

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283196609>

Fostering Family–School and Community–School Partnerships in Inclusive Schools: Using Practice as a Guide

Article in *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* · September 2015

DOI: 10.1177/1540796915594141

CITATIONS

79

READS

2,912

5 authors, including:



[Shana J Haines](#)

University of Vermont

48 PUBLICATIONS 647 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



[Judith M. S. Gross](#)

Indiana University Bloomington

33 PUBLICATIONS 475 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



[Martha Blue-Banning](#)

University of Kansas

29 PUBLICATIONS 1,246 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)




[Grace L. Francis](#)

George Mason University

96 PUBLICATIONS 810 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Fostering Family–School and Community–School Partnerships in Inclusive Schools: Using Practice as a Guide

Research and Practice for Persons
with Severe Disabilities
2015, Vol. 40(3) 227–239
© The Author(s) 2015
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1540796915594141
rps.sagepub.com


Shana J. Haines¹, Judith M. S. Gross², Martha Blue-Banning²,
Grace L. Francis³, and Ann P. Turnbull²

Abstract

Partnerships between school staff, families, and community members are vital for ensuring the success of all students in inclusive schools. This article reports the results of a synthesis of two original studies: one study that examined the perspectives of family members and another study that examined the perspectives of community partners in developing partnerships with school staff at six inclusive knowledge development sites located in five geographic regions within the United States. The current synthesis study analyzes the original studies' overlapping themes to inform concentrated efforts aimed at strengthening family and community partnerships in inclusive schools. Themes of this synthesis study include positive, inviting, and inclusive school culture; strong administrative leadership driven by a clear vision of inclusion; attributes of trusting partnerships; and opportunities for reciprocal partnerships and involvement. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

Keywords

family, school, partnerships, inclusion, culture

Partnerships between school staff, families, and community members are vital for ensuring the success and full participation of all students (Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sailor & McCart, 2014). Trusting partnerships among these groups contribute to student success and, ultimately, to creating a thriving and democratic community (Auerbach, 2010; Burrello, Hoffman, & Murray, 2005; Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996), especially in schools with diverse populations (Leonard, 2011; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Such partnerships result in benefits for all stakeholders (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), including improved student learning, achievement, behavior, and attendance (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Epstein, 2011; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lawson, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2014); educator efficacy (Haines, McCart, & Turnbull, 2013; Lawson, 2003); enhanced family quality of life (Burke & Hodapp, 2014; Summers et al., 2007); and increased connections among community members (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

Trusting family and community partnerships are integral to the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center's approach to inclusive school reform. The SWIFT Center is a national K-8 technical assistance center that promotes learning and academic achievement of all students, with and

¹University of Vermont, Burlington, USA

²University of Kansas, Lawrence, USA

³George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Shana J. Haines, University of Vermont, 533 Waterman Building, Burlington, VT 05405, USA.

Email: sjhaines@uvm.edu

without disabilities. SWIFT asserts that all school and district staff, family members, and community members share responsibility for the success of all students. SWIFT uses evidence-based practices to transform leadership, policies, organizational structures, and relationships to support improved academic and behavior outcomes for all students, including those with the most extensive support needs. Trusting family-school and community-school partnerships comprise 2 of the 10 features of SWIFT, an evidence-based model for inclusive school reform (McCart, Sailor, Bezdek, & Satter, 2014; see www.swiftschools.org). SWIFT describes family-school partnerships as follows:

Trusting family-school partnerships, contributing to positive student outcomes, occur when (a) family members and school staff have respectful, mutually beneficial relationships with shared responsibility for student learning; (b) family members have options for meaningful involvement in their children's education and in the life of the school; and (c) the school responds to family interests and involvement in a culturally responsive manner. (www.swiftschools.org)

SWIFT describes community-school partnerships as follows:

Trusting community-school partnerships, contributing to positive student outcomes, occur when schools work collaboratively with community members, agencies, organizations, businesses and industry around common goals, resulting in (a) direct participation by community representatives in school leadership and (b) enhanced community resources. (www.swiftschools.org)

SWIFT combines the features of family-school partnership and community-school partnership into one domain of its framework titled "Family and Community Engagement." As noted in SWIFT's definitions above, however, family-school partnership and community-school partnership surpass the typical forms of "engagement" by establishing partnerships based on reciprocal relationships and common goals. Epstein (2011) suggested merging family-school partnership with community-school partnership (i.e., family-community-school partnerships) to bring together the three spheres of influence in which children learn and develop.

During the first phase of work, the SWIFT Center conducted in-depth exploratory studies of six schools identified as knowledge development sites (KDS), summarized by Shogren, McCart, Lyon, and Sailor (2015). As part of the in-depth study of the KDS, SWIFT Center conducted focus groups, separately, with (a) family members of students with disabilities enrolled at the KDS; (b) family leaders at the KDS, some of whom had children with disabilities; and (c) community partners identified by the KDS. The SWIFT Center published numerous studies as part of its inquiry of the six KDS schools. One study (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, et al., 2015) focused on family-school partnerships, and another (Gross et al., in press) focused on community-school partnerships. Many similarities between the findings of these two original studies are evident, and synthesizing the themes from them can inform efforts to foster partnerships among families, communities, and inclusive schools as well as future research on partnerships. The purpose of the present article is to synthesize the findings of these two original studies, highlighting the implications for forming partnerships among families, communities, and schools.

In the following sections, we provide detail on the two original studies. Then, we present the findings of this synthesis study, which highlights the original studies' overlapping themes. Finally, we connect these themes to the literature and discuss implications for practice and research.

