Moving from toolkits to relationships: Family engagement for systems change

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the development and challenges involved in one school-university partnership over a four-year period, to learn what is needed to support teachers, future teachers and schools to be able to gather, understand, and use family knowledge in long term, mutually meaningful, and co-designed family engagement efforts. Here we explore impact on teacher-candidate, teacher, administrator, and university faculty understanding in one high poverty, majority Latino, rural elementary school in the northwestern USA. The processes and structures involved in family-school co-construction of informal and formal family engagement experiences are detailed in this case study. The account details the inclusion of knowledge and applied strategies from Early Childhood home visiting (Roggman, Boyce, & Innocenti, 2008), a Human Services emphasis on navigating systems and interprofessional collaboration (Mellin, Belknap, Brodie, & Sholes, 2015), and prioritizing the immersion of teacher-candidates in diverse, low income, communities of color (Murrell, 2001). This account reinforces the importance of sustaining long term engagement in meaningful inquiry-based field experiences grounded in community collaboration in the pre-service preparation of a family and community-engaged teacher. The development of trusting relationships with family as a goal in itself, is discussed as foundational to cultivation of partnership thinking in the education of primary school students**.**

Introduction

This account presents the development and challenges involved in one school-university partnership over a four-year period in order to learn what is needed to support teachers, future teachers, and schools to be able to gather, understand, and use family knowledge in long term, mutually meaningful, and co-designed family engagement efforts (Warren, Hong, Rubin, Uy, 2009; Hong, 2012). The aim of this work was to develop family engagement efforts in a rural, majority Latino, high poverty elementary school, in partnership with a college of education. The effort included an iterative process using a multidisciplinary framework of knowledge and applied strategies based in (1) Early Childhood home visiting traditions (Roggman, Boyce, & Innocenti, 2008), (2) a Human Services emphasis on inter-professional systems collaboration (Mellin, Belknap, Brodie, & Sholes, 2015) and (3) the prioritizing of the immersion of teacher-

candidates in diverse, low income communities of color (Murrell, 2001). These efforts

comprised one strand of many in a four year state education grant designed to both increase

student achievement and transform teacher preparation (Carney, Carroll, Nutting, Chu, Timmons

Flores, 2012; Chu, 2014) in diverse, high poverty schools.

Demographics

The elementary school student demographics remained consistent during the four years

of this study. Approximately two-thirds of the students identified as 'Hispanic/Latino' (with

approximately half of this group identified as 'English language learners'), one-third as 'White',

and 5% or less identified as one of the following: African-American, Asian, or of two or more

groups. Approximately 80% of the students were living in poverty (as indicated by the free and

reduced lunch data) throughout the 2012-2016 timeframe.

Table 1. Student K-5/6 Demographics (2012-2016)
(Data below reported by the school each October to the state education agency.)

Student Ethnicity	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016
Hispanic/Latino	66.4%	65.4%	57.8%	55.3%
White	30.0%	29.8%	36.8%	37.7%
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	1.6%	1.6%	1.6%	.9%
Asian	.5%	.5%	1.0%	1.6%
Black/ African-American	.5%	.7%	.8%	.9%
Two or more races	1.1%	2.1%	2.1%	3.4%
Total No. of Students	**440**	**436**	**386***	**438**

*The sixth grade level was eliminated due to district restructuring, resulting in approximately
fifty fewer students attending from 2014 to 2015.

Table 2. Family Income and Language Status (2012-2016)

Family Income/ Language status	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016
Free/reduced lunch	81%	79.9%	78.8%	77.2%
Transitional bilingual	34.2%	34.8%	30.7%	29.3%
Migrant	12.9%	17.3%	14.9%	19.6%

During 2012-2016 there were 19 to 21 teachers in grades K-5 or 6 each academic year. This group of elementary teachers identified themselves as 98% white, female, English speaking adults, with one teacher being fluent in Spanish.

Similarly, the annually placed student teachers working in their final teaching internship were also predominantly White, English-speaking females, with 2 of 28 interns being bilingual, interns of color (See: Table 3). Interns are described by one of the university faculty instructors and advisors as "having college majors focusing on language, literature and culture which emphasizes culturally-responsive practices and an assets-based perspective." In addition, approximately one quarter of the interns placed at this school experienced a summer of immersion in Mexican language and culture in the Michoacán region of Mexico where a majority of the Latino families in the school were born or had strong family ties.

Table 3. Year-Long Student Teacher Intern Demographics

Student teachers placement in internship	No. of interns	Ethnicity
2013	7	6 - White, female 1 - Latino, male, bilingual
2014	7	6 - White, female 1 - White, male
2015	6	5 - White, female 1 - Asian, female, bilingual
2016	8	7 - White, female 1 - Pacific-Islander, female

Also present were P-3, (prenatal to grade 3) early childhood education endorsement students engaged in supporting family engagement initiatives through service learning in their third or junior year *Family and Community Relationships* university course. Over the course of four years (2013-2016), 16 total students (ranging from 3-6 candidates per year) participated. All of

these students were female, with approximately half being students of color and half identifying as white.

