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Parental Engagement in a Reggio Emilia–inspired Head Start Program

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Abstract

In the United States, progressive education programs have historically failed to take hold among low-income families, even when that population has been their initial focus. Instead, these programs tend to become popular among middle-class or affluent families. Some research suggests that working-class/poor families' expectations of education may be incompatible with progressive principles, at least in the United States. The Reggio Emilia early childhood programs in Italy, based in part on Deweyan progressive principles, successfully serve families across all income levels, but in the United States, most Reggio-inspired schools serve affluent populations. The author interviewed predominantly Hispanic parents and teachers in a Reggio Emilia-inspired Head Start program regarding families' understanding of the program's curriculum and pedagogy and their engagement with the program. Although a majority of parents interviewed did not articulate a full understanding of the program's approach, and some felt that elements of it were not congruent with their expectations of preschool, interviewees had positive impressions of family/teacher relationships and reported positive family engagement in children's education.

Introduction

Family engagement can be an important factor in helping to create successful early childhood programs. Children of families that are involved in their children's education have been shown to earn better grades, have higher graduations rates, and be more likely to enroll in postsecondary education (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Family engagement can be particularly important for children whose home culture differs from the largely middle-class, white, English-speaking culture of the school system, such as low-income and minority students. Schools that are better able to partner with families can create greater consistency between home and school environments. Such partnerships require that teachers and parents have shared understandings of classroom curriculum, pedagogy, and behavioral expectations; this requires open communication between teachers and families. However, significant barriers to family engagement exist for the parents of low-income and minority children. These include factors present in many low-income communities such as poor access to transportation and restrictions related to parent working hours. Cultural differences can present additional hurdles.

From the early 20th century, progressive programs that targeted low-income populations failed to take hold among that population but instead became popular among an emerging middle class (Semel & Sadovnik, 2008). Bernstein (1975) theorized that low-income families have difficulty understanding and accepting the conceptualizations of work and play in progressive classrooms. Studies in early childhood education have suggested that middle-class and working-class/poor families have different ideas about what children should be learning prior to starting kindergarten (McClow & Gillespie, 1998).

Differences in classroom engagement practices of low-income families and minority families are sometimes dismissed by teachers and school administrators as reflecting a cultural deficit. Theories of cultural deprivation or deficit emerged in education and other social science fields in the 1960s and 1970s, stemming from Oscar Lewis's (1959) suggestion of a "culture of poverty" among poor populations. Such theories have suggested that children from low-income or minority (usually African American or Hispanic) families would be frustrated with

school, as a result of their limited experience with the expectations of the dominant culture, leading to serious behavior problems and disengagement (Getzels, 1966; Piuck, 1975). Although these theories have been largely discounted by education researchers in favor of theories that do not see cultural difference from a deficit perspective, the notion of cultural deficit still influences the underlying attitudes of many teachers and school administrators when considering families that are low-income, minorities, or speak a language other than English at home (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Literature Review

In early childhood programs, as in elementary and secondary schools, progressive education is often viewed as a pedagogy of the middle class. Progressive programs encourage children to direct their own learning. Children are allowed to explore classroom materials with a great deal of freedom and are typically permitted to self-manage their time during the day (Dewey, 2001; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993; Hinitz, 2002; Meier, 2002).

Many progressive pedagogic models were originally designed to educate children of all socioeconomic levels. The City and Country School, a Deweyan school founded by Caroline Pratt in 1914 in Greenwich Village, was developed for working-class children in Greenwich Village (Semel, 1999). However, working-class parents worried that children would not be ready for public school after attending a program so heavily child-directed. The school instead became popular with the new “Village Intelligentsia”—artists and writers who embraced unconventional methods (Semel, 1999).

The Walden School (formerly the Children’s School), founded by Margaret Naumburg in 1914 in New York City, experienced a similar change. The school drew heavily from Froebelian philosophies of the unconscious and stressed a balance of physical, emotional, and intellectual powers in children (Hinitz, 2002). Like the City and Country School, the Walden School was not able to maintain a working-class population, but for different reasons. The school was unable to raise money for operating costs without charging tuition (Hinitz, 2002).