The Original Studies

Family-School Partnership KDS Study

The family focus groups were designed to better understand factors that facilitated family-school partnerships from the perspective of parents of children with and without disabilities (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, et al., 2015). A total of 58 family members (49 mothers and 9 fathers) participated in 1 of 11 focus groups. Six of these focus groups consisted of family members of children with disabilities. Student disabilities and needed supports varied widely. The other 5 of these focus groups consisted of family members

considered by school personnel to be “family leaders” (e.g., highly involved in school activities, planning, and governance), some of whom had children with disabilities. Based on a sampling grid of diverse characteristics provided by the research team for recruitment, each KDS invited family members to participate in the focus groups. When inviting participants, the SWIFT research team asked KDS personnel to (a) follow the criteria for inclusion with each focus group (i.e., either be a school leader or have a child with a diagnosed disability enrolled in the school) and (b) include demographic diversity to reflect their schools’ population.

Themes of family–school partnerships. The findings of this study resulted in five main themes: (a) school culture of inclusion, (b) administrative leadership, (c) attributes of partnerships (i.e., commitment, respect, and communication), (d) opportunities for family involvement, and (e) positive outcomes for all students.

School culture of inclusion. The findings of the family study (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, et al., 2015) showed that a positive school culture, based on inclusive beliefs, values, and attitudes, led to respectful and caring behaviors of all school stakeholders. The authors also found that such a culture contributed to a school commitment to meeting all students’ needs in the general education curriculum, which helped families of students with diverse needs feel a strong sense of belonging in the school community. KDS’s use of inclusive practices enabled all students to participate as valued members of the school community, which fed the positive school culture. The study cited positive school culture as a ubiquitous factor that facilitated trusting family–school partnerships, especially as many parents spoke with great emotion about their experiences at previous schools where they did not feel the same sense of belonging and commitment to their children’s well-being.

Administrative leadership. Francis and colleagues also found that many family members attributed the development of a positive school culture and trusting partnerships to administrative leadership that was effective, involved, and based on high expectations. Participants characterized effective administrators as approachable, available, responsive, and caring. Administrators who were involved in the students’ day-to-day lives were able to address family concerns related to bullying, academics, behavior, and student–teacher relationships. Furthermore, families appreciated administrators holding high expectations for all students and school staff.

Commitment, respect, communication, and professional competence. Francis and colleagues reported that commitment, respect, and communication were positive attributes of family–school partnerships. Families felt assured by teachers’ commitment to the child and family as well as their dedication to reaching the high expectations they held for the children. Families described their trust in school professionals who were competent in addressing students’ needs in a flexible manner, willing to learn, and used proactive and creative educational approaches. Families described school staff’s respect for children as being manifested through empathy, sensitivity, compassion, and kindness, while respect for families was evidenced through listening to them, valuing their knowledge, and treating them as equals in educational decision making. Families also underscored the importance of communication in bridging home and school environments to ensure student success, and they emphasized that communication is nonverbal as well as verbal, has multiple modes, and is a reciprocal responsibility.

Opportunities for family involvement. The KDS provided numerous meaningful family involvement opportunities, including opportunities for families to be school leaders and to support the “life of the school” (i.e., contributing to the day-to-day functioning and enhancement of the school; Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, et al., 2015). Participants discussed helping draft policies, designing and implementing programs and systems, and belonging to decision-making committees as opportunities for being school leaders. Families supported the life of the school by assisting teachers in multiple ways (e.g., providing clerical assistance, leading small academic or social skills groups, attending field trips, volunteering at school events, donating materials to the classroom) and attending school events (e.g., international nights, math nights, back-to-school events, and parent education nights).

Positive outcomes for all students. Francis and colleagues also found that positive outcomes for all students increased family–school partnerships at the KDS. Participants identified that the additional staffing available in inclusive classrooms benefited students without disabilities because paraprofessionals and other staff assisted all students and enabled more differentiation of instruction. Families also noted that inclusive practices increased everyone’s sense of belonging and decreased the emphasis on differences, focusing instead on students’ strengths and needs. This increased sense of belonging was especially important to parents of children with disabilities, who attributed improvements in their children’s academics, social skills, behavior, and friendships to inclusive education.

Community–School Partnership KDS Study

SWIFT’s community focus groups were designed to learn about the kinds of community partnerships the KDS developed (Gross et al., in press). In addition, the study examined factors that facilitated strong community partnerships in these schools. Forty community members participated in one of five focus groups; 32.5% of participants were male and 67.5% were female. SWIFT researchers asked KDS school personnel to invite anyone who they considered to be a community partner. The resulting participants represented community businesses, state and city agencies and departments, cultural organizations, colleges/universities, and non-profit organizations.

Kinds of community partnerships. Gross and colleagues found a diversity of reciprocal community partnerships, including partnerships with universities, social service organizations, local and non-local businesses, non-profit organizations, and local municipalities. The reciprocal nature of these partnerships meant that the school and its constituents (i.e., students, families, teachers, staff) benefited from all community partnerships with the school, and each community partner benefited from its interactions with the schools, including benefits to their business or program, personal satisfaction or growth, and/or enhanced knowledge of inclusive values and practices.