Family Engagement

Families of elementary school children have numerous experiences with teachers, future teachers, and staff, both in and outside of their children's school. These multiple family-school interactions contribute over time to a community's feelings about school personnel, ranging from comfort and respect to a pervasive sense of invisibility (Flores, 2016; Hong, 2012). Similarly, family engagement literature suggests this continuum of family and community reactions is often associated with how school staff understand families' *social capital* or how aware teachers are of families' understandings of how a school operates (Bourdieu, 1986; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Pérez-Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Warren, 2005).

There is an extensive literature base on family engagement for teachers, teacher-candidates, and teacher-educators hoping to facilitate learning about the building of family partnerships (Epstein, 1995, 2009; Jeynes, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The role of the teacher who values trusting teacher-family relationships, especially with families whose culture, class norms, and values differ from the dominant European-American, middle class context, is to recognize the enormous influence all families have on a young child's overall development and dispositions toward learning (Halle, Zaffe, Calkins & Margie, 2000; Maccoby, 2000). Among a teacher's many responsibilities is the necessity to respect the life experiences of students and their families, and to consider the multiple 'funds of knowledge' provided by the care-givers and family environment (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). This requires the suspension of judgment and the challenging of implicit biases that we all hold towards others (Korsmo, 2016). Despite this shift away from deficit oriented parent engagement, the U.S. family-school

partnership literature is full of studies of families from non-dominant communities who "often feel unwelcome, powerless and marginalized in their children's schools" (Ishimaru, Torres, Salvador, Lott, Williams & Tran, 2016, p.851).

Trusting relationships built over time

In enacting family-school partnership practices, relationship-based processes are required to build authentic, trusting interactions over time that are mutually engaging and promote shared decision making by teachers and families (Hong, 2012). Enacting this partnership work requires teachers to understand the complex nuances of listening to families and co-constructing ways to use family knowledge in culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally sustaining ways (Paris, 2012). In addition, teachers need to learn specific communication, relationship building, and facilitation strategies to be culturally responsive (Ngo, 2010, p. 484), build cultural humility (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013; Oswald & Korsmo, 2015), and use the growing connections with families to build social capital for everyone (Barratt, 2012).

Working with families also requires a facilitative, flexible, and collaborative stance, common in early childhood home visiting traditions, rather than an expert and directive orientation (Roggman, Boyce, & Innocenti, 2008). Unfortunately, complex, long term relationship building processes are often reduced to 'toolkits' consisting of a series of interview questions (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), 2015) or brief, inconsistent, and infrequent basic communication with care-givers. All too often, this communication is unilateral, with teachers asking either personal questions of the family or general information about the student and/or the student's progress (but not reciprocating with information about themselves). Neither of these communication forms (while necessary in

certain contexts of sharing and soliciting information) bode well for developing trusting relationships with the goal of sharing power (Stewart, 2012).

Learning and applying family knowledge

A family's knowledge and culture, as it is embedded in daily practices and routines, has been identified by Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti as a family's 'funds of knowledge' (2005). Inviting a family to share their knowledge is routinely advocated by educational systems as a way for teachers to understand a student's world and to use it to enrich learning. A teacher's understanding of a family's 'funds of knowledge' may today be in danger of being reduced to shallowly understood educational jargon used to retain the 'greatest hits' (Warren et al, 2009) of school-directed and controlled activities, events, and conferences with families (Epstein, 2009). Brief documents on culturally relevant partnership practices, without accompanying professional development for how to use the suggested knowledge and skills, are being disseminated and promoted as 'ready to use' teacher 'toolkits' by state and federal agencies (ECLKC, 2015; Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), 2016). Analysis of teachers' understandings of the application of the cultural component of such practices has been summarized by Sleeter as "a persistence of faulty and simplistic conceptions of what culturally responsive pedagogy is…" which she cautions, "…must be directly confronted and replaced with more complex and accurate views." (2011, p.7).

Preparing future teachers for family engagement work

A qualitative analysis of teacher candidate reflective writing during involvement in family engagement initiatives over four years points to the importance of meaningful inquiry-based and family-engaged field experiences. Insights gained from pre-service teacher-education

students reflect previous work by Murrell (2001) and Zygmunt, Clark, Clausen, Mucherah & Tancock (2016), which advocates for a community teacher-immersion approach.

Reflection on the development of directly experienced trusting relationships as a goal in itself was discussed as foundational to the cultivation of partnership thinking in the preparation of future teachers. Increasing self-awareness of a diversity of teacher candidates' assumptions about the role of family culture and learning (Valenzula, 2016) was associated with observation and analysis of their experiences with teacher-mentors, community members, and family members in home visits and at family nights.

