

Great Expectations? Critical Discourse Analysis of Title I School–Family Compacts

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Abstract

Family, school, and community partnerships are a critical part of student achievement, but the successful establishment of meaningful partnerships with low-income and minority populations remains elusive. In 1994, legislators in the United States passed a version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that seeks to address this challenge with the inclusion of several parental involvement mandates, including the development of a school–family compact in every school receiving Title I funding. This study combines critical discourse analysis with a corpus linguistic approach to examine such compacts in the Midwest region of the United States. The authors seek to understand how discourse in these documents contributes to the framing of family, school, and community partnerships and how the role of power is addressed within these compacts. Findings indicate that Title I compacts primarily reinforce hierarchical models of parental involvement and emphasize transactional encounters over and above partnership activity. A model of co-construction that fosters more authentic engagement is introduced as an alternative approach to current school–family compact development practices.

Key Words: Title I school–family compacts, families, parents, partnerships

Introduction

Policymakers, researchers, and education leaders agree that family, school, and community partnerships are a critical part of student achievement (Weiss,

Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010). Positive outcomes include higher graduation rates (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005), improved attitudes toward school (Rivera & Waxman, 2011), and increased test scores (Van Voorhis, 2011). Yet, the establishment of strong home and school connections can be challenging. In particular, meaningful partnerships with low-income and minority populations are elusive (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In an attempt to address this challenge, legislators in the United States passed a version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1994 that included several parental involvement mandates. Among these legislative requirements is a demand for the development of a school–family compact for schools receiving Title I funding. Title I is a federal program that provides additional funds to districts and schools with high percentages of children who are economically disadvantaged. According to the ESEA legislation, the compact

is a written agreement between the school and the parents of children participating in Title I, Part A programs that identifies the activities that the parents, the entire school staff, and the students will undertake to share the responsibility for improved student academic achievement. In addition, the school–parent compact outlines the activities that the parents, school staff, and students will undertake to build and develop a partnership to help the children achieve to the State’s high academic standards. (Improving America’s Schools Act, 1994, sec. 1118)

The compacts are intended to be collaborative documents outlining the shared insights of multiple stakeholders and reflecting the unique sociocultural context of each school building. These compacts are examples of social discourse that contribute to the production of family engagement practices writ large. They are an attempt to promote interaction between educators and families by requiring schools to initiate communication regarding shared expectations. This article seeks to understand how the language in these school–family compacts contributes to the framing of family, school, and community partnerships, how the role of power is addressed within these documents, and potential implications for authentic engagement activities.

Family Engagement and Title I Schools

In the United States, 44% of children currently live in low-income families (Addy & Wight, 2012). Poverty impacts the whole child, as research indicates that there are negative effects on cognitive development, health, and behavior (Anyon, 2005; Sparks, 2012). Families living in poverty may have difficulty accessing quality healthcare, early childhood education, summer or after school activities, and affordable housing (Ladd, 2012). Children in low-income families are also more likely to attend poorly funded schools and thus have access

to fewer resources, experience increased class size, and are often taught by less qualified and experienced teachers (Anyon, 2005). Title I legislation provides additional resources for schools with a high concentration of poverty. The goal is to improve academic outcomes for students and to support low-income families by bridging the gap between home and school (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Title I legislation requires schools to implement practices that will further engage low-income families and to report on their building's progress. The emphasis on family engagement is in recognition of extensive research indicating that strong school and family relationships can improve student outcomes such as attendance, test scores, graduation rates, and attitudes toward school (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). While the research in support of family engagement is promising, there are a number of challenges that may hinder low-income families' ability to become more involved with schools, including: a lack of transportation and childcare; inflexible work schedules; and feelings of intimidation based on a lack of educational attainment, cultural differences, and language barriers (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Breitborde & Swiniarski, 2002; Huss-Keeler, 1997). In addition, low-income parents may lack trust in schools based on negative experiences during their own education (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Rapp & Duncan, 2011).