Deweyan and Froebelian philosophies of education are quite different from each other. Froebel saw the child as divine; the child was of “nature, God, and man” (Mills, 1904). It was the intention of kindergarten to make the divine life conscious in the individual (Cavallo, 1976). Followers of Dewey’s philosophy, such as Caroline Pratt, found Froebel’s methods, including lengthy descriptions of the uses of “gifts,” to be too rigid (Beatty, 1995). The preferred focus was on creating a community of children who could explore their world much more freely (Pratt, 1948). However, both philosophies focused on the importance of learning through play, a clear departure from the rigid academic environment of traditional schools.

Bernstein (1975) theorized that progressive pedagogies (what Bernstein called “invisible pedagogy”) legitimized the class and culture of the middle class or affluent family. The progression of the child through the curriculum is regulated by knowledge of the child and child development rather than a rigid curriculum guide (Bernstein, 1975). The weakened hierarchy between the teacher and child allows for greater input from the child into the curriculum. Directed pedagogies (or “visible pedagogy”), on the other hand, are more reflective of the hierarchies of low-income families and thus are easier for them to understand and accept. Bernstein (1975) suggested that parents’ lack of understanding of the pedagogy could hamper family engagement.

This situation has been further illustrated in Lareau’s (2011) study of families and children from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Poor and working-class families in her study demonstrated strict and strongly framed hierarchies between children and parents, in which parents expected full compliance of directives with no discussion. Middle-class families had weaker hierarchies in which children were invited to participate in discussion with adults as equal partners and express disagreement with parent directives (Lareau, 2011). For the low-income families in Lareau’s study, the invisible pedagogies of a progressive school were very different from the culture of the home, while for the middle-class families, the home and school culture were quite similar.

The City and Country School and the Walden School are just two examples of how Deweyan and Froebelian ideals in early childhood education transitioned from the poor and working classes to the affluent. Affluent families were better able to support the progressive schools financially and were more likely to accept an unconventional play-based curriculum, reinforcing the notion that progressive education was for the affluent and not for the poor and working classes. While Dewey and Froebel (as well as many other educational theorists and reformers) developed pedagogical models for all children, these models became the pedagogy of the upper middle classes, or what Semel (1999) termed “democratic education for the elite.”

Like the City and Country School and the Walden School, the Italian schools following the Reggio Emilia approach were intended to welcome children of all socioeconomic levels (Gandini, 1993). The first Reggio Emilia school was built in the northern Italian city of the same name after World War II with proceeds from the sale of tanks, trucks, and horses. The program opened under the direction of Loris Malaguzzi. While the program was (and is) Italian, its foundations were in American progressivism, primarily the work of Dewey (Edwards et al., 1996). In Italy, the Reggio Emilia approach continues to educate children across socioeconomic levels. However, in the United States, Reggio is typically implemented in private programs (Geiger, 1997; Haigh, 1997) and the Reggio Emilia approach is not well known among American parents of any socioeconomic class.

In contemporary educational systems, many parents find progressive early childhood pedagogies, such as Reggio Emilia, difficult to fully understand. True progressivism, even among schools serving affluent populations, has

become rare. However, parents of American middle-class children may be more likely than working-class or poor families to accept progressive elements of the Reggio Emilia approach, such as internalization of hierarchies, explicit child agency, and relationships between work and play that are reflected in American middle-class families.

Parent involvement is an important component of early childhood programs; therefore, family engagement becomes a source of concern when designing effective early childhood programs for low-income children. This study examines family engagement and perceptions of parent/teacher partnerships in a Reggio Emilia-inspired Head Start program on the South Side of Chicago. Bernstein's (1975) theory of social class and pedagogic practice, and some related literature, suggest that the parents in a Reggio Emilia-inspired Head Start program may face difficulties in understanding and accepting the progressive curriculum and the pedagogy, thus making the formation of school partnerships more difficult (Henderson et al., 2007; Lareau, 2011; Newhouse, 2007). This research addresses three primary research questions: (1) Will low-income minority parents in a Reggio Emilia-inspired early childhood program in the United States have difficulty understanding the program's curriculum and pedagogy? (2) Will low-income minority parents in the program have difficulty forming partnerships with teachers? (3) Will low-income minority parents in the program become engaged in their children's educations?