Background of Four Years of Family Engagement Efforts

A school-university family engagement subcommittee of a large grant partnership group began in the summer of 2012with the simple question, "*Why and how should teachers engage families in the life of an elementary school?*" The initial subcommittee was composed of three teachers, the school counselor, a teacher-educator, the grant partnership coordinator, and two school administrators. Initially no parents were included in the family engagement subcommittee because teachers stated they wanted to be able to openly discuss their questions about how to begin to learn from and with families. Learning in public with peers was common for these teachers, but learning with parents was not. The larger state grant leadership group of approximately twenty school staff, community members, and university faculty focused on a broad investigation of how to increase academic outcomes for the school's approximately 400 elementary students while simultaneously preparing teacher-candidates in field experiences in the same school (Chu, Jones, Clancy & Donnelly, 2014, p. 53).

The change model identified in the grant and developed over the first four years of implementation was that of inquiry-action teams or professional learning teams using a

participatory action research model (Abramson, 2008; Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000; DuFour, 2004; Kemmis & McTaggert, 2000). Teams were to be engaged in 'situated learning' in a 'community of practice' (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) in which mutual engagement might generate a shared set of negotiated practices. Teams were planned to include or invite the perspectives of teachers, families, teacher-educators, teacher-candidates, and other community members. The grant narrative described processes based on examining evidence, taking action, assessing results, and critically considering methods for improvement and then repeating the process. Ongoing communication among team and community members to foster collaborative action to achieve targeted outcomes was stressed (Carney, Carroll, Nutting, Chu & Timmons Flores, 2012). This focus appealed to, and seemed to build on assets of, the university faculty members' expertise in collaborative inquiry and the strongly relationship-based orientation of the rural school community.

The school's principal helped organize the sub-committee's initial discussions with a reminder of the school district's family engagement goal to "*engage families to provide encouragement and support to students, ensuring that student needs are met and their educational opportunities are enhanced.*" This policy directive clarified for the group that the purpose of family engagement initiatives must ultimately relate to the promotion of student learning. A meta-analysis of research associating family engagement with increased student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) was shared in the group. Individual members noted the importance of talking and/or reading to children as well as the need for a school to support a parent's high expectations, regardless of a families' educational level.

The case study research question that emerged was, "*How do we support teacher-candidates to learn about culturally relevant family engagement while a family-school*

partnership is being constructed?" Involved teachers agreed they also wanted to investigate this question as it related to their own learning. As Zeichner (2010) has also described, there was additional inquiry into whether or not teacher candidates would be able to solicit and then value knowledge about learning from different sources, including knowledge learned from families, as complimentary to their own academic knowledge.

How do families want to be engaged with the school?

During the 2012 fall sub-committee meetings, one of the teachers shared information from a district administrator who offered resources based heavily in Epstein's classic work on six types of family involvement with schools (1995/2009). The school-directed, family involvement areas included: (1) helping and learning about parenting skills and understanding child development and home conditions for learning; (2) communication about school programs and progress; (3) involvement as volunteers at the school; (4) involvement in learning activities at home; (5) participating in school decisions; (6) and coordinating and providing services. (Epstein, 2009; Minnesota Dept. of Education, 2014, p.6). These areas reflected the existing 2012-2013 school emphasis on periodic school open houses, kindergarten orientations, regular teacher conferences, communicating classroom volunteering opportunities, and offering decision making involvement through the Parent-Teacher Organization.

Involvement of parents at periodic all-school open house events was characterized by the attendance of hundreds of families. The fall school event was a school tradition with a welcoming atmosphere made up of teachers barbequing and serving food, and offering school information and children's activities. Community information and resources including free haircuts were offered on site. Teachers relayed that while this had traditionally been an enjoyable and well attended annual tradition, it had not resulted in most parents becoming engaged in other

parent involvement areas. Very small numbers of parents were volunteering in classrooms, and even smaller numbers consistently engaged in the decision-making processes of the Parent Teacher Organization, which consisted of only four white, middle class mothers.

The results of early 2012 surveys of both teachers and families regarding ways to better engage together were discussed at a leadership meeting. Teacher comments frequently related to a need to better engage with non-white students and English language learners, such as, "[We] must find more effective ways to reach parents of other cultures and non-English speaking families…" and "[I have a] strong desire to work to make all families full partners and active participants in a child's education." Similarly, parent comments also frequently related to a desire for such connections. Some comments presented specific suggestions for simple communication to aid in the process of feeling more connected, such as, "Call us more and tell us what is going on at school…" (Chu, Jones, Clancy & Donnelly, 2014). Other comments were more general in scope, including a desire for additional family-oriented activities within the school.