Administrators and teachers in Title I schools acknowledge the important role of family and community involvement but often struggle to engage low-income families. In one mixed-methods study focused on administrative, teacher, and parent perceptions of Title I School Improvement Plans, both administrators and teachers identified community involvement as their greatest challenge (Isernhagen, 2012). This challenge is identified in the following findings:

The item rated lowest by both administrators and teachers was “Community members are engaged in decision making based on data that was analyzed”....The similar item “Community members were involved in identification of the Title I Goals” garnered similarly low ratings from administrators and teachers. (Isernhagen, 2012, p. 5)

In the same study, efforts by administrators who sought to address low levels of engagement were primarily focused on home–school communication. While strong communication is vital to effective home–school relationships, it is only one component of a more comprehensive engagement strategy that seeks to include families as partners. An overemphasis on providing more information as a response to low levels of engagement is a typical strategy for educational leaders trained in managerial approaches to community work that “enforce circumscribed and institutionalized roles for parents vis-à-vis the school” (Crowson

& Boyd, 2001, p. 12). It assumes that a lack of awareness is the primary cause for disengagement and fails to consider the possibility that more systemic issues may be involved. For example, school outreach efforts are often focused on changing the behaviors of minority and low-income families so they are more aligned and supportive of the goals of school leaders (de Carvalho, 2001; Olivos, Jimenez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011). This type of schoolcentric approach to family, school, and community partnerships narrowly defines success as being linked to increased student achievement on standardized tests (Auerbach & Collier, 2012). Although academic achievement is an important goal, families may be more interested in addressing some of the underlying social and political issues that have resulted in such drastic educational inequities (Olivos et al., 2011). In this case, low levels of engagement are not due to a lack of awareness or interest but rather are a byproduct of different priorities.

The recent growth in low-income family participation in community-based organizations that are working on education issues suggest that new models of engagement that honor the life experiences of families and empower them as critical collaborators can be effective (Olivos, 2007). These efforts have resulted in positive student outcomes and, in some cases, contributed to broader systemic changes in education (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009). Central to these efforts is the emphasis on engagement over and above involvement. Shirley (1997) describes this critical distinction:

Parental *involvement*—as practiced in most schools and reflected in the research literature—avoids issues of power and assigns parents a passive role in the maintenance of school culture. Parental *engagement* designates parents as citizens in the fullest sense—change agents who can transform urban schools and neighborhoods. (p. 73)

Unfortunately, many public schools continue to focus on transactional models of involvement that emphasize volunteerism and homework assistance. Other schools fail to connect with families beyond superficial attempts at communication (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Schutz, 2006). School–family compacts are one of the Title I requirements intended to ameliorate some of these problems. However, according to a 2008 monitoring report, compliance with ESEA parental involvement requirements is the most significant weakness for most states (Stevenson & Laster, 2008). Anecdotal reports suggest that most schools remain content to rely on stock language from school–family compact templates and fail to engage in a collaborative design process (Henderson, Carson, Avallone, & Whipple, 2011). This study critically examines school–family compacts to better understand how the language in these documents contributes to the framing of family, school, and community partnerships and potential implications for the support of authentic family engagement activities.

Methodology

This study uses a combination of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and corpus linguistics to explore the research question described above. Critical discourse analysis has been described as “an attempt to bring social theory and discourse analysis together to describe, interpret, and explain the ways in which discourse constructs, becomes constructed, represents, and becomes represented by the social world” (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & O’Garro, 2005, p. 366). Given the abundance of research on power and justice issues related to family and school work (see, e.g., Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Li, 2010; Olivos, 2007) the researchers believed that it was essential to include this critical lens. The “critical” component of CDA places an emphasis on the role of power as it relates to class, race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation (Fairclough, 1995). Although there is not one way to do critical research, there are some shared assumptions:

Critical theorists, for example, believe that thought is mediated by historically constituted power relations. Facts are never neutral and are always embedded in contexts. Some groups in society are privileged over others, and this privilege leads to differential access to services, goods, and outcomes. Another shared assumption is that one of the most powerful forms of oppression is internalized hegemony, which includes both coercion and consent. (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 368)

