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Running Head: PARENT PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

Culture in Inclusive Schools: Parental Perspectives on Trusting

Family-Professional Partnerships

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Abstract

This qualitative study improves understanding of parent perspectives about the factors that facilitate family-professional partnerships in schools recognized for inclusive practices. Five themes emerged from 11 focus groups consisting of parents of students with and without disabilities and with varying levels of involvement with the school: (a) school culture of inclusion, (b) positive administrative leadership, (c) attributes of positive partnerships, (d) opportunities for family involvement, and (e) positive outcomes for all students. School culture was an overriding theme, with each of the other themes closely linked to school culture. Implications for strengthening trusting family-professional partnerships as well as directions for future research are discussed.

Culture in Inclusive Schools: Parental Perspectives on Trusting Family-Professional Partnerships

Trusting family-professional partnerships occur when families and school professionals (e.g., principals, teachers, support staff) regard each other as reliable allies and families have multiple opportunities for meaningful participation in their children's education and in the life of the school (Haines, McCart, & Turnbull, 2013). Research indicates that trusting family-professional partnerships contribute to positive outcomes for multiple stakeholder groups, including students, educators, families, and community members (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Family-professional partnerships result in enhanced student learning, achievement, positive behavior, and attendance; and in decreased achievement gaps between groups of students, including those with disabilities (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Giovacco-Johnson, 2009; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Lawson, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Family-professional partnerships also promote educator efficacy and improved instruction (Haines et al. 2013; Lawson, 2003). Positive family outcomes include enhanced satisfaction, understanding, social connections, development, and parenting skills (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Haines et al., 2013; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Burke and Hodapp (2014) also reported a relationship between trusting family-professional partnerships and lower levels of stress among mothers who have children with disabilities. Finally, community members benefit as families make connections with each other through the school and form supportive relationships outside of school (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

Although the importance of family-professional partnerships is well documented, barriers exist to making these partnerships a reality in many schools, including cultural mistrust among families who experience marginalization (Auerbach, 2010) and a prevalence of school professionals harboring low expectations for families with low incomes and/or families of color

(Cooper Riehl, & Hasan, 2010). Further, many school professionals have limited knowledge or support to partner effectively with families, especially those they consider “difficult to reach” (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Another barrier is a lack of information about the factors (e.g., professional development, class size) that facilitate trusting family partnerships. All of these barriers can be magnified in inclusive settings when teachers are unprepared to teach students with disabilities or have negative attitudes about teaching all students in an inclusive setting (Cullen, Gregory, & Noto, 2010).

These barriers can leave families and school professionals unable to conceptualize and engage in trusting family-professional partnerships. Developing a greater understanding about the influencing factors that facilitate trusting partnerships can mitigate many of these barriers. Further, the perspectives of parents of children with and without disabilities have the potential of providing keen insight into the factors families find most meaningful, thus enabling school professionals and families to hone in on the most crucial aspects of developing trusting family-professional partnerships.

Trusting family-professional partnerships are a vital component of family engagement and one of 10 features that form the foundation of the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center, a national K-8 technical assistance center that promotes learning and academic achievement among all students, including those with and without disabilities. (Sailor, McCart, Bezdek & Satter, 2014; see www.swiftschools.org). The SWIFT Center framework consists of five domains related to inclusive practices: administrative leadership, multi-tiered system of support, integrated educational framework, family and community engagement, and inclusive policy structure and practice. The framework coherently braids evidence-based practices to transform policies, organizational structures, and relationships

to support improved academic and behavior outcomes for all students. The SWIFT Center's National Leadership Consortium, a group comprised of researchers, scholars, and technical assistance providers knowledgeable about inclusive school reform, used surveys and phone interviews to select five culturally, geographically, and economically diverse elementary schools and one middle school that exemplified one or more of the SWIFT domains. These schools, known as knowledge development sites (KDS), informed SWIFT Center's technical assistance practices and procedures. The purpose of this article is to explore the perceptions of parents with children attending the KDS regarding factors that facilitate trusting family-professional partnerships. Specifically, we investigated the following research question, "What factors do parents perceive as facilitating trusting family-professional partnerships in schools recognized for inclusive practices?"