Challenges as understood and described by teachers

The family engagement and larger leadership group discussed over the fall of 2012 how the ethnic, class, and linguistic diversity of the school required different and multiple ways to learn how families wanted to be engaged. Members of the committee agreed that a family engagement needs assessment, in the form of a written questionnaire, should be administered at an open house event and other times at school. Others suggested this was necessary but not sufficient because it would probably not be completed by families with low literacy levels, including those multilingual families who spoke an indigenous dialect from the Oaxaca region of Mexico. Others stated they anticipated that the families not present at the fall open house, or

those who would probably not complete a written needs assessment, were also not participating in most other school events. Teachers explained this environment by referencing past professional development on the 'culture of poverty' (Payne, 1998/2005) and noted the stressors in low income families' lives that kept them away from participation in school. The dilemma for the group was to decide how to use the resources of a state partnership grant to connect with families, learn their perspectives, and link this new understanding to broad student achievement goals (Carney, Carroll, Nutting, Chu, & Timmons Flores, 2012).

Moving away from deficit models

Teachers were unaware of the critique of their prior professional development in Payne's 'culture of poverty' framework, frequently cited by academics as an example of deficit thinking. An analysis of Payne's characteristics of the 'hidden rules of poverty' was shared by university faculty as overgeneralized to all low income people, and shared by many social scientists and practitioners who felt these 'rules' essentialized or created poverty stereotypes due to a lack of a research base for the framework's assertions (Bohn, 2007; Bomer, Dworin, May & Semingson, 2008; Gorski, 2013; Korsmo, 2013). Members of both the sub-committee and the larger leadership group were receptive to thinking beyond this individualized poverty framework in portions of bi-monthly meetings and to moving to a systems analysis of family engagement. The group began to consider school factors that might be influencing limited family participation outside of highly attended open houses.

Family Visits and Family Nights

Out of these discussions, the group identified home visits to be organized on the families' schedules as one action to initiate change. In the spring of 2013, home visiting, more commonly used in early childhood programs, was chosen (Roggman, Boyce, & Innocenti, 2008) with an

emphasis on building a positive relationship through listening to families' hopes and dreams. There was a desire to step away from the sometimes negative connotations associated with social service "home visits", which conjured images of Child Protective Services or other clinical or punitive family interventions. With this perspective, the group preferred to refer to them as "family visits", as the intention was to visit with and get to know the families and not to otherwise check on the home. This subtle but important variation helped in the reframing of these visits to consider the intent of relationship building and not an investigation into the home life of children and families.

Members of the leadership group wondered, *"If teachers facilitated a more reciprocal face to face dialogue, would parent perspectives be shared and could this lead to an increase in parent engagement in the school?"* (Chu, Jones, Clancy & Donnelly, 2014). Teachers were offered professional development on ways to engage families in culturally responsive conversations, rather than taking on an 'expert' stance of talking at families (Scheinfeld, Haigh & Scheinfeld, 2008, pp. 115-128). The mostly white teacher group asked for and received professional development on Oaxacan culture and family visiting interaction protocols for building relationships with families (Roggman, Boyce, & Innocenti, 2008). Together a Latino paraeducator whose family was from Oaxaca and a Spanish speaking teacher facilitated the candid discussion of how to interact on a home visit. A previously published account of this period described efforts as:

> *In the spring of 2013, sixteen families volunteered to have teachers come*
> *to their home or to meet privately at school to learn their hopes and dreams for*
> *their child. The family engagement subcommittee adopted this simple focus*
> *in order to focus on understanding how multilingual families wanted to communicate*
> *with the school and to put into practice the belief that parent partnerships*
> *would emerge if all families participated in a process in which they were*
> *treated with respect and listened to as people who are rich in ideas.* (Chu, Jones, Clancy
> & Donnelly, 2014, p. 54-55)

Next, a second family visit found families deciding on beginning a 'family night' at school:

> *In the fall of 2013, teachers returned to the same family homes visited the previous winter and spring and requested the families critique a menu of choices coming from home visit and family engagement subcommittee discussions. A once a week story sharing, family literacy group for parents of children in preschool to first grade, and an afterschool heritage language club or Club de Lectura (Prospera Initiatives, 2012) for second to sixth graders was chosen by families from a list of options. Families identified that beginning with dinner in the school cafeteria would bring the school community together at the six pm start of the weekly, two hour family nights.* (Chu, Jones, Clancy & Donnelly, 2014, p. 59)

In the third year, family visits continued the work of the previous years, as described in the

school's grant update newsletter.