University–school partnerships, that is, connections between institutions of higher education’s teacher preparation programs and KDS, provided the schools with student teachers, professional development, and continuing education (e.g., master’s degree programs) to benefit school staff and students with and without disabilities. In turn, university partners had trustworthy, high-quality student teacher placements and space for on-site seminars for their student teachers. Social service partnerships included health care, child advocacy, community mental health, developmental disability, and juvenile detention agencies that partnered with KDS to provide their services at the school. These partnerships benefited the KDS by facilitating collaboration, helping keep students in school and engaged in after-school activities, providing free or reduced-cost health services (e.g., medical, dental, vision), and referring students and families for disability or needs-based services. Correspondingly, social service organizations benefited from having convenient access for the families they served. Business partnerships were developed with a wide range of local (e.g., pest control company) and national (e.g., Reebok, an educational technology company) for-profit businesses that often made tangible contributions (e.g., financial, material) to the school. These contributions resulted in such benefits to the business as advertising/name recognition and product improvement as a result of feedback from the KDS. Partnerships with non-profit organizations included organizations with a cultural mission (e.g., museum, arts council) or service mission (e.g., feeding the hungry, providing clothing to those in need). These partnerships with organizations with a cultural mission provided student enrichment activities and professional development for teachers at the KDS, while non-profits with a service mission worked toward fulfilling their missions and gained knowledge about supporting students with diverse support needs. Local municipality partnerships were with local governmental officials and employees engaged in positions of civic service (e.g., fireman, policeman, city commissioner) within the community, and these partnerships helped reach shared goals for safety (e.g., fire safety, building sidewalks) and wellness (e.g., after-school athletic programs)

Themes of community–school partnerships. The findings of this study resulted in four main themes that led to the promotion of strong community partnerships within the KDS: (a) strong school leadership, (b) inviting school culture, (c) teacher commitment to student success, and (d) collaboration and communication among partners.

Strong school leadership. Strong school leadership was characterized by individuals who had a clear vision for the school and the community's role in supporting the school and who were capable of both leading all school staff toward the school's inclusive vision and nurturing relationships with community partners. Participants described such leaders as talented and enthusiastic in developing relationships with community partners and able to motivate school personnel to do the same. Participants described the strong school leader's vision of inclusion as surpassing full inclusion of students with disabilities to also encompass inclusion of diverse community partners.

Inviting school culture. Inviting school culture encapsulated the community partners' feelings of being welcomed in the school and valued for their contributions and creative ideas. Community participants attributed their enjoyment in visiting the school to the positive school culture that made them feel as though they belonged to the school community. Participants described an "open door policy" in which they were welcome to contribute to the school in numerous ways, including initiating new ways of collaborating. They also discussed participating in numerous events, including regular school day happenings as well as extra-curricular activities, and connecting with other community partners during these events.

Teacher commitment to student success. Community partners expressed that teachers in the KDS were committed to their students' success and often surpassed their professional responsibilities. This commitment instilled a strong desire in community partners to help teachers achieve their goals, and community partners were confident that school personnel would use their contributions wisely. Teachers' hard work and determination to help their students experience success motivated community members to partner with the school.

Collaboration and communication among partners. Gross and colleagues found that collaboration and communication were essential to creating strong partnerships. Participants defined collaboration as working together on projects as well as contributing ideas and ensuring reciprocal benefit. Participants described communication as essential to collaboration, and they underscored the necessity of listening to everyone involved. School personnel sought community partners' ideas and feedback through surveys and collaborative discussions, and they informed them of school happenings by sending weekly or monthly newsletters (also sent to families).

The Synthesis Study

After separately conducting the two original studies' analyses, we explored the convergence of themes across the two groups for the present synthesis study. All authors of this article were involved in various aspects of the original SWIFT KDS study from which the two original studies synthesized here were drawn, including planning the study, writing the protocol for the focus groups, conducting the focus groups, analyzing the data, and disseminating the results.

Method

To conduct this synthesis study, the first author drafted a figure documenting the overlap as she saw it and identifying shared themes across the two studies. Members of the research team then reviewed the figure and, via conference call, provided feedback. The first author revised and edited the figure to reflect the research group's thinking. Next, each member of the research team reviewed the figure and provided written feedback on it. Each author referred to the analysis of the data from the first two studies to ensure the accuracy of the synthesis, but we did not re-analyze the data. This collaborative and recursive cycle of feedback and revision continued until all members of the research team agreed that the revised figure captured the major themes of both studies and the themes of the synthesis study. Figure 1 represents the result of this dialogic process (Paulus, Woodside, & Ziegler, 2008).