Method

This paper reports qualitative focus group data from the six KDS recognized by The SWIFT Center as exemplary in at least one inclusive practice, which may include family-professional partnerships. The KDS included five elementary schools and one middle school that represent all major U.S. geographic regions (Northeast, South, West, and Midwest). The schools represented diverse race/ethnic populations, (e.g., 27% to 64% of students categorized as White, 18% to 24% Black, 11% to 24% Hispanic, 0.4% to 10% Asian, less than 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and American Indian or Alaska Native, and 6% to 11% reporting two or more races/ethnicities), as well as economic diversity (12% to 54% of student families were categorized as economically disadvantaged). The percentage of students identified as having a disability ranged from 11% to 27% of students, and those identified as English-language learners ranged from 2% to 15%.

Participants

We conducted 11 focus groups at the KDS; six groups consisting of parents of children with disabilities (e.g., students with autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder) and five of parents considered by school personnel to be “leaders” (e.g., parents with reported high levels of involvement at the classroom, school, and/or district-levels), some of whom had children with disabilities. The initial sampling plan was to conduct two focus groups at each site. However, due to scheduling and other logistical issues, one school was unable to gather a focus group of parent leaders. We requested schools recruit 5-10 participants for each focus group to be small enough for “everyone to have the opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide a diversity of perceptions” (Kreuger & Casey, 2009, p. 6). Despite our guidelines, the actual groups the schools organized ranged from four to 12 participants. In total, 58 parents (49 mothers and 9 fathers) participated.

We collaborated with the principal and staff at each KDS to identify participants for the focus groups, providing them with a set of participant criteria. For the focus groups comprised of parents of children with disabilities, we requested a representative sample of the population of families who have children with disabilities at the school (e.g., family income, race/ethnicity). In addition, we requested that the focus group participants’ children vary across a range of characteristics, including (a) academic, behavioral, functional, and health needs, and (b) grade levels. For the parent leaders focus groups, we requested parents who were highly involved with school and community activities and/or their child’s education, served on school/community leadership teams, and/or had leadership roles in various groups (e.g., PTA, school board, Girl Scouts, Big Brothers Big Sisters). With these criteria, school staff (i.e., principals, secretaries) contacted potential participants, explained the purpose of the research, and extended an invitation

to participate. In accordance with our Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved plan, we report only limited participant demographic data in order to protect the confidentiality of the focus group participants.

Procedure

Two researchers moderated each focus group. A primary facilitator used an interview protocol to guide groups, while a co-facilitator took notes and monitored the time. The primary facilitator began each group by welcoming the participants, describing the SWIFT Center and the purpose of the focus group. The primary facilitator also obtained written informed consent from each participant. Participants then introduced themselves and shared information about themselves, their children, and their involvement with the school.

The primary facilitator used the interview protocol to guide the discussion and gain information about families' perspectives of trusting family partnerships at their respective schools and to help control for moderator bias. Focus groups sessions averaged 1.5 hours and were audio-recorded with participant consent. A professional transcriptionist later transcribed the recordings.

Data Analysis

The research team used Dedoose, a web-based qualitative software, to methodically analyze the transcribed focus group data. In the process of data reduction, team members first independently open coded two transcripts noting general themes (Creswell, 2009). The team met weekly to discuss the coding process, data, and emerging themes. These conversations led to the development of an initial codebook, which contained defined themes and subthemes that team members agreed were prevalent across all transcripts. Subsequently, the codebook went through numerous revisions as team members completed coding of all transcripts. During this time, team

members continued to meet weekly to determine if new themes emerged, if themes collapsed, and/or if theme definitions remained accurate. This process led to a semi-final version of the codebook. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, this codebook was circulated to the entire research team who individually evaluated to determine if it accurately represented the data. Any changes were systematically incorporated into the final codebook. In the final phase of data reduction, two team members (the first and second authors) divided the transcripts equally between them and independently coded a clean copy of each using the final codebook. After sorting and organizing the data, the research team reconstructed the data, interpreting patterns and themes.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of parents of children with and without disabilities at the six KDS about factors that facilitate trusting family-professional partnerships. During focus group discussions, participants recounted, often with great emotion, the nature of partnerships in their respective inclusive schools. Five themes emerged: (a) school culture of inclusion (b) positive administrative leadership, (c) attributes of positive partnerships, (d) opportunities for family involvement, and (e) positive outcomes for all students.