Methods

A case study approach employing qualitative methods was used to examine experiences of low-income families served by an American Reggio Emilia-inspired early childhood program. The findings reported here are part of a larger study of two Head Start programs; this paper addresses data from one of those programs. The methodology drew from ethnographic case studies by Sissel (1999) and Lubeck (1985) in Head Start and private preschool programs. Like the authors of those two studies, the researcher worked as a classroom volunteer for most of a school year. During that time, she observed interactions between parents and teachers and between parents and children, and conducted interviews with parents and teaching staff.

Setting

The program chosen for this study is part of a social service agency in Chicago. The agency is a Head Start delegate and operates four Head Start centers in various high-need neighborhoods throughout the city. The agency teaching staff developed an interest in the Reggio Emilia approach after the child development director's visit to the Reggio Emilia region of Italy, and the agency's Head Start programs gradually incorporated elements of Reggio Emilia beginning in the early 1990s. According to the staff, teachers chose to focus on only one element of the Reggio Emilia approach the first year, adding others in successive years.

Teachers at the site consistently expressed a strong commitment to Reggio Emilia. This was exemplified by numerous classroom elements such as natural light and materials, large areas for art with supplies the children could access without assistance, and availability of "adult" materials such as ceramic dishes, oil paints, and clay. The children learned basic skills through play in small groups. Information about Reggio Emilia was conveyed to parents through displays throughout the center (in English and Spanish), parent meetings (also in English and Spanish), newsletters, and one-on-one conversations with teachers about the principles and practice of classroom instruction. Faculty in the school actively and intentionally talked to parents about the program philosophy and pedagogy and offered opportunities for engagement. Teachers discussed the elements of Reggio Emilia with parents using clear definitions and minimal jargon. Elements were often identified as "child-centered" rather than "Reggio Emilia." Teachers stressed the importance of emergent curriculum; artistic expression; availability of natural or "real" materials, such as clay for molding or ceramic plates for dramatic play; and the use of a classroom project or "exploration." Explanations of elements of Reggio Emilia and their connection to learning were also posted throughout the classrooms and in center common areas.

The daily schedule was largely outside of the teachers' control. Scheduling of arrival and meals were dictated by state and federal requirements. Other parts of the schedule were affected by the children's gross-motor period, which itself was dictated by the availability of the center's gross-motor room.

Participants

In the two classrooms included in this report, the population was primarily Mexican-American. Parents interviewed were selected for proficiency in English and availability of time for the interview. Proficiency in English was a consideration in selecting parents because the interviewer did not speak fluent Spanish. Most of the eight parents interviewed were not first-generation immigrants, but all were either first or second generation (see Table 1).

Table 1
Parent Participants

Classroom	Participant	Race/ethnicity	Length of time in program (child)	Length of time in program (family)

Classroom 1	1	Mother 4-year-old girl	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	1.5 years	1.5 years
	2	Father 4-year-old boy	White (Italian-American)	4 years	4 years
	3	Mother 5-year-old girl	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	1 year	1 year
	4	Mother 3-year-old girl	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	4 months	4 months
Classroom 2	5	Mother 3-year-old boy	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	3 years	3 years
	6	Mother 3-year-old girl	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	3 years	9 years (older son)
	7	Mother 5-year-old boy	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	1 year	1 year
	8	Mother 4-year-old boy	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	2.5 years	8 years (older daughter)

The group of teachers interviewed was somewhat reflective of the population served (see Table 2). Five of the six teachers in the two classrooms were themselves Mexican-American, either second or third generation in the United States. Those five teachers were also all fluent Spanish speakers and were able to converse with parents in both English and Spanish. They self-identified as members of the community and reported a very clear understanding of the culture of the majority of the families in the center. The teacher who was not Mexican-American made a noticeable effort to understand the cultures of the children and families.

