Equity Dispatch

Parents/Caregivers as Authentic Partners in Education

September 2015

IMPACT: *Educate, Engage, Empower - for Equity*

(Click words to navigate to sections)

> *"Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much."*
>
> *~ Helen Keller*

Educate

Traditional Views of Parent/Caregiver Engagement in Schools

It is well documented that school communities enhance their ability to be responsive to and supportive of all students by deeply and authentically engaging parents/caregivers and families (NEA, 2011; Ontario Schools, 2013). However, traditionally this arrangement is not always realized in practice. Sociohistorical factors such as school collaborative structures (committees, advisory groups, parent/caregiver teacher associations) and

Meet the Authors

This edition of the Great Lakes Equity Center newsletter was written and edited by:

Tiffany S. Kyser
Nickie Coomer
Tammera Moore
Gayle Cosby
Robin G. Jackson
Seena M. Skelton

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sociohistorical conditions (hierarchies of power and decision making in schools and school communities), often serve as barriers to integrate parents/caregivers and families in "decision-making junctures" (Trainor, p. 245, 2010) in their child's educational experience. This, in part, has created a lineage of educator and family arrangements being more adversarial than collaborative (Harry et al, 1995). Further, this arrangement negates opportunities to be responsive to the lived experiences (Genzuk, 1999) of families who have been historically marginalized and underserved. Thus, missing opportunities to redress inequitable policy and decision-making in schools. Therefore, as we think about approaches to strengthen the relationship between families and schools, understanding the traditional ways in which parents/caregivers have interfaced with schools as well as how educators can disrupt problematic practices is instructive.

Troubling Traditional Arrangements between Parents/Caregivers and Schools

Traditional arrangements between schools and parents/caregivers places the family in the role of pursuer and assimilator. Procedures and processes for families to engage in their school community are often determined by the school and not in direct engagement with parents/caregivers. Thus, resulting in bureaucratic or "highly regulated process [that] often rel[y] on parents' use of cultural and social capital" most prevalent in the dominant culture (Trainor, p. 246, 2010). When White, middle class cultural practices are not fluently applied by parents/caregivers, educators all too often make stereotypical assumptions (Harry et al, 2005) that lead to deficit views (Valencia, 2010) and a disregard for parent/caregiver participation. For example, culturally and linguistically diverse parents/caregivers are often perceived as resistant (MABE & MATSOL, 2012) or not involved with supports or recommendations made by educators concerning their child(ren). However, often educators lack a "clear understanding of the cultural assumptions that guide their own thinking" and subsequent perceptions of parents'/caregivers' behaviors (MABE & MATSOL, 2012).

Developing a Shared Understanding of the Term, "Partner"

There are differences in expectations for realizing legal mandates (IDEA, n.d.; Metropolitan, 2010) and school policies that calls for collaboration and partnership with families. The term "partner" connotes equal arrangements in power and decision making between families and schools; however, partnerships between families and schools are often an unequal and inequitable endeavor.

Spotlight

Ashley Cartell Johnson, M.A., BCBA, is a Clinical Faculty member at Miami University in Oxford, OH, in the Educational Psychology Department.

Ms. Cartell Johnson has focused her career on working alongside individuals with disabilities and their families to find, create, or increase authentically inclusive experiences for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Specifically, her research has included examining the effects of incorporating video games into instruction and job-training for individuals with autism, residential and day habilitation program options for adults with autism, the effects of sensory integration environments on individuals with developmental disabilities, and incorporating Applied Behavior Analysis in a positive behavior supports culture.

The hierarchal culture of schools and assumptions that all families approach participation, expectations of roles, responsibility and authority (Harry & Harry, 2012) with an alignment to only the school's expectations places families who have different expectations at a disadvantage (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). Further, educators are often trained as clinicians, using specialized knowledge and jargon through the course of daily work and through collegial relationships, thereby acquiring cultural and social capital in ways that are not often made accessible to parents/caregivers (Murtadha-Watts and Stoughton 2004; Trainor 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to view the term and subsequent exchanges of partnership between schools and parents/caregivers as rife with power imbalances and expectations.