These are assumptions that are shared by the authors and used to frame this study of school–family compacts. One criticism of CDA is that researchers using this approach rarely acknowledge how different audiences will interpret texts differently (Widdowson, 1995). In other words, the ideologies that inform our interpretation of the text may become equally oppressive. We recognize that our approach is prone to researcher bias, and other researchers and educators might interpret these compacts differently, but as we seek to identify and challenge underlying assumptions related to power, we welcome these additional interpretations as a means to further conversations related to family and school relationships in low-income communities (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

The authors also wanted to ascertain if CDA findings regarding school–family compacts were generalizable to a larger population of Title I schools, so corpus linguistics was incorporated into the study. Corpus linguistics involves the study of language in larger samples of text. This approach can help reduce bias (a common criticism of CDA) by working with a larger sample of texts that are culled from their natural contexts; although, the findings are admittedly still a result of the researchers’ interpretations of the text (Cameron,

2001). A corpus linguistics approach offers a quantitative perspective that allowed us to consider a broader sample of school–family compacts in Title I schools (Mautner, 2009). The corpus of school–family compacts was manually compiled (which differs from many larger corpus studies that utilize computer software). The school–family compacts make excellent subject matter because by definition they are contextually situated, co-constructed, and serve the purpose of defining family, school, and student relations. To create the sample for this study the researchers first bound the sample geographically, limiting the collection of compacts to the Midwest (OH, MN, MI, WI, IA, IL, IN, ND, SD, NE, KS, MO). Finally, it is important to note that the focus of this study is on the language that is used in the compacts and its framing of family–school relationships. It is possible that these documents may not reflect relational dynamics in practice. For example, students could possess a great deal of power in a school, but this might not be reflected by compact language. The decision to focus on the compacts is driven by the desire to understand how a federally mandated family involvement measure manifests itself in a school community.

Although school–family compacts are intended to be publicly available documents, we initially experienced difficulty in our attempts to collect samples via direct contact with schools. In the end, we collected compacts using an Internet search of school and district webpages. As a result, we have a nonrandom sample since only schools with compacts available via the Internet are included in the sample. In total, we collected 175 compacts, representing roughly 1% of the compacts in the Midwest. The sample is in proportion to the population of each of the 12 states that were included in the study. The researchers also compiled information regarding the size of the community where the school was located, student racial demographics, and school level (elementary, middle, high school). The overall sample is reflective of the general statistics for Title I schools in the Midwest. The schools in the sample were located in communities of varying size: 52% of the schools were in communities with populations of less than 25,000, 25% were located in communities with populations ranging from 25,000 to 100,000, and 23% of the schools were in communities with populations of more than 100,000. The researchers also looked at the racial demographics of each school to determine if the sample was representative of the broader Midwest population: 77% of the schools were predominantly White, 14% of the schools were predominantly Black, 6% of the schools were predominantly Hispanic, and 3% of the schools in the sample did not have a racial majority. Finally, with regard to school level, the sample includes elementary (69%), middle (10%), and high schools (21%). For the purposes of this study, schools that combined traditional middle grades (6–8) with high school education were coded as high school. The overall sample is reflective of the general statistics for Title I schools in the Midwest.

Table 1. Sample Coding of Title I School–Family Compacts

Interpretations of the Concept “Provide”	Directionality	Sample Excerpts
Give To—to impart, inform, bestow, or allow	Parent to Teacher	Provide the school with current contact information.
	Teacher to Parent	Inform parents of school and state standards.
	Teacher to Student	Provide students with high-quality teaching and leadership.
Give Care—to help, support, or assist	Parent to Teacher	Communicate and work with the school to encourage my child’s learning and positive behavior.
	Teacher to Parent	Teacher will seek ways to help parents become involved in their student’s education.
	Teacher to Student	Will provide a positive classroom environment to encourage student achievement.
Give In—to obey, defer, or submit	Student to Teacher	Come prepared daily for class work and complete all homework assignments.
	Student to Parent	Give all notes and information from the school to my parent/guardian daily.