Table 2
Teacher Participants

Classroom	Participant	Highest degree	Race/ethnicity	Experience
Classroom 1	1 Head Teacher	Master of arts in teaching	White	7 years
	2 Assistant Teacher	Associate in early childhood education	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	4 years
	3 Teacher Aide	Child Development Associate (CDA) certificate	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	6 years
Classroom 2	4 Head Teacher	Bachelor of arts in early childhood education	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	5 years
	5 Assistant Teacher	Associate in early childhood education	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	10 years
	6 Teacher Aide	Child Development Associate (CDA) certificate	Hispanic (Mexican-American)	4 years

Data Sources

Interviews were conducted to gather information about parental and teacher beliefs about early childhood development, early childhood pedagogy, family engagement practices, and the interviewees’ general feelings about the program and the program’s effectiveness.

Parent interviews focused on the parents’ knowledge of the program, their reasons for selecting the program, their perceptions of their children’s progress, and their beliefs about how young children learn. Parents were asked the following questions:

- How do you believe that children learn best?
- What do you know about the way that this program teaches children?
- What do you think about your child’s progress?
- Does this program provide opportunities for you to be involved?
- Do teachers keep you up-to-date on your child’s progress?
- Do you feel welcome here?
- What do you like best about this program?

Teacher interviews focused on the implementation of the Reggio Emilia approach and their beliefs about how the school’s population influenced implementation of the program philosophy and the use of progressive pedagogy. Teachers were asked the two questions about family engagement: How does your program include families? What are the special needs of the school population? All interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed and coded.

Findings

Major themes that emerged from analysis and coding of data from parent interviews included program curriculum and pedagogy, individual child progress, opportunities for parent engagement, and teacher-parent relationships. Themes that emerged in the coding of data from teacher interviews included opportunities for parent engagement and teacher-parent relationships. Each theme is discussed in detail below.

Parent Perceptions

Program Curriculum and Pedagogy: Of the eight parents interviewed, three cited and interpreted key classroom elements (e.g., child-centeredness, emergent curriculum, artistic expression, availability of natural and “real” materials) in the same manner as the teachers when asked about how the program teaches children:

They open up different areas. They have reading time or story time. I know they sing. They dance. They do a lot of painting. They give them a choice to do what they want. (Parent 1)

[Children learn best through a] hands-on experience and giving them the opportunity to explore the materials. They paint, paintbrushes, cotton swabs, if they want to use their hands. Their hands, spreading the whole sheet of paper ... playing with it. ... [The center has] a lot of variety of materials here that they can explore. (Parent 6)

They work with so many different materials. ... They work with natural items, like clays and things like that. It’s kind of cool to me. (Parent 8)

The remaining parents had greater difficulty describing the program curriculum and pedagogy. Several acknowledged the program was different from other programs they had encountered, but they were not sure how. Some parents indicated that they perceived the program as lacking both structure and focus on academic skills. One interviewee remarked, “They just kind of do whatever they feel like doing” (Parent 5), and another commented, “She knows letters, but they don’t reinforce it here” (Parent 4).

In both of these cases, the parents expressed disappointment with what they saw as unstructured play. It was not clear to them that the teachers introduced academic skills or that the child-directed curriculum reflected intentional teaching. Other parents’ descriptions highlighted the required classroom schedule, emphasizing it as an important classroom element.

The system, it’s a system that they follow. Let’s put it this way: as an adult, we get accustomed to get up in the morning, get a cup of coffee, have breakfast, go to work. It’s a really young age, they get programmed how life is supposed ... gonna be set up. (Parent 2)

The way they structure the day, I like it as well. They have time for everything. (Parent 7)

It’s very strict at this one [regarding the schedule]. (Parent 4)

While the schedule was important in managing the classrooms, it was not heavily emphasized by teachers in their interviews.

Individual Child Progress: All of the parents stated they felt well-informed about their child’s progress, and they largely had positive feelings about the program. Most parents were encouraged by the growth they had observed in their children since entering prekindergarten; they noted significant improvements in vocabulary, problem solving, self-help, and social and emotional skills. Parents were impressed by their children’s curiosity. Most importantly for some families, teachers addressed concerns that the parents were having regarding their children. One parent commented:

So far, I like the way they teach my daughter. She had a really hard time speaking in the beginning. She wouldn’t be able to pronounce the words. So I had to guess what she wanted to say. Since I started coming here, her vocabulary and everything started fluently. So, it was good. (Parent 3)

Another parent reported improvement in a child’s behavior as a result of family-staff collaboration.