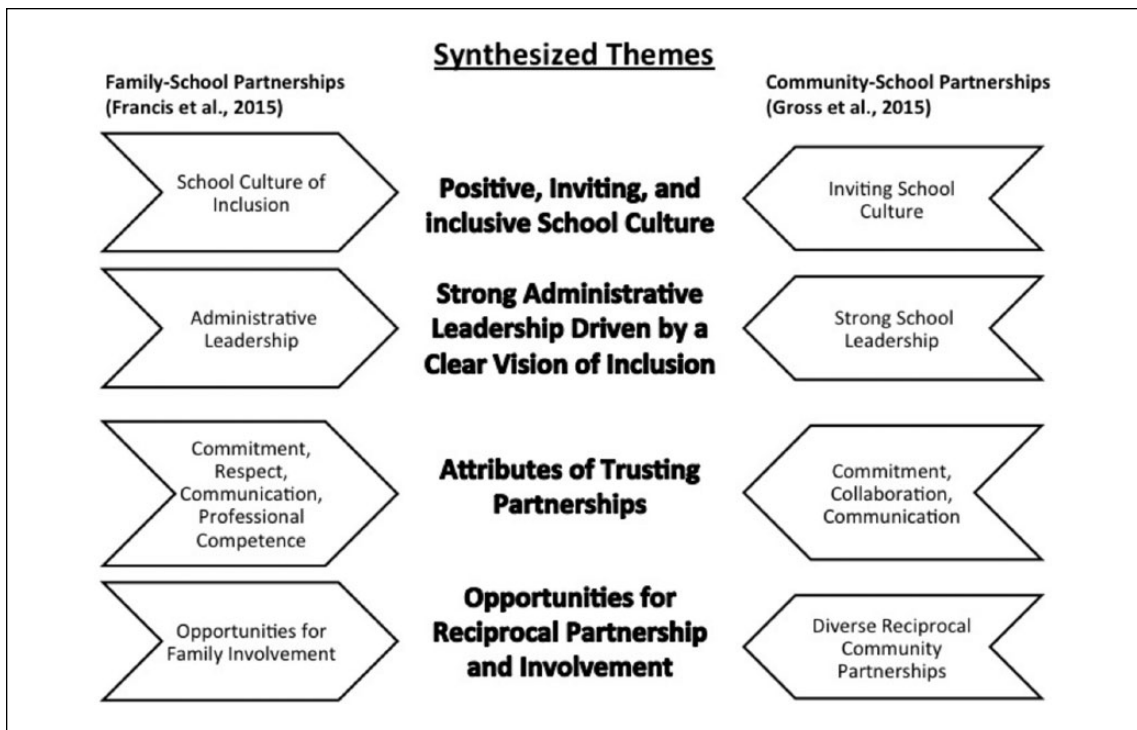


Figure 1. Synthesis of themes from original family and community knowledge development studies.

Results

As illustrated in Figure 1, the two original studies' overlapping themes synthesize into four primary themes regarding family–community–school partnerships in inclusive schools: (a) positive, inviting, and inclusive school culture; (b) strong administrative leadership driven by a clear vision of inclusion; (c) attributes of trusting partnerships (i.e., commitment, communication, collaboration, respect, professional competence); and (d) opportunities for involvement and reciprocity. One theme from the family–school partnership study—positive outcomes for all students—was not present in the community–school partnership study and is therefore not included in the synthesis. We describe these themes in the following sections.

Positive, inviting, and inclusive school culture. Both original studies identified school culture as influential in the development of partnerships. The community partners perceived their school partners as having an inviting school culture—an “open door policy”—where they felt encouraged to contribute to the school in ways that worked for them. They also noted that the “open door policy” made the school a positive place where the partners felt welcomed. The families at the KDS also felt that their schools were welcoming and inviting places to be. Interestingly, family members also used the term *open door policy* to describe their access to their schools' administrators and teachers. Families felt that the school culture was guided by the “beliefs, values, attitudes, and expected and demonstrated behaviors of all school stakeholders” (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, et al., 2015, p. 9). When these beliefs and values centered on inclusion and equality, all families felt like valued members of the school community, regardless of whether their child had a disability. This culture of inclusion was also observed and experienced by the community partners, many of whom benefited from their partnerships with the schools when applying their knowledge of how to include someone with a disability in the settings in which they worked (e.g., place of business, local museum). Participants in both the family–school and community–school partnership studies emphasized that developing and sustaining trusting partnerships was a key element of a positive school culture.

Strong administrative leadership driven by a clear vision of inclusion. Participants in both the family–school and community–school partnership studies emphasized that developing and sustaining trusting partnerships starts with the administrator. Participants identified specific aspects of the principal’s leadership style that facilitated a school culture in which partnerships flourished. The principal was seen as key to ensuring that the school had a quality teaching force with school staff members who held a similar vision of partnerships with family and community members, which included reciprocal benefit for all partners and a shared responsibility for student learning. Family members identified that building this kind of staff began with the principal hiring and mentoring quality teachers and support staff. Community partners expressed the importance of the principal in motivating school staff members to engage the community in the life of the school. In addition, both groups associated the principal’s personal attributes with facilitating partnerships and creating an inviting school culture, including the principal’s enthusiasm, compassion, approachability, and ability to nurture relationships with students, families, school staff, and community members.

Attributes of trusting partnerships. Both original studies recognized the importance of positive behaviors on the part of school personnel that contributed to the formation of trusting partnerships. Both original studies found commitment to student success and communication to be fundamental attributes of partnership. The family–school partnership study found respect to be important while the community–school partnership study found collaboration to be vital to successful partnerships. In addition, the family–school partnership study found professional competence to be an important aspect of partnership. For the synthesis study, we included all these themes—commitment, respect, communication, collaboration, and professional competence—because they are all closely related and important attributes of partnership.

Community partners were encouraged by teachers’ commitment to their students’ success, which was manifested by long work hours, seeking professional development to strengthen teaching skills, and maximizing the utility of community resources. Community partners who witnessed such strong teacher commitment were motivated to help address barriers to student success. Families also discussed teacher commitment to all students’ success, stressing the importance of teachers sharing positive hopes and expectations for all children. Parents described teachers demonstrating commitment by attending sport events, delivering materials and equipment to students’ homes, and attending community activities with families.

Families extended the broad theme of commitment to all students’ success by explaining the importance of professional competence as it relates to their specific children. The theme of professional competence refers to school personnel’s expertise in meeting individual students’ needs and taking a proactive approach to meeting student needs. For example, families described how teachers learned strategies individualized for their children and were able to adapt planned interventions in the event of their children’s unpredictable or inconsistent behavior. In addition, families were especially appreciative of teachers’ dedication to inclusion and figuring out how to address individual student needs within the general education classroom. That this theme was not a finding in the community–school partnership study is understandable, as it relates to an attribute of partnership that is best understood by families of individual students. It is, however, an important attribute of family–community–school partnership.