Towards Authentic Partnership

Establishing Cultural Reciprocity

Educators should begin to examine their own power in their schools and consider ways to reposition that power which is more attune to "cultural reciprocity" (Kalyanpur & Harr, 2012: Trainor, 2010). Establishing cultural reciprocity between educators and parent/caregivers, attempts to redress the power dynamic of teacher as expert and parent/caregiver as non-expert. Dr. Beth Harry recommends a four step approach toward cultural reciprocity to enhance communication, understanding, and collaboration with culturally and linguistically diverse families (Essential Tools, 2005). These steps include: 1) educators identify the cultural values underlying their perceptions and interpretations of students and families, 2) educators explore to the extent those cultural values align or misalign with their students and families, 3) educators acknowledge cultural differences and discuss their perspectives with students and families, and finally, 4) educators collaborate with students and families to negotiate new ways of "being" within a partnership that incorporates the family's value system as well as school expectations (MABE & MATSOL, 2012).

Capitalizing on Families' Funds of Knowledge

Centering parents'/caregivers' funds of knowledge in schools realizes a deeper, more equitable partnership where the school also benefits. Funds of knowledge is defined as "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, p. 133, 2001). Parents/caregivers contributing their knowledge and perspectives in decision making, offering their skills, and allocating their resources culminates in a richer and healthier school community more attune to all students. Educators can learn about the assets

their students' parents/caregivers bring to the school community using various strategies. These strategies can include: conducting community walkthroughs, facilitating family interviews, hosting coffee chats with families, and inviting parents/caregivers to observe classes (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia & Nolly, 2004). These strategies help to engender a communication loop that more authentically centers participation, representation, and high outcomes of families, but also authentically involves parents'/caregivers' funds of knowledge present in their students' home and community (Genzuk,1999). Thus, parent participation becomes valued as a way to increase the efficacy of both educators and students (Garcia et al. 2000; Trainor, 2010).

Negotiating Policy & Practice With Families

The daily practices within school communities are mediated by an array of policies that often do not incorporate families meaningfully (GLEC, 2014; Trainor, 2010). Further, multiple and sometimes contradictory policies are created by individuals who may or may not share familiarity with the local context (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010) and school community. Thus, families should be considered tremendous assets and thought partners in negotiating the exchange between policy as written versus policy as practice (GLEC, 2014; Sutton & Levinson, 2001). In establishing practices which anchor cultural reciprocity and capitalize on families' funds of knowledge, families and schools are better positioned to leverage one another's assets in deciding, interpreting and implementing policy in ways that are responsive to the needs of the local school community.

Towards Authentic Collaboration with Parents/Caregivers

Below is an exemplar of how a school community centered equity in parent/caregiver partnerships. Scholars, Dr. Samantha Paredes Scribner's (Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis) and Dr. Erica Fernandez's (University of Connecticut) full case study can be read in the UCEA Review, here. Below is a summary of their research.

Leading with Latin@ Immigrant Parents

On a Wednesday afternoon during the school year at a public elementary school in Indianapolis, you are likely to find three or four Latina mothers arranging the school's Community Room for the weekly meeting of a Latin@ parent organization. They set up refreshments they have prepared or purchased, make coffee, and arrange seating so that parents and guests can assemble around a large table at the center of the room. As the afterschool programs come to an end and children and adults make their way out of the building, the mothers leading the organization carry

on their weekly commitment to organizing Latin@ immigrant parents/caregivers in accordance with the group's mission: to advocate for Latin@ parents' rights at the school and for high quality education; to gain access to community resources; and to work collectively to change and improve their own future and that of their children.

Context

A 2007 report out of Indiana University's Center for Evaluation and Educational Policy (Levinson, et al., 2007) documented the lack of preparedness by districts to cope with increasing numbers of language minority students — citing underprepared teachers and funding per ELL students that did not adjust despite an almost four-fold increase of students. Compounding the challenges these students encounter at their school is a policy context that increasingly criminalizes immigrants (or anyone who "looks" like an immigrant from South of the border). The intersection of economic downturns and scapegoating of immigrants have led to the adoption of state and local measures that target undocumented or unauthorized immigrants, particularly immigrants of color (López, 2011).

Engagement at the Intersections of Immigration and Educational Policies

For Indianapolis Latin@ immigrants, this context is particularly hostile. Families with undocumented members live in fear of being detained and/or deported. The threat of family separation as a result of such detentions is a constant stress on adults and children. For example, when the mothers leading the parent organization identified the lack of Spanish-speaking bilingual staff as a problem at the school, capitalizing on their funds of knowledge, the parents offered to come into classrooms to read to children in Spanish during reading time. This would increase opportunities for Spanish-speaking children to enjoy stories and, in their words, enjoy their own culture. However, district policy required that any volunteer at the school must have a criminal background check in order to assist in classrooms or in other areas of the school. Because of fears related to immigration policies, many of the mothers refused to be fingerprinted and risk having their records entered into the database. In such a situation, principals are faced with a conundrum: willing and available parent volunteers and a district policy in place to protect the school population. Because of the relationship between the parents/caregivers and the school administrators and staff at this school, the principal negotiated ways that the parents/caregivers could assist without skirting either policy and ensuring increased visibility and support for Spanish speaking parents/caregivers and children at the school. What becomes instructive here, is that this principal had to be open to the fact that immigration policies and

educational policies do intersect in ways that must be dealt with in order to achieve school objectives.