When he originally came into the program, he was around the time where kids start having the temper tantrums and all that. Whatever it is that they teach here, they kind of work with the parents, so we work hand-and-hand, and he outgrew the temper tantrums ... almost right away. I would even say within a month. (Parent 8)

Opportunities for Parent Engagement: Parents reported that the teachers found multiple ways to contact parents and maintain good relationships. Parents were able to stay through and after breakfast. They were invited into the classroom for special projects and had special activities to do with their children at home. The center had parent meetings and workshops. Parents reported that they could also volunteer to work in classrooms, go on field trips, or work on building improvement projects.

I can pretty much volunteer whenever I want on my days off. They’re always looking for volunteers, so if it works with my schedule, I definitely do. (Parent 8)

I used to come in the morning and they were allowing me to stay 20 minutes, even a half hour and I would read to him—up until they need to get involved. Let’s say I would need to be here at 8:30. By 9:00, they would need to be on the carpet [for the whole group lesson], which is really good. (Parent 2)

Teacher-Parent Relationships: Nearly all of the parents stated they had very good relationships with their children’s teachers. They felt that they were welcome in the classroom, that their input was important, and that

they were treated as an important part of their children’s educations. The following interview excerpts reflect some of the overall positive experiences reported by parents:

They would ask me, “What do you want your daughter to learn?” I told them ... “I want her to write her name.” And she did ... she writes her name. They asked me, after she accomplished that, the next things was, “What do you want her to do now?” (Parent 1)

They say, “Stay for breakfast.” We can stick around, they don’t mind. They encourage us, actually. (Parent 3)

Most of the parents also felt they had a strong personal relationship with their children’s teachers and often with other teachers at the school. All family members were openly welcomed in the classrooms. The parents reported that they found the environment to be warm and engaging.

Even when I first came here, they tried to make me feel comfortable. (Parent 3)

I feel welcomed here. My son knows everybody. That has a lot to do with me keeping him here. (Parent 7)

They get to know you, know your family. My [older child] hasn’t been here for over four years, and they still talk to her like she’s part of the program. I just really like that, that they don’t forget you. (Parent 8)

They’re part of my family. (Parent 5)

The parents’ most frequently cited reason for recommending the program to others was the relationships with the teachers. Teacher-parent relationships were also the most important element named when parents discussed what they liked best about the program and whether the program was good for their families.

Teacher Perceptions

Opportunities for Parent Engagement: The teachers interviewed all expressed similar views about the center’s welcoming environment. All six teachers stated their classrooms were very open to parent involvement at any time.

They’re always welcome. We have an open-door policy. They’re more than welcome to come, hang out. If they want to read a story, if they want to donate books, if they want to come have breakfast or lunch, they’re more than welcome to come participate. (Teacher 2)

We try to involve our parents just by doing, like helping the children out for breakfast or like, for example, the scrapbook making. We try to involve a lot of dads too. We had a parent, a dad, come in here for a few minutes just to dance with the kids. They really enjoy it. They have lots of fun. (Teacher 1)

Teacher-Parent Relationships: The teachers also noted that the center’s environment and their openness strengthened relationships with parents. *Home* and *family* were among the words teachers used to describe how parents seemed to view their relationships with the center staff:

I think it is effective because it’s like this is their second home. They can come and talk to us. They can come and talk [to the social workers]. They feel like nobody will hear them out there. We’re here for them, so this is like their second home. And we have a lot of parents talk to us about personal things. (Teacher 4)

We try to treat them like family. Like, “Oh, if you need something, we’re here to help” and things like that. ... They know we’re here to help, and they feel comfortable coming to us for whatever they need, even if it’s not about their child. We have some families that don’t know how to read English, and they’ll be like, “Oh, could you help me? Could you read this to me? Could you tell me what it says?” (Teacher 6)

The teachers interviewed stressed the value of the program for the population because it created a nurturing environment and allowed for children to learn in a hands-on, low-stress environment.