Community and family partners identified communication as an essential element to trusting partnerships. Community partners described effective communication as being reciprocal among all family, community, and school partners and involving all parties listening to each other and sharing ideas and resources. Family participants stressed the importance of, as a first step to establishing a partnership, determining the preferred mode of communication between partners. For example, partners may prefer oral communication (e.g., phone calls, in person before or after school, parent–teacher meetings) to written communication (e.g., home–school journals, emails, text messages, photographs, newsletters, and student plans). Participants also discussed the power of nonverbal communication, emphasizing the potent effect of school personnel’s affect when working with children and communicating with families and community partners.

Community partners discussed the importance of collaboration and, similarly, families highlighted the importance of feeling respected by school personnel. In the community study, collaboration included working together on projects and bringing each partner’s ideas to fruition within the school. In the family study, the theme of respect included teachers displaying empathy, sensitivity, compassion, and kindness toward

students as well as working collaboratively with families. Both community partners and family partners appreciated when school personnel sought their ideas and valued their input and knowledge. In addition to school personnel seeking partners' input and advice (a sign of respect), both family and community partners discussed how the power of seeing their ideas put into action motivated them to continue to collaborate.

Opportunities for reciprocal partnership and involvement. Both studies found that family and community members had a variety of opportunities to partner with schools, which enabled them to choose options for partnership that reciprocally benefited them as well as the schools. Across studies, the activities in which partners participated and the benefits to themselves and the schools varied greatly. Ways the partnerships benefited the schools included providing funding, increasing continuity between home and school environments for students, sharing family wisdom and history, providing adults for classroom help (e.g., student teachers, parent and community volunteers), creating and staffing special events, donating materials (e.g., books, exercise equipment), providing enrichment and athletic activities for students, providing professional development for teachers, providing technology and technology support for students and teachers, creating physical infrastructure to make the school more accessible, and developing community service opportunities in which students engaged.

In these reciprocal partnerships, family and community partners also benefited in numerous ways. For example, some participants (both community and family partners) identified feeling an increased sense of belonging in the school community due to their partnership efforts, while others learned more about inclusion and developed a deeper understanding of disability and how to provide accommodations. Other participants learned instructional techniques from the professionals at the school and were able to implement these practices with their own children or clients. Still others experienced benefit related to their professional role, such as testing educational software at the schools or having strong placements for student teachers at the schools.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study is to synthesize the findings of the two original studies (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, et al., 2015; Gross et al., in press) conducted as part of the SWIFT Center's knowledge development studies of six schools. One of the original studies (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, et al., 2015) focused on family-school partnerships, and the other (Gross et al., in press) focused on community-school partnerships, and the findings were presented separately. The aim of the synthesis study is to inform efforts to foster partnerships among families, communities, and inclusive schools as well as future research on such partnerships. We found that a significant overlap exists in the findings of the two original studies (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, et al., 2015; Gross et al., in press), and these commonalities underscore the connection between family-school partnerships and community-school partnerships. In this section, we connect the results of this study to the literature, discuss limitations of this study, and suggest implications for practice and research.

Numerous researchers and organizations have identified the importance of a positive and inviting school culture where family and community members feel welcomed to be active participants in supporting successful student outcomes (e.g., Ferguson, Jordan, & Baldwin, 2010; Head Start, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In these school cultures, all stakeholders' strengths and contributions are respected and appreciated, and family and community members have access to culturally responsive options that enable them to contribute to students' successful outcomes (Mapp, 2003). Family participants in the KDS study likened their school culture to that of a community, noting that the warm, welcoming environment was palpable on entry. Similarly, respondents in Anderson, Houser, and Howland's (2010) study referred to their school as a community with a common set of values and guiding principles.

The education literature has long recognized that administrative leadership, particularly principal leadership, is vital to creating and sustaining partnerships with family and community members (Auerbach, 2010; Ferguson, 2005; Sanders, 2014; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). An essential component of principals' leadership is vision and subsequent support for authentic family and community partnerships (Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

Sanders (2014), in reviewing a comprehensive family and community engagement approach developed at the National Network of Partnership Schools, noted that, if the principal does not “buy-in” to the notion of partnership, families and community members are not likely to be engaged nor have their contributions valued in the classroom or in school leadership (Hands, 2005; Sanders, 2014). However, a principal who values strong family and community partnerships can then rely on those partners to support his or her vision of inclusion. Equally important, school staff members must also share the vision so that associated values and goals are integrated into instruction and relationship building (Berg, Melaville, & Blank, 2006).

In addition to their vision, it is essential that principals also support authentic partnerships, which Auerbach (2010) characterizes as respectful alliances valuing relationship building, dialogue, and power sharing. Participants in both studies identified attributes and actions of the principal that supported positive relationships. These relationships were, in turn, critical to family–community–school partnership. The identified attributes and actions of the principals (e.g., compassionate, available, responsive) exemplified elements of trust (Blue-Banning et al., 2004), which is “a foundation principle that holds all relationships . . . together” (Covey & Merrill, 1996, p. 203). Similarly, Gordon and Louis (2009) found that principal actions and attitudes have a significant impact on community and parent democratic participation. Multiple researchers report that shared responsibility by families, community members, and school staff is critical to student success (Berg et al., 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010). This shared responsibility requires a change in the principal’s traditional, hierarchical leadership role to a more collaborative approach (Anderson, 1998; Higgins, Young, Weiner, & Wlodarczyk, 2009–2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), in which the principal empowers these stakeholders to share in decision-making and leadership responsibilities once exercised exclusively by principals (Leithwood & Prestine, 2002).