School Culture of Inclusion

School culture permeated focus group discussions. Participants' most passionate comments often related to school culture and focused on guiding beliefs, values, attitudes, and expected and demonstrated behaviors of all school stakeholders. Participants in all groups frequently used the word "community" to describe the culture in their schools: "It's [the school] a community itself. It's very unique because . . . we all feel part of this school. It's not like

[only] our kids go to school here. We feel part of this school.” Parents offered various descriptors of the school’s community. One parent described it as follows:

This sense of community within the school is just absolutely crucial . . . that families feel welcomed and have an opportunity any day, any time to make a suggestion . . . that there is a place for children of all abilities and all disabilities and that being in the same place, to not only be able to be different but to be respected while you’re being different.

A significant factor in establishing this community was the perception that inclusion and equality pervaded the school:

I came from a traditional local school, [where] there’s a sense that you’re just a parent. . . . We all come to the table [at current school] as equal, as well as a parent, so you really demolish a sense of hierarchy here, and I think that makes a huge difference. . . [at] most traditional schools, there is a hierarchy, the gate closes.

Focus group participants described a ubiquitous and “seamless” culture of “acceptance” and “diversity,” which created a “welcoming and . . . supportive” atmosphere that felt like “family.” Participants emphasized the importance of all school staff maintaining the “mindset” and “the attitude . . . that everybody’s valued.” The positive school culture that developed from these globally accepted values related to dignity, openness, and acceptance, which resulted in families feeling a strong sense of belonging as valued members of their school communities. Thus, the school served as a unit of shared values and goals. These values and goals, in turn, positively influenced trust between all stakeholders (e.g., educators, students, families, school staff).

Families, students, and educators uniting to meet the needs of all stakeholders also contributed to the positive school culture. One participant commented: “We’ve just been

operating as a community that's completely supportive of each other . . . recognizing and identifying what our needs are and pursuing and getting those needs met." Uniting to meet the needs of others and having individual needs met made participants feel as if they were valued members of their school community.

Inclusive practices also played a significant role in creating a sense of belonging for families and students. Providing an appropriate education to all students in general education classrooms prevented families of children with disabilities from feeling "like the odd man out," "alone," or "unappreciated," as school staff met all student needs "as a community." Further, numerous participants stated that their children (with and without disabilities) also felt like valued members of the school community because their needs were met alongside their peers in non-stigmatizing ways:

[The child] loves being at [school], and to me that's a part of the inclusion of the support system that they have in place . . . but that's what I would want as a parent in any school, is to have a student, who is [academically] behind, still want to go to school, I think that's huge.

The commitment to meeting the needs of all students resulted in a shared emotional connection. A mother recalled a powerful demonstration of a teacher's commitment to her son's success:

Last year, my son could not read a word, and this year he's reading chapter books, and when [teacher] comes up to you and is crying and is giving you a hug and saying, "Look how far he's come," you know they care about your child just as much as we care about our children. It's just amazing how the teachers can care.

Finally, the majority of parents of children with disabilities told a transformative "before and after" story, with the "before" stories comparing the segregation and isolation experienced in

schools their children previously attended to the “after” stories at their children’s current schools, which demonstrated radically opposite experiences at the schools. Illustrative phrases used in the “before stories” were “going to fight,” “super, super battle,” and “always a struggle” with multiple references to mediation and legal assistance. Alternatively, phrases used in the “after” stories were “they explained everything thoroughly,” “it was such a collaborative process,” and “IEPs are like a meeting just to say congratulations.” This is exemplified by one father who shared his “before story,” in which he described the incredible effort he took to prepare for his child’s IEP, marking the document with colored tags, and creating an Excel spreadsheet. He contrasted this experience with his “after story,” in which he was “actually taken off guard . . . literally” by the positive IEP experience:

In the past what I have done is I’ve taken the previous IEPs . . . I’m an engineer, so I’m . . . a little anal attentive. . . . These are all red tags, these all have to do with goals; blue tags have to do with services; this . . . has to do with [policy requirements] . . . I even have an Excel spreadsheet about all the things I would need and the reasons why and what page . . . I had my best and final offer all ready, in my mind I knew exactly what I was gonna go to mediation or not. But [when I got to the new inclusion school] it was always like okay, it was like, all the air went out of my sails. I was like, ‘What you said [about my child] . . . that sounds like you nailed it.’ So it’s been a very different experience for me . . . and . . . so very difficult for me to get out of the mode of adversarial We address . . . exactly what the kid needs as opposed to what the school can save money on.