> *The "Hopes and Dreams" visits piloted last year and in the fall have led to more open relationships with Mixteco-and Spanish-speaking families in the school. School staff expanded the family visits to a new group of families in April. This time they focused on families with 5th and 6th grade students who will be moving to middle school in the fall. These visits gave the staff an opportunity to discuss the transition in a comfortable setting and to address any concerns the families had. They also got to learn more about younger siblings still attending Washington School.*

> *After each period of home visiting, "a display of the families words, family photos, and children's drawings of their families. This documentation on the walls of the elementary school stood as evidence of the commitment to the collaborative work of teachers, teacher-educators and teacher candidates to join with families ....and reflecting on mutual needs, interests and goals* (Chu, Jones, Clancy & Donnelly, 2014, p. 64-65).

Continuing into the third and fourth years, weekly Family Night evenings in the winter months

returned as noted in the grant update in the school newsletter:

> *On Thursday, January 22nd, 2015, Family Nights got off to a great start with over 100 people attending....Families gathered for dinner at 6:00pm followed by a variety of activities for all ages. ESL classes that began last year are continuing with a teacher from the local Community Action Agency. In response to parent and staff requests, there is also a conversational Spanish class being taught by the school's head secretary. A teacher, is heading up a knitting class, and the library is open for story time, homework help and computer access. Also continuing from last year is the popular Club de Lectura, a heritage literacy program for Spanish speaking students.*

In the winter of 2016, Family Nights continued by popular demand with the usual

community dinner and the same wide variety of learning opportunities including family

suggested additions of a bilingual story time in the library facilitated by a teacher and a parent,

and a game called *Loteria (matching card game in Spanish).*

During this period, the leadership group was offered ideas for consideration by university

faculty from Hong's (2012) research from a school with a similar majority Latino immigrant

population located in an urban, rather than a rural, context. Instead of focusing on activities,

Hong (2012) found it was the many ways relationship building processes were emphasized that

was foundational to engaging and sustaining a process of inviting and integrating family

engagement in the school. The initiatives enacted were considered with the following processes

more commonly associated with community organizing or Human Services professional

practices with an emphasis on: (1) *mutual engagement* (e.g., the interests and needs of both the

school and the family are equally considered), (2) *authentic relationships* (e.g., an ecological

focus or using many ways to interact both in and outside of school), and (3) *shared leadership

and power* (e.g., collective decision making with families and school professionals) (Hong, pp.

30-31). This criteria was helpful in contrasting the difference in effectiveness of the first effort at

a family needs assessment with the subsequent family visits and family nights. Appendix 1

summarizes the purposes, processes, structures and changes that applied to the new engagement

efforts.

Decision making - Parent Action Team

During the third year of the partnership grant work, a participatory action research group

referred to as the *Parent Action Team* was formed. Participants were initially selected through

connections among staff, parents, and administrators initiated during home visits and Family

Nights. The group was made up of four district staff including teachers and administrators, five parents, and one Human Services faculty member. The group used a 'community navigator' approach, which valued the insider knowledge of frequently marginalized, low income, Spanish speaking families in the school (Korsmo, et al, 2015). The navigator approach was selected based on its previous success engaging low-income community members in action research (Winter, Korsmo, Dallmann, Battis & Anderson, 2007). The strategy of the group's initial weekly informal meetings was to learn about each other through activities such as sharing family artifacts and develop a sense of relationship and community. The group then used the trust these dialogues generated to consider together how to increase family engagement in the school. The group's jointly researched journal article explains the power of developing family engagement that begins with personal relationships:

> *The results of the participants being more connected to one another builds social capital for each individual .... Perhaps more salient than that, however, is the contagion of connectivity, and a growing trust and sense of community that is felt throughout the greater school community. ... A significant outcome thus far in the Parent Action Team's time together is the degree to which all individuals are able to spread a sense of trust in school personnel and diverse sectors of families within the school community throughout their own personal networks. Similarly, school personnel are now able to speak more from personal experience when engaging with their colleagues and discussing families' strengths and aspirations. The members of the group can, in a sense, vouch for each other, with parents speaking to other parents about their positive experiences working with school personnel, and vice versa, with school personnel able to speak first-hand with their colleagues about the strengths and assets of the families, thus stretching their various circles of influence....* (Korsmo, et. al., 2015, p. 5)

It is important to note that the same teachers who had not been comfortable with parents being on the family-engagement subcommittee two and a half years earlier, were excited to participate in the Parent Action Team after developing awareness of the benefits of engaging families at all levels of the effort.

Influences on child outcomes during the Parent Action Team year

The state partnership grant also funded academic interventions not explored in this account. Concurrent to the previously described family engagement work, teachers were engaged in ongoing professional development cycles to improve student achievement. The two professional development opportunities teachers most frequently cited in bi-monthly grant leadership team meetings for positively impacting their ability to promote student learning were Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) and Professional Learning Community (PLC) protocols and processes. Additionally, counter to the previous deficit-oriented learning, additional professional development was provided for the entire body of school personnel, which focused on poverty and privilege through an asset orientation (Korsmo, 2013).