Data was coded and analyzed using the research software Dedoose. The creation of the codes was based on several assumptions held by the researchers. First, the compact is intended to be a social document outlining the commitments of various education stakeholders (students, parents or caregivers, teachers, and occasionally administrators) in relationship with one another. Thus the codes reflect directionality (e.g., parents → teachers, students → parents). Second, the directionality indicates that action is taking place. As we examined these actions in a pilot round of coding we noticed the frequent use of the word “provide.” Using a critical lens, it became clear that the word was being used in different ways. As we considered the situated meaning of “provide” in compact discourse, we found the word really represented a broader concept of “giving” which appeared in the compacts in three primary ways. Each use signified a varying degree of power that was vested in the giver (Gee, 2004): (1) “Give to”—to impart, inform, bestow, or allow; (2) “Give care”—to help, support, or assist; and (3) “Give-in”—to obey, defer, or submit. This

resulted in 36 initial codes based on a combination of direction and action, although not every code was applied (e.g., there were no examples of students “giving to” any of the other stakeholders). Table 1 provides an overview of the codes and some examples of the school–family compact texts. As the coding process continued, we added four additional codes to address excerpts where directionality was oriented toward the self (e.g., Students will do their best) and a category for the monitoring of student behaviors by parents and caregivers.

Following the establishment of the codes, the researchers recoded the pilot data and all additional compacts. Analysis was ongoing, and memos were created by each of the researchers as they sought to identify emerging themes. Our analytic memos signaled potential patterns and trends during the coding process, and when coding was complete, these themes were reconsidered based on their frequency (see Appendices A, B, and C). In total, the researchers coded 4,017 excerpts from 175 compacts. The researchers took interrater reliability tests resulting in pooled Cohen’s Kappa scores of 0.95 (good to excellent agreement) and 0.60 (moderate to good).

Findings

Three primary findings resulted from the authors’ analysis of the compacts. First, the framework for family, school, and community partnerships created by the discourses in Title I school–family compacts largely reinforces school-centric family involvement models. Second, the relationships between actors in the compacts are primarily transactional in nature, and there is little discussion of partnership work. Third, students are primarily cast as objects in school–family compacts with little agency in their own education. These findings were consistent across the sample regardless of school level or the racial makeup of the student population (see Appendices A, B, and C). The uniformity of the findings across both the states and school demographics suggest that the compacts are not being collaboratively developed with diverse stakeholders, since one would anticipate that the sociocultural context of each school building would result in more variation within the sample. It appears more likely that school–family compact templates are being adapted at each school (Henderson et al., 2011).

Reification of Schoolcentric Family Involvement Models

Our interpretation of discourse patterns in Title I school–family compacts revealed a clear model of family, school, and student relationships (see Figure 1). The percentages in Figure 1 represent the number of compacts that included these codes. While the language in the compacts indicates that both teachers

and families possess power, the type and amount of power was significantly different. In our analysis, teachers possessed power based on their capacity to both instruct and support families and students. In contrast, families were overwhelmingly tasked with providing support to students and teachers. Students have little agency in the model and were expected to adhere to the rules established by both teachers and families, a finding that will be discussed in greater detail later in this article.

In relation to families and students, the language in the compacts portrayed teachers as the more powerful actors. The source of their power is depicted through their capacity to both instruct and support families and students. While arguably these commitments are simply part of a teacher's job, the reciprocal dynamic in which families are only expected to offer support and students are expected to obey places teachers in a position of power. The potential knowledge and expertise of families and students does not appear to be recognized within the model.

A closer examination of the compacts offers examples of these power dynamics in action. For instance, there were 102 excerpts wherein teachers provide (or give to) families information about volunteer opportunities, often accompanied by a list of acceptable possibilities or phrases like, "teachers will advertise volunteer opportunities *when needed*." In a related concept, parents are frequently expected to provide support to teachers by committing to "Volunteer time at school *if requested*." In these examples, the support and participation of families was actively solicited, but only as defined by the teacher. The language implies that teachers will only solicit parent involvement when they need something specific from them and that it is not okay for parents to volunteer unless they are asked. Even in the few examples where teachers reached out to families for advice the focus remained on service to the school. For example, the teachers at one building committed to "Seek input from parents about how best to motivate other parents to become involved." In this case, the overarching goal is primarily focused on the needs of the school.