Discussion

This study addressed the question of whether low-income minority parents in a Reggio Emilia-inspired early childhood program would have difficulty understanding the program’s curriculum and pedagogy. In the program that is the focus of this research, the parents largely had positive perceptions of the program’s curriculum and pedagogy, but they seemed to have a limited understanding of what it meant to be a Reggio Emilia-inspired (or “child-centered”) program. Some elements of the program were noticed and recognized as valuable, but others were misinterpreted. While most parents liked the program, few could define what made it unique, and several did not seem aware that the program *was* unlike other early childhood programs, even though several had

experience with other more traditional programs through older children or the children of family members.

This study also addressed whether these low-income minority parents would have difficulty forming partnerships with teachers. Analysis revealed that the most important theme in both parent and teacher interviews was the positive relationships between the teachers and the families. The children's families were highly valued by staff at the center. This is not surprising because the role of the family is one of the foundations of the Reggio Emilia approach. All of the teachers and administrators at the center made clear efforts to reach out to families. The parents emphasized the value of the relationship and the openness of the center. The teachers did not hesitate to ask parents to be involved, and the parents felt welcomed in their children's classrooms. Thus, the teachers and administrators were able to plan for family activities knowing that the response would be positive. Likewise, parents could approach teachers about becoming more involved knowing that they would be welcomed.

It may be that if parents are highly valued in the child's education, then equality between all participants—teachers, family, and the child—is recognized, and the individual strengths of children and families are acknowledged and nurtured. As a result, parents and teachers can form partnerships regardless of how well parents understand program pedagogy.

This study questioned if low-income minority parents in this Reggio Emilia-inspired American early childhood program would become engaged in their children's education even if they did not seem to fully understand the program's curriculum and pedagogy. The results of this research suggest that, contrary to what is cited in previous literature on family engagement, parental understanding or lack of understanding of program philosophy and pedagogy does not necessarily affect their engagement. Most of the parents interviewed spoke of several ways in which they felt involved in their children's educations. Family engagement was quite observable in the classrooms; both classrooms displayed pictures of families and family projects that required parent help. During the time the interviews were conducted, one of the classrooms was working on a family book about houses (part of the children's exploration of that topic). Parents were invited to come during the school day to help their child work on the description of their home. This book was kept on display in the classroom. In the other classroom, pictures of parents and children together on the first day of school were on display, along with descriptions of what both parent and child were feeling on that day and what their hopes for the school year were. Both classrooms displayed family and child projects from previous school years, such as a collage of household objects in one classroom and sculptures made from recycled materials in the other.

The high level of parental engagement in the program despite lack of full understanding of key elements of the program was not expected given the literature in family engagement in early childhood education—particularly among low-income populations. It seems that at this center, the teachers and administrators were able to overcome enough of the barriers to engagement to draw in parents so that a full understanding of program content and pedagogy was not a prerequisite for involvement.

Parents and teachers were held in equal esteem with regard to the education of the children. Parents trusted teachers to be nurturing, and teachers recognized the importance of the parents' role as a teacher. Parents did not need to recognize the uniqueness of the program. They knew that the environment was welcoming, that their children thrived, and that they were treated as equals by the teachers. These three factors created strong family engagement.

Conclusion

This is a small case study involving a small number of parents and teachers at a single school. The results are interesting in that they go against much of the accepted literature, yet the sample is much too small to make any conclusive statements about the relationship between parent engagement and the Reggio Emilia approach in schools serving low-income minority children and their families. However, the findings do suggest the need for additional research on a much larger scale.

While it is important for parents to understand what is happening in the classroom, it is perhaps less important that they fully comprehend a complex educational philosophy and pedagogic method. This study suggests that incomplete understanding of pedagogy and curriculum may not limit parent engagement. Teachers can engage parents in the program by creating an environment that welcomes them; parents, like children, have needs that must be met. For low-income minority parents, these needs may be numerous. Teachers and administrators must understand the culture of the families and the community and take the initiative to reach out to parents in culturally appropriate ways. Additionally, the families of enrolled children should feel that the school is a place where their children belong.

As the Reggio Emilia approach necessitates inclusion of the family and recognition of the value of all families, teachers and administrators in Reggio-inspired programs may naturally interact with parents and families in a manner that will appeal to and welcome them. While the progressivism of the Reggio approach might be considered by some as an impediment to engagement with low-income Hispanic families, the fundamentals of Reggio Emilia have the potential to create strong partnerships between schools and families.

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