Over 90% of teachers between 2013-2015 completed a GLAD week long professional development training (Be Glad Language Acquisition Design, n.d.) in language and literacy development with a literacy professor from the university partnership group. This program was chosen because of its evidence-based impact on children who were English Language Learners (ELLs) and the general positive impact on all children's engagement through active learning strategies. A northwest regional research study "…*found that after one year of implementation, ELLs in Project GLAD classrooms performed better in vocabulary, reading comprehension and two aspects of their essay writing (ideas and organization), compared to ELLs in control classrooms."* (Deussen, T. & Rodriguez-Mojica, C., 2014). The elementary school newsletter reported after GLAD training,

> *In the fall of 2014, the school conducted a review of the school's English Language Learner (ELL) data by looking at English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) data from the previous year and historical ELPA data. While this particular assessment has changed over the years, the elementary school's data was compared with state and like-school data. The school earned a State Achievement Award in 2014 for improvement in*

> *English language learning. This award was based upon student improvement on the ELPA and on ELL student performance on state assessments.*

This effective professional development is noted because it was an intervention in the school unrelated to family engagement, which may have significantly contributed to an improved social climate among teachers and students in the school. Unsolicited, teachers expressed extreme satisfaction with their new GLAD active teaching skills, knowledge, and related ongoing professional development peer conversations in most bi-monthly grant leadership team meetings between 2013-16.

(Suggested revision for active voice) During the same 2013-2015 period almost every teacher in the school participated in another week-long intervention known as Professional Learning Community (PLC) training by outside consultants (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006/2010). Teachers learned specific collaborative inquiry and action processes for their identified purpose of joining with their grade level teaching peers to examine their teaching practices and their student assessment data for improved student learning (DuFour, 2004).

Understanding this background context is important when reading the following Parent Action Team's simultaneous reference to reduced behavioral intervention referrals. Due to multiple, simultaneous interventions over the same time period, beginning with family visits and family nights and continuing with teacher GLAD and PLC professional development, it is impossible to know which intervention was most impactful to children's more pro-social behavior and teachers' more asset-orientation approach to addressing behavior challenges in the classroom. However, the single academic year of work by the Parent Action Team during this period, clearly demonstrates the synthesis of many efforts culminating in the following positive child outcomes:

During the 2013-14 academic year, prior to the formation of the Parent Action Team, data show there were a total of 420 (behavioral intervention) referrals, with 140 in October, 110 in November, 80 in December, and 100 in January. During the current (2014-15) academic year, while the Parent Action Team has been operating, those numbers have declined by more than 60 percent overall, to 67 in October (54 percent reduction), 50 in November (45 percent reduction), 28 in December (65 percent reduction), and 19 in January (81 percent reduction). It is believed that these significant reductions in intervention referrals of students is due to a combination of factors, including both an increased sense of positive community within the school, and among students and their families, and an increased likelihood that teachers and staff will consider working with students in alternative, more relational means than sending them to a referral. In other words, it is believed that there is a shift from deficit-leaning, corrective measures to an asset- and relational-oriented practice of engagement. This reduction in intervention referrals transfers directly over to a reduction in negative interaction between families and school personnel, as well as time students spend removed from their learning and social, community-building environment (Korsmo, et al, 2015, p.6)

Teacher candidates, engaged in community immersion, impacting the classroom

In addition, during the four years of the general family engagement work, four cohorts of between six and eight teacher candidates (referred to as *interns*) in their final year-long student teaching internship from the involved university were placed in the school from 2012 to 2016. A goal stated by the university faculty and the mentoring teachers was for these interns to become part of the community, rather than to be, what faculty felt some had been in other school placements, short-term observers of a community. In this effort, the interns began their community immersion with field trips. Their community immersion was viewed as an opportunity to strengthen the interns' understandings of a place-based approach to social studies teaching. The interns investigated the geography, ecology, economy, history, and sociology of the local area before their teaching began with local community members acting as community experts and mentors in preparation for the interns' facilitation of a socio-cultural inquiry project with the elementary children. The interns were therefore focused learning specific information

about the characteristics, community resources, and family knowledge in each school

neighborhood.

One of the challenges teachers and interns identified for getting families to volunteer in

the classroom was the agricultural jobs that many parents cited as preventing daytime classroom

participation. An instructional technology professor and grant Principle Investigator (PI) in the

partnership group suggested a way to apply community and family knowledge to the classroom

might be to give the children small tablet computers purchased from the grant funds, and have

them interview a family member at home. Then the parent's story could be shared virtually with

the other children. The school newsletter described this effort as the *My Family & Neighborhood*

Community phase of a long term project that was implemented in one grade level in year three:

> *Second grade students at our elementary school have been learning about "community" in social studies. They are using their iPads to tell the story of their local communities: our school, their family and neighborhood, and our area:*

> *In their videotaped interviews of a family member, students asked where the person being interviewed originally came from and why they left that community to come to our area. Later each student found that location on a Google map and took a screen snapshot of it to include in their video. Images and videos from the students were then brought together…to create a digital story about where their family came from.*

The use of technology to bring family stories and knowledge into the classroom was a creative

way to break through systemic barriers to family classroom participation.