While the dominant message was that teachers generally "informed" parents (76%), there were also examples of teachers "giving care" to families (65.71%), often in relation to assisting them with understanding their child's academic status in class and by being accessible for questions or concerns. For example, many compacts offered variations of the following excerpt: "Provide you with assistance in understanding academic achievement standards and assessments and how to monitor your child's progress." This finding is consistent with prior research detailing a narrow focus on academic outcomes as the primary goal of family engagement (Auerbach & Collier, 2012; de Carvalho, 2001).

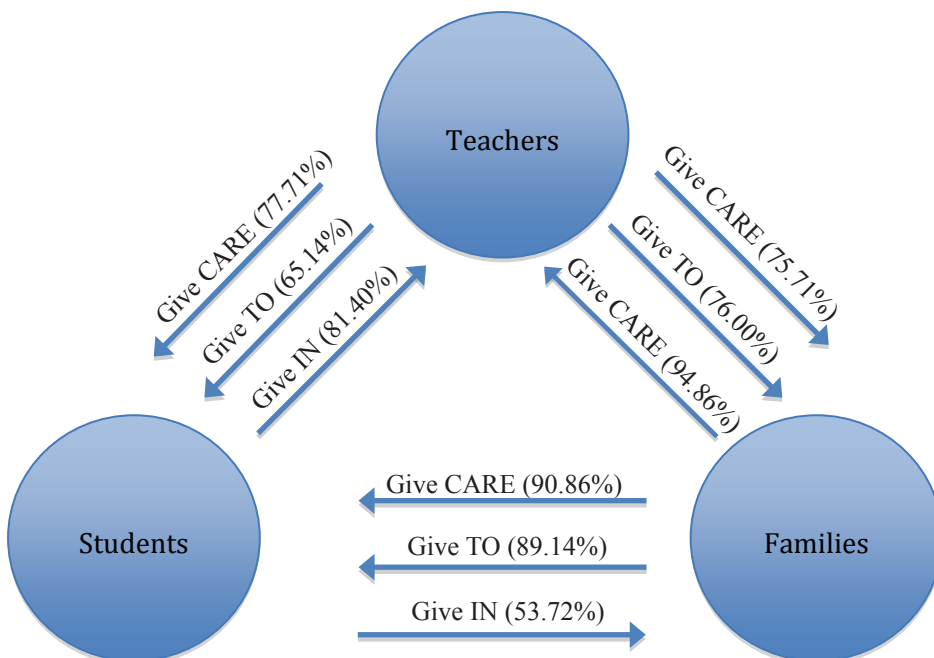


Figure 1. Critical Discourse Model of Title I School-Family Compacts

Parents were most often cast in a supporting role to teachers. There was some variation of parents providing support to teachers in 95% of the compacts, making it the most commonly applied code in the study. There was a particular emphasis on families helping teachers achieve behavioral goals. A typical excerpt would state, “I will support the schoolwide discipline plan. I will encourage my child to follow school and classroom rules.” With schools focused on academic achievement, family contributions were generally focused on monitoring the behavior of their children (occurring in 86% of the compacts). School attendance (79.5%), homework (57.2%), and television viewing (42.8%) were the most frequently occurring areas of concern.

The language and phrasing that was used in many compacts left little doubt with regard to the balance of power in family-school relationships. For example, one compact asked parents to “Supervise the completion of my child’s homework according to the teacher’s guidelines.” The paternalistic tone encountered in many compacts raises questions as to the extent that families were included in the development of the documents at all. Less than 2% of the compacts used language where parents were asked to provide knowledge to educators (Appendix B). When the family was called upon to provide information, it was generally limited to ensuring that contact information was kept up to date. More common were efforts to maintain schoolcentric family-school dynamics with excerpts like, “Model respect by going to the teacher first about

any concerns, trying to keep the lines of communication open, and understanding that there are two sides to every issue.”