These contrasts in school cultures clearly demonstrated the importance of a positive school culture that creates a sense of belonging and investment among all stakeholders in building trusting family-professional partnerships.

Positive Administrative Leadership

Positive administrative leadership, particularly by school principals, was a major theme among participants across all 11 focus groups. Participants attributed positive school culture and positive student and family outcomes to principals' actions, attitudes, and other characteristics. Participants perceived that a strong school culture that supports trusting family-professional partnerships "starts with the administrator." Participants discussed attributes of the principal that contributed to the success of the school, including (a) demonstrating strong, effective leadership; (b) being directly and actively involved; and (c) having great expectations.

Participants consistently noted the importance of the principal's leadership. Many parents identified that an important component of strong, effective leadership was hiring and mentoring quality staff. One parent described a time when she and other parents worked with the principal to hire a new teacher:

We [the hiring team] had some candidates that were pretty good, we [parents on the team] said 'oh, maybe let's give her [one of the candidates] a chance to come in and do a demo lesson and [the principal] said 'no. If they're not excellent, there's no need to go to the next step. We have plenty of candidates. I want teachers that excel. I don't want ones that are [just] good enough. They need to be the best.

The significance of the principal creating a "more relaxed, welcoming environment" came up frequently in the discussion about effective leadership. Participants indicated that a welcoming environment was facilitated by the principal's enthusiasm and caring, as exemplified

by the principal greeting students by name and informally interacting with families. These interactions put parents at ease, making them feel “safe” and “good” about their child going to school. Further, several participants noted how a principal’s welcoming behavior positively influenced teacher behavior and morale. One participant described how the principal’s clear commitment to families, school staff, and student outcomes “attracts other people who are committed,” including staff and family leaders. A leadership style that is approachable, available, and responsive to all families exemplified this commitment.

Participants focused considerable discussion on principals’ direct and active involvement in day-to-day student issues. They perceived that this involvement facilitated trusting family-professional partnerships. Participants from several schools recounted circumstances when the principal swiftly and effectively addressed family concerns related to bullying, academics, behavior, and student-teacher relationships.

We had some issues with a bus and bullying, and [the principal] rode the bus . . .he went the route with them, and he talked to the kids. There were some kids that were older that went to the middle school. He went to the middle school and met with the principal and that student [who was bullying], and one morning he got on . . .and he addressed everyone, but [bullying] stopped. I mean it was just his involvement there.

Participants also communicated the importance of principals having great expectations for all students and sharing those expectations with family members. One mother described her first interaction with her son’s principal, as she entered the school with her son who uses a walker.

I’m a better parent because of [the principal]. . . . At other campuses, [I thought] ‘Oh isn’t that cute how the kids push him around [in his walker] . . .’ [the principal at current

school] said . . . ‘[Your son’s] walker represents his legs. So the mission for [your son], is to walk in his walker, so we don’t push him around on campus.’ . . . I thought that is so respectful of my child.

Attributes of Positive Partnerships

Participants described the attributes of their partnerships with educators and other school staff, including (a) communication, (b) respect, (c) commitment, and (d) professional competence.

Communication. Across all focus groups, parents strongly emphasized the importance of communication to bridge the home-school gap and ensure student success. Their comments related to communication included: (a) modality, (b) reciprocity, (c) frequency, and (d) cultural sensitivity. Parent participants often stressed the importance of establishing the preferred mode of communication between themselves and their children’s teachers. They said that this exchange was often a first step in establishing on-going positive communication. Their preferred types of communication included oral communication (i.e., phone calls, in person talks before or after school, parent-teacher meetings) and written communication (i.e., home-school journals, emails, text messages, photographs, newsletters, and student plans). Participants also alluded to the importance of non-verbal communication, such as appearing to genuinely care for their children and enjoy their jobs: “People here seem to be happy to come to work... It’s not like ‘this day’s over, oh, thank God.’”

Participants readily identified the importance of reciprocity with educators in communicating student needs and successes and emphasized that communication is not a one-way activity:

I do have a say in what's happening with my child and when he does something here, they let me know because we have to reinforce it at home; or if he does something at home, we let the teachers know here, so it's that communication . . . we work on things together.

Participants in all focus groups expressed the importance of frequent and informal communication. They often used words such as “seamless” and “streamlined” when talking about how frequent communication occurred at their child’s school. One participant remarked that communication was “not about [just] setting up a meeting.” Instead, families and school staff typically communicated continuously throughout the school week. The continuous and informal communication about where students have “struggled” or had “challenges” also benefited formal meetings such as IEP meetings because “there really are no surprises” when it came to discussing student data to evaluate and update the IEP.