Participants identified communication, respect, commitment, professional competence, and collaboration as positive attributes of trusting partnerships. These attributes are similar to elements of trust recognized by other researchers (e.g., Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Trust is the foundation of all school partnerships (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015). Blue-Banning and colleagues (2004) identified the following broad components of partnership, in addition to trust, which is perceived as the keystone in developing effective partnerships: communication, commitment, respect, equality, and professional competence. These components of partnership are interrelated to some extent, but trust is closely related to each component. Trust between families, community members, and school staff is essential to developing effective partnerships (Adams & Forsyth, 2013).

Blank, Melaville, and Shah (2003) identified mutual respect and effective collaboration among families and school staff as a condition critical to a successful school because family–school partnerships contribute to student achievement and success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), and families who feel respected and a part of a collaborative relationship are more likely to contribute and connect to their children’s school. Similarly, Leonard (2011) found that supportive communication among partners (student, school, family, community members) in an urban school increased student success and led to a “positive culture of achievement” (p. 999) and, ultimately, a higher level of trust between partners.

In this study, we found that reciprocity kept the partnerships active and strengthened trust and engagement in the relationship. Hands (2005) referred to such reciprocity as a “win-win situation” (p. 72) in which both partners receive mutual benefits from the partnership. Partners’ increased understanding of each other’s philosophies and history supports Epstein’s (2011) model of overlapping spheres of influence, which recognizes the interdisciplinary nature of family–community–school partnerships. Increasing understanding of the environments a student inhabits is a win–win situation for families, communities, schools, and, perhaps most of all, students (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Epstein, 2011). As families, communities, and schools are constantly “negotiating and renegotiating their relationships” (Garbarino, Bradshaw, & Kostelny, 2005, p. 297), partnerships between those members must also be characterized by ongoing and fluid relationships.

In addition to learning from each other about each other, a win–win situation occurs when schools, families, and community partners benefit from each other’s resources, including time, skill, knowledge, and materials (Blank, Jacobson, & Melaville, 2012). A noteworthy finding in the KDS studies was that, as a reciprocal benefit, families and community partners identified learning about inclusive culture, disability, and effective educational practice from the school staff. Without the family–community–school partnerships, we speculate

that many families and community members would not have sufficient knowledge to become interested in fully including people with disabilities, and the schools would have fewer resources with which to meet students' needs.

Limitations

There are two main limitations inherent in this study. First, this study is limited by the participant selection and description. When conducting the original studies, we had limited control of the participant selection as the school personnel invited participants, and institutional review board restrictions limited the collection of detailed demographic data. Second, although we collaboratively approached the task of synthesizing these two qualitative studies, our identity as members of the research teams with intimate knowledge of the data for the two original studies we synthesized might have influenced our analysis for this synthesis study (Yin, 2011).

Implications

Trusting partnerships among families, communities, and schools are critical to accomplishing “the complex task of educating a diverse group of students in a changing world” (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 18). Trust cannot be taken for granted; however, fostering such partnerships must be intentional and ongoing (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Perceiving all students at the center of the overlapping spheres of influence highlights the need to simultaneously focus on both types of partnerships to strengthen both family–school and community–school partnerships (Epstein, 2011). While our previous work presented research that merged the concepts of family–school partnership within general education and special education (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, et al., 2015) and highlighted community partnerships at inclusive schools (Gross et al., in press), this study merges the concepts of family–school partnership and community–school partnership within inclusive schools into an overall partnership framework.

This synthesis suggests numerous practice implications for strengthening family–community–school partnerships within inclusive schools and informs future research on such partnerships. The four themes resulting from this synthesis, while neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, provide an outline of key components to consider when envisioning, evaluating, and improving family–community–school partnerships. When focusing on strengthening family–school–community partnerships in inclusive schools, we urge school leadership teams to concentrate their efforts on the themes from this synthesis, namely, creating a positive, inviting, and inclusive school culture; building strong administrative leadership driven by a clear vision of inclusion; fostering the attributes of trusting partnerships; and providing multiple opportunities for reciprocal partnerships and involvement for both families and community members. Although detailing the numerous strategies to promote each of these components is beyond the scope of this synthesis, we encourage school leadership teams to engage diverse families and community members in numerous activities, including building a common vision based on democratic values that distribute power and leadership (Burrello et al., 2005; Marzano et al., 2005; Weiss & Stephens, 2010; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010), establishing methods of communication between all stakeholders (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Francis, Blue-Banning, Haines, et al., 2015; Turnbull et al., 2015), discussing potential opportunities for reciprocal partnerships (Burrello et al., 2005; Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, et al., 2015; Valli, Stefanski, & Jacobson, 2014), evaluating existing partnerships (Flamboyan Foundation, 2014; Sha, Brink, London, Masur, & Quihuis, 2009; Summers et al., 2005; Tschannen-Moran, 2014), and conducting deep analytic discussions about the inclusive school culture (Artiles, Kozleski, & Skrtic, 2014).