Starting a pilot program to address the concrete needs of families in poverty

In year four of the grant, a school coordinator was hired to develop an evidence-based,

Communities in Schools program. The program's vision of supporting low income families by connecting

them to needed community resources appealed to the partnership group.

> *Struggling students and their families have a hard time accessing and navigating the maze of public and private services. There may be ample resources in a community, but rarely is there someone on the ground who is able to connect these resources with the schools and students that need them most. Through a school-based coordinator, we bring*

these local resources into the school where they are accessible, coordinated and accountable (Communities in Schools, [http://ciswa.org/our-unique-model)](http://ciswa.org/our-unique-model).

Despite several years of family-school partnership work, a small number of families, many of whom were white families from generations of rural poverty, had needs the teachers felt they did not have either the time or the expertise to handle. The new coordinator shared:

I have been working extensively with two families regarding housing. Both are large families (4 and 5 children, respectively). We discussed the local community action agency resources but they were already on a waiting list for those, So, we are looking into other options such as Friendship House, Habitat for Humanity, the local Family Center, etc.

The school has a great partnership with the food bank in downtown. If a family is in need, all they need to do is fill out a form stating how many people are in the house, and then every Friday I go down to the Food Bank to pick up bags of food that have been prepared for each family to use over the weekend.

Being on site at the school makes me accessible to the staff and families but I am not tied to the day's bell schedule. This provides me with the flexibility to come and go as needed throughout the day. I have been able to make home visits to talk to families regarding specific concerns they (or teachers/staff) have. Teachers can come to me with concerns and then they can return to the classroom and focus on teaching, knowing that someone is following up with the family.

A summary and brief analysis of school and community engagement efforts including the Parent Action Team, increased classroom engagement with family knowledge, and the beginning of the Communities in Schools program coordination is in Appendix I.

Discussion and Conclusion

Teacher candidates just beginning their teacher preparation learned that listening and learning from and with families involves a long term process of cultivating authentic relationships and sharing power in order to strive to understand and use the knowledge of families in school. Teacher candidates were able to experience the different social capital (Daly, 2010) present in a school community of mostly middle class white teachers and a majority Latino, low income parent group. They experienced and learned about the ongoing efforts of

school inquiry teams to take responsibility for working as co-creators and co-learners with families. In this way they saw what it means to strive to link social capital (Mellin, Belknap, Brodie & Sholes, 2015) rather than to accept deficit based family poverty frameworks which do not offer ways to bridge the divide between families and schools. Their own parallel inquiry into these engagement efforts seemed to challenge their past images of the teacher as the expert and the parent as the learner (Barton, et al, 2004). Instead of a primary focus on having a 'toolbox' of easy to implement parent engagement strategies, candidates learned engaging families is more like the development of strands in a very complex weaving, requiring a long term commitment.

Four years of efforts at increasing family-school engagement was summarized by a synthesis of interviews of teachers, families, university faculty, and community participants in the grant partnership project as:

> *The organizational climate shifted from one of school-based relationships reinforcing the status quo to one of a gradual openness to generating new ideas with members of the university and with the students' families.* (Corbin, Chu, Carney, Clancy, Donnelly, in press).

If the relationship-growing efforts were summarized in terms stated by teachers, families and teacher candidates in collaborative meeting contexts, they might be labeled: (1) *Learning about family hopes and dreams on home visits,* (2) *Working together creates belonging and solves problems, and* (3) *School is a place where learning is for everyone.*

The challenge of sustaining the work of this complex family-school-university partnership now in its fourth year is becoming more evident. The Parent Action Team has dispersed, with infrequent communication due in large part to competing commitments for time, however the Parent Teacher Organization is growing and diversifying and represents the entire school community. The Family Nights are wildly successful with hundreds of families participating, and

the school has built on its open house tradition, but with a more inclusive, family-teacher designed learning and social environment.

The challenge for involved partners is to accept the sometimes unpredictable and organic process of a parent engagement effort that is co-lead by a coalition of school, community and university staff. Commitment to collaborative process criteria (Hong, 2012) for partnerships seems critical to sustaining meaningful family engagement rather than adherence to traditional teacher-driven structures and activities (Epstein, 2009). Professional development for teachers in PLC processes seems to have offered teachers adult facilitation and communication strategies they did not receive in their teacher preparation, which is also transferable to family communication contexts. The inquiry team approach offered more embedded 'community of practice" professional development for both teacher and teacher-educators with a focus on building adult relationships, sharing power, and letting go of the expert stance in exchange for developing partnership thinking (See: Figure I). Offering field experiences to teacher candidates about the change process while it is happening has left some unanswered questions. Candidates should be followed into their teaching careers to see if their pre-service experiences will impact their work with families and meet Sleeters's call for deficit views "…to be directly confronted and replaced with more complex and accurate views." (2011, p.7).