A final topic related to communication was cultural sensitivity. Participants said that culturally sensitive communication was particularly important in situations in which families are from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, are new to the school, and/or speak a language other than English. A participant from the parent leader group described how her school community recognized cultural differences by creating a “warm welcome team” to initiate communication with families from diverse backgrounds:

We have a woman on the team who was Latino and she said sometimes in [her] culture they [Latino parents] don’t just jump in and help. They want to be asked to help, and so, with that feedback . . . we’ve created this warm welcome team where we started calling and had a group of people who would call families and say, “How’s it going? Is there anything that you need? How can we help?”

Respect. In nine of the 11 focus groups, participants discussed the importance of members of a partnership demonstrating respect through action and communication. Participants were especially emotional as they described how teachers and staff “value and appreciate” their children for who they are. One father’s statement exemplified this sentiment, “[My child] is appreciated and loved for who he is, not for what he isn’t...and he’s seen as a valued member of the community.” Participants indicated that professionals demonstrating empathy, sensitivity, compassion, and kindness toward students also helped build trusting partnerships with families. They especially appreciated that teachers were invested in all students and that they identified “strength[s] [in] all the kids . . . let[ting] them know what their strength is and encourag[ing] them in that strength.”

Teachers and staff also demonstrated respect by treating families as equal partners, especially by seeking out and respecting parental knowledge. A parent described how equality pervades at her child’s school: “We [parents] all come to the table as equal [with educators] . . . here I feel like, if you have something to bring to the table, it’s welcomed.”

The conversation was often lively and energized when parents talked about the fact that the teachers at their child’s school “don’t roll their eyes” when parents give suggestions. A parent commented on how it made her feel valued for “the teacher to listen to you and treat you like you have a brain and know what’s best for your child.” Participants frequently described teachers’ openness and willingness to ask for parental advice: “I feel like the teachers respect the parents whether or not they personally agree, I just feel like they put their personal stuff aside . . .”

Participants stressed the importance of educators listening and acting upon what they heard parents saying. As one parent said, “Words are only as good as the actions you follow up

with.” One mother of a student with disruptive behavior talked about sharing a strategy she found effective at home with a teacher, “I just happened to mention it to the teacher one day, and she said, ‘I’ll pay attention to that,’ and then she did that [the strategy] . . . and it made a difference.” As a result of being respected by educators, parents perceived themselves as valued partners in educational decision-making for their children, felt that their contributions and personal investments were valued, and that they made positive differences in the school community.

Commitment. Participants’ comments regarding commitment focused on members of the partnership sharing a sense of assurance about partners’ loyalty to the child and family and school professionals sharing positive visions and goals for all children, including a common investment in student success.

I feel the teachers . . . extend themselves. They seem very committed and . . . when I go to my child's classroom . . . they greet me, [and] they communicate how my son has been doing, so I feel very good. If something happens during the day, I get a call. . . . I really get a good sense of their commitment to all children.

Participants described how the educators in their children’s schools go “over and above” to meet the needs of students because “it's not just a job to them.” For example, one mother described how her son’s teacher responded to her son setting off the fire alarm at school:

[His teacher] has gone above and beyond. . . . Just an example, one day . . . the fire alarm went off at the end of the day. Apparently, [my son] tripped the fire alarm. . . . I got a call like 30 minutes after I picked him up from school at the end of the day and they said, “Could you bring him up here [to the school]?” He wasn’t in trouble . . . [his teacher] had printed out a little story—because he’s good with Social Stories—to . . . help him to

understand, and she typed up a little Social Story about fire alarms and what they do, and she walked him all around the school, and they played a game about we don't touch the fire alarms. I mean this was after school, and I know she was tired . . . but she spent like 40 minutes with him, teaching him, and apparently he has not touched the fire alarms [since then].

Parents recounted, with great appreciation, circumstances when teachers demonstrated commitment by attending student sporting events outside of the school and providing behavioral and academic support at the students' homes, including dropping off/picking up materials and equipment and going to community activities with families. A few participants also pointed to the fact that parental commitment impacted educators' commitment. As one parent noted, "I think if the teachers recognize that you're [the parent] committed and that you're going to be there and your communication is open, I think they embrace that and they work with you a lot..."