Leading at the Intersections

This one example is by no means a minor lesson. If educational leaders are to engage families and communities — if they are to view their role as community leaders (Khalifa, 2012) — they must find the will and the ways to see and act on the impact of policies that shape family life and inevitably intersect with school-life and within the school space. When parents/caregivers mobilize to support children and schools, leaders do well to lead with parents/caregivers, rather than in spite of parents/caregivers.

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Engage

The Inclusive College Experience at Miami University

Pioneered by Ashley Cartell Johnson, Miami University's Inclusive College Experience at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio brings together community participants with cognitive and developmental disabilities and current Miami students for a week-long program of classes, dining, and recreation. What began as a classroom conversation in an undergraduate level Educational Psychology course has evolved into a long-term initiative to increase the university's definition of "diversity" to include those with cognitive and developmental disabilities.

Miami's Inclusive College Experience provides the opportunity for undergraduate students and external student participants with intellectual disabilities to live, learn, and have fun together in a one to one mentoring environment.

Engaging Families as Partners

One of the key tenets of the program is engaging families and participants in authentic partnership. Many of the parents and caregivers of the participants had never

considered postsecondary options for their children beyond job-training and day habilitation services. For many of the participants, the week-long program was their first time away from home. Parents/caregivers expressed that their children have been noticeably more independent, willing to do more social activities, and make choices for themselves after completing the program. Several participants will also be applying to inclusive college programs across Ohio for the 2016-2017 school year.

Agency, Independence, and Advocacy

Participants and current Miami students are an integral part of the program's long-term success. Miami students are not "helpers": they are peers, friends, and part of an authentically symbiotic relationship of mutual benefit. Current Miami students commented on how the experience filled a gap in their own experiences and friendships they had not known were there, and how this feeling will inform their teaching. As Intervention Specialists in the field, a true understanding of what inclusive education looks like, how to recognize and break barriers to inclusion, and reframing deficits or disability as appreciable difference will be key to providing equitable opportunities for all students. For more information on the Experience, including programming please contact Global Initiatives at Miami University.

What Educators and Parents/Caregivers Should Know

Ms. Cartell Johnson believes that educators and parents/caregivers should know that students with cognitive and developmental disabilities can and do attend college. Researching inclusive college programs should be part of post-secondary transition planning for all students with a desire to continue their education. There are close to 250 other programs at colleges and universities across the United States that offer a complete range in types of programming for students with intellectual disabilities: from job experiences to four-year degree programs. For students who want to attend college, there is likely a program out there for them.

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Empower

Something to Read!
Schools Should Roll Out the Welcome Mat For Parents

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for children

A supportive and nurturing school environment is a vital component in student academic success and achievement. The authentic engagement of parents/caregivers as partners in and advocates for the education of their children is often influenced by the depth and quality of the relationships they establish with classroom teachers and administrators. This posting focuses on Indianapolis Public Schools and articulates the significance of cultivating strong relationships between parents/caregivers and educators. The focus of this posting is to assist in empowering parents/caregivers and challenging them to think critically about the ways in which schools traditionally interact with families, the limits it imposes and ways in which more equitable and authentic interactions can take place.

Something to Watch!
Building Relationships Between Parents and Teachers

Megan Olivia Hall was Minnesota's 2013 Teacher of the Year at Open World Learning Community. As an educator Megan understands the transformative power of building authentic collaborative partnerships with parents/caregivers. Megan believes that creating an atmosphere of trust and respect with both students and parents/caregivers is imperative in the academic success of the student. In this video, Megan reflects on some of her personal experiences and interactions with the parents/caregivers of the students in her classroom. She discusses some of the ways in which these collaborations have created a more secure foundation for students to build on.

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Something to Use!
Bridges/Barriers for School, Family and Community Partnerships

This tool is designed to assist practitioners in creating a more collaborative and inclusive school environment in which parents/caregivers are valued as equal partners in their child's learning experience. This framework for parent/caregiver engagement focuses on some of the attributes and characteristics necessary to cultivate and sustain responsive and supportive school, family, and community relationships.

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