Figure I. Community-based teacher preparation: Engaging in the changing ecologies of family-school-university partnership work

WHY? Strengthen adult learning about navigating school and community systems to support student needs and educational opportunities

WHAT?

Building mutually beneficial, trusting relationships is the foundational goal for all family-school engagement

HOW?

Inquiry Teams:
Listen and observe, collect data, reflect/plan/act, and revise together, over and over

WHEN?

No shortcuts: Significant time needed to invest in developing strategies for sharing power and collective decison making

Long term engagement means expecting and living with tensions of different school and family logics, expectations and goals

WHERE?

Many sources of knowlege are valued: Culture and the lived experiences of families and teachers along with interprofessional perspectives from the community and university

*__Inquiry Teams__ (involving family home visiting and family night work using Early Childhood Education home visiting and communication/interaction strategies as described by Roggman et al, 2008) were also known as: *Parent Action Teams* (PACs as described by Participatory Action Research criteria as adapted by Korsmo, et al, 2015) and *Professional Learning Communities* (grade level teacher PLCs using criteria as defined by DuFour, 2004). Teacher candidate field experience inquiry into family engagement strategies follows a similar process (See: Appendix I).

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Appendix I – Summary and Analysis of Four Years of Family Engagement Initiatives

When? Grant Year	What? Activity or Focus	Why? Who? Purpose/ Goals	How? Processes/ Strategies	How? Structures/ Policies	Change Process Reflection by Leadership Team*
Year One (2012-2013)	**Family Needs Assessment Plan**	School staff learn families views of current parent involvement opportunities & experiences at school	Focus Group/ Questionnaire administered at large all school event	Experts gather data in ways easiest for school to obtain, compile and disseminate to funder	Many parents do not participate, **lacks authentic relationships, power sharing or engagement in school**.
Years Two Three Four (2013-2016)	**Home or Family Visit (at school or other community location)**	School/families increase mutual trust, learn families' perspectives & offer new engagement opportunities	**Relationship building goal** requiring significant time and professional development for teachers	Explore new collaboration best for many ELL families not well represented at other events	-Safe, welcoming & asset-based climate - **Prioritizes the relationship** as the goal in itself -Expanded to district & region
Year Two (2013-2014)	**Family Read Series** (in later years a version of this incorporated into Family Nights)	Building oral language via songs, stories and daily life conversations w/ picture books	**Bilingual, Bicultural facilitation** w/teacher, paraeducator, & college students	Home visit families invited w/ provided family meal, book & child program	**-Power sharing** in small group discussions through engagement w/ emergent themes
Years Two Three Four (2013-2016)	**Family Night** (later named 'Wolf Nights' after the school mascot)	Culturally responsive transformation of long standing open-house tradition.	**Flexible, welcoming & based on combined family-school interests**	Dates, times, location & format refined each year with family/teacher feedback	-Many options for learning & social activities, -Whole **school intersection of school/families interests.** **-Co-designed & co-facilitated.**
Years Two Three	**Parent Teacher**	Problem focused	Indirect cultivation of parent leaders	Translation & invitation from principal	**-Information sharing & decision making,**

Four (2013-2016)	**Organizatio n (PTO) Member Expansion**		in other activities		expanded to more representative group including Spanish speaking families
Year Three (2014-2015)	**Parent Action Teams**	Exploration to support sharing family perspectives, w/power to advise principal	Reflective partners, co-learners & co-planners	University faculty facilitation for one year only	Cultivation of new leaders & voices for making meaning of families as **equal partners in school decision making**
Years Two Three Four **(2013-2016)**	**Classroom Curriculum Invites Family/ Community Voices to be Documented**	From expert guides to respectful working alliance	From traditional to virtual visit (via I-Pads) technology innovations	Teacher candidate community immersion visits	**-Family engagement intersects w/ student academic/social identity development**
Years Two Three Four (2013-2016)	*Communities in Schools* **staff hired**	Recognition of the role of the school in preventing and problem solving needs in times of crisis with families	Assess & guide families & educators in local resources by professional	Recognition of human services systems navigation needs not understood by teachers	-Response to meeting strong, resource needs of some families -**Meets mutual resource needs of school & families**

*Hong's (2012) three family engagement processes used to critique efforts are the development of: (a) authentic relationships, (b) sharing of power/leadership and (c) mutual engagement.