Professional competence. School professionals' expertise and proficiency in addressing students' individual needs, willingness to learn new techniques, and acting proactively rather than reactively to students' needs is the final attribute of trusting partnerships families identified. Participants discussed how teachers and other staff met student needs by crafting meaningful IEPs or other individualized strategies; met students at their current levels; and employed "outside of the box" strategies to address unique academic, behavioral, social, and emotional needs inside and outside of the school environment, sometimes adapting on the spot.

Participants also appreciated teachers addressing needs of children with disabilities as a part of the "normal flow of the class" so "the rest of the class is not gawking . . ." Participants reflected on the amount of dedication involved in learning how to address student needs: "I think

that it's taken a lot of training on these teachers' part to make it look so simple, but they're dedicated to it." Participants also noted the importance of preparation and proactivity regarding services, supports, and transitions between grades and schools. One mother appreciated the time her daughter's teachers invested in her transition to middle school: "Yesterday in preparation for middle school...we walked through the whole day just to see what possible...hurdles might come up . . . it was awesome, just absolutely awesome how proactive they are, and very personal."

Opportunities for Family Involvement

Participants described two types of family involvement opportunities: families volunteering as school leaders and families volunteering to support the life of the school.

Families volunteering as school leaders. Participants highlighted leadership efforts related to policies, programs, systems, or other issues that they did independently, with other families, and/or alongside educators. The degree of family leadership efforts ranged from leadership at a district level to a school or classroom level. For example, some participants discussed families contributing to grant proposals or legislation on behalf of the school, while others talked about leading Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) committees. A parent of a child with a disability described how her leadership in the school community guided her to becoming a community leader focused on increasing inclusive opportunities in her community:

. . . so parents who get the power [of leadership] here [at the school] go out with that power and say, "okay, let's make this change too because we can't just have one space [school] where our kids are included, they need to be included in everything [in the community]."

Family leaders also developed a number of strategies to encourage more parents to partner with the school so they become "more comfortable . . . showing up." Some of these

strategies included: (a) “recruit[ing] kindergarten parents” to get “new blood” in the volunteer circuit and prevent burnout; (b) providing multiple ways for parents to be involved in the school “because everybody has their own family, demands, and their own needs;” and (c) initiating one-on-one contact with parents [new to the school] and inviting them to participate in school activities or volunteer opportunities.

Families volunteering to support the life of the school. Participants also described volunteer efforts that supported the school to function successfully. These efforts often supported strategies to encourage family involvement. Family involvement in class and school volunteer activities included (a) assisting teachers in the classroom, (b) contacting parents and inviting them to help, and (c) answering new parents’ questions. Parents assisted teachers in multiple ways, including providing clerical assistance (e.g., helping the teacher make copies), leading small academic or social skills groups, attending field trips, volunteering at school events, and donating materials to the classroom. Participants encouraged family involvement by contacting other parents with a personal invitation to partner with the school

A lot of parents won’t show up to volunteer unless they’re specifically asked. And I do that a lot, too. When you send an email out, I won’t respond. . . . But if you specifically ask me . . . “Can you do this?,” almost always I can say, “Yeah, sure, I can do that.”

Participants reached out to other families over the phone, through email, and in person at school and community events and by responding to the questions of new parents, especially questions related to inclusion.

Many group participants volunteered at the school in some capacity and nearly all described attending school events such as international nights, math nights, back-to-school events, and parent education nights (e.g., a guest speaker presenting reading strategies to

parents). Participants universally enjoyed these activities, noting how these activities created feelings of community, pride, and excitement in their schools.

Positive Outcomes for all Students

The positive outcomes of inclusion for all students also emerged as a factor that influenced trusting family-professional partnerships. Several participants who did not have children with disabilities admitted feeling surprised and relieved that their children's education was not impeded, but instead benefitted from students with disabilities being included in general education settings. All participants generally agreed that the additional staffing, which occurred in inclusive classrooms, globally benefitted students because paraprofessionals and other specialized staff assisted all students. For example, several parents noted, "that children have opportunities for differentiated curriculum and instruction" in inclusive classrooms. Another parent noted how therapists providing services in the general education classroom benefitted all students:

What's wonderful I think, too, is that a lot of the . . . speech therapists and occupational therapists come into the classroom so all of our kids get the benefit of having them there. Like, if they see someone who . . . needs a little help with the way they're holding their pencil or whatever the case may be, they'll mention it to the teacher, so they're [students without disabilities] also getting this benefit in the classroom as well.