Using the themes presented in this synthesis study, future research should investigate family–community–school partnerships during the process of school transformation from segregated schools to fully inclusive schools. Times of transformation present many challenges as well as opportunities; the presence or absence of family–community–school partnerships before and during times of change could potentially have a significant impact on the process (Ferguson et al., 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Conclusion

We synthesized two original studies to identify common themes related to family–community–school partnerships. The separate original studies on family–school partnerships and community–school partnerships were conducted at six inclusive schools selected by SWIFT Center as knowledge development sites. This synthesis study identifies overlapping themes and suggests that inclusive schools are well positioned to form optimal family–community–school partnerships if they invest in creating a positive, inviting, and inclusive school culture; provide strong administrative leadership driven by a clear vision of inclusion; exhibit attributes of trusting partnerships (i.e., commitment, communication, collaboration, and respect); and provide opportunities for reciprocal partnership and involvement.

Authors' Note

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, or enterprise mentioned in this publication is intended or should be inferred. All analysis and interpretation are the work of the authors. As well, the authors are responsible for any errors or misrepresentations in this article. Office of Special Education Programs officers Grace Zamora Durán and Tina Diamond served as the project officers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors produced this document under the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs Grant H325Y120005, the SWIFT Center.

References

- Adams, C. M., & Forsyth, P. B. (2013). Revisiting the trust effect in urban elementary schools. *The Elementary School Journal, 114*, 1-21.
- Anderson, G. (1998). Toward authentic participation: Deconstructing the discourses of participatory reforms in education. *American Education Research Journal, 3*, 571-603.
- Anderson, J., Houser, J., & Howland, A. (2010). The full purpose partnership model for promoting academic and socio-emotional success in schools. *The School Community Journal, 20*, 31-53.
- Artiles, A., Kozleski, E., & Skrtic, T. M. (2014). What are high quality instruction and support in high need and culturally diverse schools? In J. McLeskey, N. L. Waldron, F. Spooner, & B. Algozzine (Eds.), *Handbook of effective, inclusive schools: Research and practice* (pp. 118-135). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Auerbach, S. (2010). Beyond coffee with the principal: Toward leadership for authentic school-family partnerships. *Journal of School Leadership, 20*, 728-757.
- Berg, A. C., Melaville, A., & Blank, M. J. (2006). *Community and family engagement: Principals share what works*. Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools.
- Blank, M., Jacobson, R., & Melaville, A. (2012). *Achieving results through community school partnerships: How district and community leaders are building effective, sustainable relationships*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/report/2012/01/18/10987/achieving-results-through-community-school-partnerships/>
- Blank, M., Melaville, A., & Shah, B. (2003). *Making a difference: Research and practice in community schools*. Washington, DC: Coalition for Community School. Retrieved from www.communityschools.org/assets/1/page/ccsfullreport.pdf
- Blue-Banning, M. J., Summers, J. A., Frankland, H. C., Nelson, L. L., & Beegle, G. (2004). Dimensions of family and professional partnerships: Constructive guidelines for collaboration. *Exceptional Children, 70*(2), 167-184.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Bryan, J., & Henry, L. (2012). A model for building school-family-community partnerships: Principles and process. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 90*, 408-420. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6676.2012.00052.x

- Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. L. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Burke, M. M., & Hodapp, R. M. (2014). Relating stress of mothers of children with developmental disabilities to family-school partnerships. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 52*, 13-23.
- Burrello, L. C., Hoffman, L. P., & Murray, L. E. (2005). *School leaders building capacity from within: Resolving competing agendas creatively*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Covey, S. R., & Merrill, A. R. (1996). *First things first*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Epstein, J. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools* (2nd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Ferguson, C. (2005). *Organizing family and community connections with schools: How do school staff build meaningful relationships with all stakeholders?* Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED486339.pdf>
- Ferguson, C., Jordan, C., & Baldwin, M. (2010). *Working systemically in action: Engaging family and community*. Austin, TX: SEDL.
- Flamboyan Foundation. (2014). *Classroom family engagement rubric*. Retrieved from <http://flamboyanfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Classroom-Family-Engagement-Rubric-V4-VF.pdf>
- Francis, G. L., Blue-Banning, M., Haines, S. J., Turnbull, A., Hill, C., & Gross, J. M. S. (2015). *Building "our school": Parental perspectives for building trusting family-professional partnerships*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Francis, G. L., Blue-Banning, M., Turnbull, A., Hill, C., Haines, S. J., & Gross, J. M. S. (2015). *School culture in inclusive schools: Parental perspectives on trusting family partnerships*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Garbarino, J., Bradshaw, C. P., & Kostelny, K. (2005). Neighborhood and community influences on parenting. In T. Luster & L. Okagaki (Eds.), *Parenting: An ecological perspective* (2nd ed., pp. 297-318). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Goddard, R. D., Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, W. K. (2001). A multilevel examination of the distribution and effects of teacher trust in students and parents in urban elementary schools. *Elementary School Journal, 102*, 3-17.
- Gordon, M. F., & Louis, K. S. (2009). Linking parent and community involvement with student achievement: Comparing principal and teacher perceptions of stakeholder influence. *American Journal of Education, 116*(1), 1-31.
- Gross, J. M. S., Haines, S. J., Hill, C., Francis, G. L., Blue-Banning, M., & Turnbull, A. (in press). Strong school-community partnerships: A collective endeavor. *School Community Journal*.
- Haines, S. J., McCart, A., & Turnbull, A. P. (2013). Family engagement within early childhood response to intervention. In V. Buysse & E. Peisner-Feinberg (Eds.), *Handbook on response to intervention (RTI) in early childhood* (pp. 313-324). New York, NY: Brookes.
- Hands, C. (2005). It's who you know and what you know: The process of creating partnerships between schools and communities. *School Community Journal, 15*, 63-84.
- Head Start. (2011). *The Head Start parent, family and community engagement framework: Promoting family engagement and school readiness, from prenatal to age 8*. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/im/2011/pfce-framework.pdf>
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: National Center for Family Community Connections With Schools/ SEDL.
- Higgins, M., Young, L., Weiner, J., & Wlodarczyk, S. (2009-2010). Leading teams of leaders: What helps team member learning? *Phi Delta Kappan, 91*, 41-45.
- Hill, N. E., & Taylor, L. C. (2004). Parental school involvement and children's academic achievement: Pragmatics and issues. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 13*, 161-164. doi:10.1111/j.0963-7214.2004.00298.x
- Lawson, M. A. (2003). School-family relations in context: Parent and teacher perceptions of parent involvement. *Urban Education, 38*, 77-133. doi:10.1177/0042085902238687
- Leithwood, K., & Prestine, N. (2002). Unpacking the challenges of leadership at the school and district level. In J. Murphy (Ed.), *The educational leadership challenge: Re-defining leadership for the 21st century* (NSSE yearbook). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Leonard, J. (2011). Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory to understand community partnerships: A historical case study of one urban high school. *Urban Education, 46*, 987-1010.
- Mapp, K. L. (2003). Having their say: Parents describe why and how they are engaged in their children's learning. *School Community Journal, 13*, 35-64.
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- McCart, A., Sailor, W., Bezdek, J., & Satter, A. (2014). A framework for inclusive educational delivery systems. *Inclusion, 2*, 252-264.

