of school" would offer time to "connect up and work together." This provides social time for the children as well as the adults.

In summary, families wished they had more time and more resources so they could become more involved in the programs. Families wanted more connection between home and school. They were eager to build relationships with other families and professionals that would enhance their children's development and learning, and also benefit the family as a whole. It is our challenge as counselors to initiate and build those bridges, create an empathic space to work with families to be culturally responsive to their needs, to be able to hear what they have to say, and to understand the dreams and hopes for the most precious gift, our children.

Limitations

This study is limited to six families who currently have children enrolled in three different early childhood programs. The design is also a qualitative interview study in which interview strategies were the main method of data collection; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other families. A prolonged engagement was not an aim of this study, and therefore limits the understanding of family involvement and the factors that enhance connections in the context of early childhood programs. However, some insights and suggestions can guide practitioners in their work with diverse families when navigating effective relationships between parents and the school system. Adjustments can be made to the specific suggestions offered here that would better fit the specific needs of other school programs.

Implications

Counselors have a critical role to play in shaping young children's lives and the community around them. Schools are sites where the basic attitudes, social skills, and values are transmitted from adults. The American School Counseling Association's national model for school counseling provides a framework that divides the functions of counselors in school settings into academic, career and personal/social counseling. Counselors need to understand cultural dimensions of children and their families, peers, and communities so as to promote each child's cultural/ethnic identity and self-concept.

In a consultation session, counselors can help to foster a greater level of understanding of the different perspectives of family involvement. Given our knowledge-base on relationships, training models on group dynamics, family systems, human development, and multicultural counseling, counselors can provide consultation to early childhood programs, teachers, administrators, families and school districts in how to build and maintain healthy relationships that include social respect and personal regard with diverse families. Counselors have an ethical responsibility to maintain relationships with families of students they are serving. Therefore, they can function as bridge between these two occasionally disconnected systems.

School counselors can lead efforts to help families build social networks to generate ideas on how to address conflict and problem solving. Counselors can provide opportunities for professional development for teachers and administrators in early childhood programs, specifically in the understanding of local meanings and strategies to improve family involvement when working with diverse families. Counselors can also provide training on how to provide safe environments in schools that will enhance children's achievement and individual development. Counselors can influence the cultural experiences utilizing social respect, personal regard, and perceived competence in early childhood settings that will enhance children's physical, emotional, cognitive and social development. Specifically, participants in this study mentioned that social respect included common courtesy and personal interest in their lives despite their differences. This respect was demonstrated by helping children and families meet life's daily challenges. Personal regard, or a lack thereof, created or sabotaged relationships. Participants underscored the importance that helping professionals take the time to listen and integrate suggestions that parents have for the child's education. Having regard for

the families can lead to fruitful and dynamic collaboration. When professionals demonstrated social respect and personal regard for the family member's concerns and thoughts, this enhanced the families' perception of confidence. When families did not feel respected, this diminished the families' belief in the abilities of the professional to facilitate learning for their children.

Future Directions

To fully understand family involvement and home-school relationships, further research using an ecological framework is warranted. Searching out and studying programs that are both inclusive of cultural diversity and demonstrate successful partnerships with diverse families would add to the body of research. In addition, studies that explore how issues of race, social class, and gender impact family involvement practices in urban areas would further current understandings of these phenomenon. Continued efforts for researching both similarities and differences of how families with different cultural values engage in their children's development and learning would be beneficial to administrators, teachers and counselors. Knowing how these similarities and differences manifest throughout different regions of the United States could enable professionals to understand how to better help families. Finally, continued scholarship with families and schools where more than one language is spoken can enable further knowledge of how languages impacts family involvement in schools. These research goals will help determine the most effective, creative and resourceful ways to involve diverse families with the school system.

Additionally, it is important to develop an ecological definition of family involvement that encompasses issues of social structures and privilege within home-based and school-based activities as well as home-school relationships. Family involvement is not just what families do; it also includes the relationship between professionals and families, as evident from the literature review and findings in this study.

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