Many parents also noticed that inclusive practices at their schools increased acceptance of diversity and differences because it "teaches all the other students to accept people for who they are . . ." Participants also commented on the benefits of demystifying disability by educators talking candidly about all students' strengths and needs.

Parents of children with disabilities commented on their satisfaction with notable improvements in their child's academics, social skills, and behavior that they attributed to inclusive education. Several participants reported specific gains, including enhanced reading skills, improved self-monitoring skills, more friends, greater self-awareness, and increased self-confidence. Many participants also reported decreases in disruptive or aggressive behavior. Participants of children with disabilities commented about the benefit of their children participating in extra-curricular activities, such as baseball, alongside supportive peers who know their children from class. A number of social/emotional benefits for students with disabilities were noted, but for many parents the biggest benefit was the acceptance of their child by other students as contributing members of the school community.

This is the first time that my son really had friends. He gets invited to birthday parties. . . . He has friends that he talks to. He's good friends with [child], and it's just like a whole new world for him. He loves [his school].

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of parents of children with and without disabilities regarding factors that facilitate trusting family-professional partnerships at six KDS identified by The SWIFT Center for at least one exemplary inclusion practice. Our findings indicate that multiple factors contribute to trusting partnerships: (a) school culture of inclusion, (b) positive administrative leadership, (c) attributes of positive partnerships, (d) opportunities for family involvement, and (e) positive outcomes for all students.

The themes in this manuscript are highly interrelated and influence one another. We learned that a strong school culture that supports a sense of belonging in a school community, where everyone is “on board,” enabled trusting partnerships to flourish. Thus, a school culture

of belonging and inclusion emerged as an overarching theme. The remaining themes of (a) administrative leadership, (b) attributes of positive partnerships, (c) opportunities for family involvement, and (d) positive outcomes for all students, formed and sustained a positive school culture, that, in turn, became the sustaining life force of the school, directly and powerfully influencing trusting family partnerships—including a strong sense of shared responsibility for student outcomes and for the life of the school. Participants across all 11 focus groups discussed administrative leadership often and with a great degree of passion in terms of the element that most directly influenced school culture.

Strong administrative leadership profoundly contributed to school culture and the other themes in this study. Participants across all focus groups uniformly noted that school principals who were friendly, involved, and focused on positive student outcomes influenced school culture and established trust and involvement among families. While describing their relationships with school professionals (especially school principals), participants highlighted numerous examples of trust, including those related to benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Participants identified that they had the sense that administrators really cared for their children as unique individuals, exemplifying benevolence and a dedication to positive outcomes for *all* students, including those with disabilities. Participants also emphasized how principals honestly and openly shared information and power, including creating opportunities for parents to assume leadership roles at the school. Participants repeatedly expressed the importance of trusting the competence of school professionals, indicating that principals selectively hiring quality teachers contributed to their perceptions of competence. Participants also emphasized the importance of school principals taking specific steps to foster trust among all stakeholders, such as setting high expectations for all students and

creating a “welcoming” atmosphere by frequently engaging in positive interactions with students, families, and faculty.

Many of our findings reflect recent literature on family partnerships with school staff. For example, researchers cite the importance of (a) trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014); (b) administrative leadership style on school culture and partnerships (Auerbach, 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2001, 2014), (c) attributes of positive partnerships between teachers and families (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Tschannen-Moran, 2001), (d) parental involvement at school (Epstein 2001; Haines et al., 2013), and (e) the beneficial outcomes of inclusion for students with and without disabilities (Dessementet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Kalambouka, Farrell, & Dyson, 2007). Our findings also align with literature on the importance of positive school culture on partnerships and teacher, family, and student outcomes (Hoy, 2012; Rose, Espelage, Monda-Amaya, Shogren, & Aragon, 2013; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013).

This study is notable, however, because it reports (a) data from six schools across the nation recognized for excellence in inclusive education practices and (b) the perspectives of parents of children with and without disabilities and with varied levels of school engagement. These diverse perspectives are especially relevant considering our themes cut across all focus groups, establishing their crucial importance to building trusting family-professional partnerships and generalizability across schools and families. Further, we illuminated several key findings.