- Paulus, T., Woodside, M., & Ziegler, M. (2008). Extending the conversation: Qualitative research as dialogic collaborative process. *The Qualitative Report*, 13, 226-243.
- Sailor, W. S., & McCart, A. B. (2014). The stars in alignment. *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities*, 39, 55-64.
- Sanders, M. G. (2014). Principal leadership for school, family, and community partnerships: The role of a systems approach to reform implementation. *American Journal of Education*, 120, 233-255.
- Sanders, M. G., & Harvey, A. (2002). Beyond the school walls: A case study of principal leadership for school-community collaboration. *The Teachers College Record*, 104, 1345-1368.
- Sha, S. C., Brink, K., London, R., Masur, S., & Quihuis, S. M. (2009). *Community schools evaluation kit*. Retrieved from http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Evaluation_Toolkit_March2010.pdf
- Shogren, K. A., McCart, A. B., Lyon, K. J., & Sailor, W. S. (2015). *All means all: Building knowledge for inclusive schoolwide transformation*. *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities*, 40, 173-191.
- Skrtic, T. M., Sailor, W., & Gee, K. (1996). Voice, collaboration, and inclusion: Democratic themes in educational and social reform initiatives. *Remedial and Special Education*, 17, 142-157.
- Summers, J. A., Hoffman, L., Marquis, J., Turnbull, A., Poston, D., & Nelson, L. L. (2005). Measuring the quality of family-professional partnerships in special education services. *Exceptional Children*, 72, 65-81.
- Summers, J. A., Marquis, J., Mannan, H., Turnbull, A. P., Fleming, K., Poston, D. J., . . . Kupzyk, K. (2007). Relationship of perceived adequacy of services, family-professional partnerships, and family quality of life in early childhood service programmes. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 54, 319-338. doi:10.1080/10349120701488848
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2014). *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley.
- Turnbull, A. P., Turnbull, H. R., Erwin, E. J., Soodak, L. C., & Shogren, K. A. (2015). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: Positive outcomes through partnerships and trust* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Valli, L., Stefanski, A., & Jacobson, R. (2014). Typologizing school-community partnerships: A framework for analysis and action. *Urban Education*. Advance online publication. doi:0042085914549366
- Weiss, H.B., Lopez, E., & Rosenberg, H. (2010). *Beyond random acts: Family, school, and community engagement as an integral part of education reform*. Boston: Harvard Family Research Project.
- Weiss, H. B., & Stephens, N. (2010). A new vision and strategy for family, school, and community partnerships. In S. Christenson & A. Reschley (Eds.), *Handbook of school-family partnerships* (pp. 448-472). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Whitney, D. D., & Trosten-Bloom, A. (2010). *The power of appreciative inquiry: A practical guide to positive change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Yin, R. K. (2011). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Author Biographies

Shana J. Haines is an assistant professor of education at the University of Vermont. Her research focuses primarily on family and community partnership in inclusive schools, refugee students and families' experiences with the American school system, and special education teacher preparation.

Judith M. S. Gross has worked in the disability field as a teacher, service provider, consultant, and researcher. She is currently a member of the Family-Community Engagement team on the School-Wide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) project at the University of Kansas. She is also principle investigator of the Assessing Family Employment Awareness Training (FEAT) project, which teaches families and young adults with disabilities about competitive employment and the resources to support it.

Martha Blue-Banning has worked in the disability field as a teacher, administrator and researcher. She is currently a member of the Family-Community Engagement team on the School-Wide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) project at the University of Kansas.

Grace L. Francis is an assistant professor of special education at George Mason University. Her research interests include family support policy and practice and post-school outcomes for individuals with significant support needs.

Ann P. Turnbull is Emerita Distinguished Professor of Special Education at the University of Kansas. Her areas of specialization include family partnerships, family support, family quality of life, and inclusive adult lifestyles.

Received: 02/13/2015

Final Acceptance: 04/30/2015

Editor in Charge: Karrie Shogren