First, in order for trusting family-professional partnerships to occur, the culture of a school had to promote a sense of belonging and membership for all stakeholders, including school professionals, students, and families. Our analysis also made it clear that school administrators, namely principals, were essential in creating a culture of trust and community.

The energy level and emotions of participants notably increased when discussing school principals and the culture of the school. Focus group participants frequently would finish each other's sentences, emphatically agreeing that the sense of belonging established by the principal and embodied by the staff, students, and families from the school was what made their schools special.

Second, parents served as a conduit and key facilitators for recruiting other families to volunteer as family leaders or contribute to the life of the school. Actively involved families recruiting others is likely successful because new families may find it easier or less intimidating talking to other parents. Further, a personal invitation by a fellow parent may increase the sense of belonging in the school community, which may promote investment in the school and a level of comfort if the parent is new to family involvement.

Third, inclusive practices had a positive influence on trusting family-professional partnerships. Focus group participants universally were pleased with the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral progression of their children and appeared to take great pride in the fact that their schools practiced inclusion. Parental satisfaction that all students, including their own children, were full "members" of the school increased trust and their own motivation to partner with educators and extend inclusion into the community.

Limitations

The primary limitation in this study relates to the participant selection process. Purposeful selection of focus group participants enables researchers to appropriately represent the perspectives of stakeholders (Maxwell, 2005). As discussed in the methods section, we provided the six schools with a set of desired criteria for selecting focus group participants. This process limited our ability to control the purposeful selection of participants. Further, we

conducted focus groups in only one middle school, which limits our ability to compare and contrast the perspectives of parents of elementary and middle school students. Last, our commitment to protecting participant confidentiality prevented us from reporting specific demographic information. Despite these limitations, this study has numerous implications for future research and technical assistance for schools implementing schoolwide inclusive transformation.

Implications

Future research should address the limitations we identified in this study. For example, future researchers should seek to purposely or randomly select participants to achieve a representative sample of families from schools. This process, in conjunction with reporting specific demographic information (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status) would likely mitigate possible issues related to the generalizability of findings.

A second important direction for future research is to analyze and compare the perspectives of various participant groups from inclusive and non-inclusive schools. These groups should include parents from backgrounds characterized by racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity as well as perspectives of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other caregivers who have experienced dissatisfaction with school services and distrust of educators. These diverse perspectives are especially important given the number of barriers that many families have experienced related to trusting family partnerships (Auerbach, 2010; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). Future research should also consider exploring the perspectives of family members, teachers, and students in grades 7 to 12 to compare them to the findings of this study, which focused primarily on elementary grades. A longitudinal study, following a number of family and student participants from elementary through high school to see how partnerships

evolve and change over time, would be especially insightful. Finally, future researchers should further explore specific strategies that educators and families with high levels of trusting partnerships use to facilitate strong trusting partnerships and school culture.

Participants overwhelmingly cited school principals as a major source of trusting partnerships. Future research should examine specific strategies that principals and other school administrators (e.g., superintendents) use to build trust and a strong community culture, including steps to overcome barriers, increase staff buy-in, facilitate shared decision-making, and build relationships with “hard to reach” families. Similarly, future research should explore the perspectives of teachers, school staff, and students to determine the effective strategies for building trusting family-professional partnerships.

Finally, the findings of this study also have numerous implications for technical assistance (TA) related to building trusting family-professional partnerships. For example, information about the influential factors identified in this study could be used to inform the ways in which (a) TA providers examine school and district policies, programs, practices and operations to identify strengths and areas of opportunity (Sailor, McCart, McSheehan, Mitchiner, & Quirk, 2014), (b) provide individualized TA supports to schools and districts, and (c) evaluate the effectiveness of TA efforts. The findings from this study also provide critical indicators that can serve as the basis of developing tools and professional development modules, which address the most effective and efficient methods of enhancing trusting family-professional partnerships during the inclusive transformation process.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to improve our understanding of parent perspectives about the influencing factors that facilitate trusting family-professional partnerships in schools

recognized for inclusive practices. We identified five major themes, all of which are highly interrelated and influence one another. However, the theme of positive school culture that promotes a sense of belonging among all stakeholders emerged as the overarching, influential factor in facilitating trusting family-professional partnerships between families and school staff. Participants indicated that school principals were the driving force behind that school culture, which principals achieved by (a) demonstrating strong, effective leadership; (b) being directly and actively involved; and (d) having great expectations.

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