There were similar power dynamics at play in relationships between teachers and students. Most notable is the type of instruction described in the compacts. Of the 204 excerpts that addressed instruction, we found 66% of the examples involved statements that promoted “banking style” approaches to teaching with the teacher playing the role of the expert. Only 33% of the excerpts described instruction that was “differentiated,” “motivating and interesting,” or “tailored to meet the needs of individual students.” Students had very little agency in this model, a finding that will be discussed in greater detail later in this article.

The Absence of Partnership Discourse in School–Family Compacts

The second finding relates to the lack of partnership activity described in the compacts. This finding was surprising considering that Title I legislation explicitly states that “the school–parent compact outlines the activities that the parents, school staff, and students will undertake to build and develop a partnership to help the children achieve to the State’s high academic standards” (Improving America’s Schools Act, 1994, sec. 1118). Descriptions of partnership or collaborative activities were almost nonexistent in the sample. Only 4.7% of the compacts addressed partnership activity with the majority of these codes being attributed to the stock line, “Parents will participate, as appropriate, in decisions relating to our children’s education.” The qualifier “as appropriate” suggests that the school already knows what type of participation is deemed acceptable and hints at a mistrust of parents before a relationship is ever formed. When these stock excerpts are excluded, the total percentage of partnership examples drops to 2.7%.

Some compacts did include aspirational partnership language such as, “Parents and staff are an unbeatable team!” or “Hand in hand we will work together to build a better world.” But these examples failed to offer any concrete suggestions for how families and schools could work together. Notable exceptions in the data included commitments to “Involve parents in the joint development of any schoolwide program plan, in an organized, ongoing, and timely way” and “The school will reach out to identify and draw in local community resources that can assist staff and families.” However, these types of specific, actionable commitments were extremely rare (less than 1%). It is possible that schools may believe that basic transactional activities like keeping families informed about school activities are examples of partnership work, so perhaps part of the challenge is that the concept of authentic family and community partnership is foreign to educators and concrete examples are rare (Evans, 2013).

The Objectification of Students in School–Family Compacts

Finally, the study found students had very little agency in school–family compacts. They were primarily asked to obey rules relating to homework completion, behavior, and attendance. A typical example from the elementary level reads, “I will not bring gum, candy, toys, or electronic devices to school.” Older students were similarly told to adhere to school and family rules. The language of the compacts is consistent with the broader social phenomena of youth being framed as problems, a perception that is increasingly common in relation to minority and low-income students (Giroux, 2012).

In addition to submitting to school and familial rules, students are also expected to maintain a “positive disposition” at school (55% of compacts), performing a school-based version of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). Students are called upon to “take pride in their school” and “promote a positive attitude toward school and community.” Students are told how they should feel about the schools they attend despite a complete lack of agency and the reality that conditions in many Title I schools are far from equitable (Kozol, 1991). Indeed, the sole student responsibility relating to family and school relationships was the facilitation of communication, which was basically delivering correspondence from teachers (occurring in 62% of compacts). There was not a single example in any of the compacts of students being asked to contribute to their own education in a meaningful way. The absence of students in family, school, and community relationships is a topic that requires further investigation, especially in light of the emerging body of research indicating the value of student voice related to school improvement initiatives (Hands, 2014; Mitra, 2007).

Discussion and Implications

Our analysis of school–family compacts indicates that frameworks for engagement in Title I schools reinforce schoolcentric models of involvement and may serve to even further alienate low-income families (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Olivos, 2007). Teachers helping families understand academic standards, attendance at parent–teacher conferences, helping with homework, and volunteering at school activities are basic commitments that should be embraced by stakeholders seeking to improve low-income schools. However, these transactional interactions become problematic when they encapsulate the entirety of family involvement opportunities. The problem is that these models are conceptually limited and ignore the sociopolitical contexts that influence public education in low-income communities. How can issues like student achievement be addressed without a consideration of broader social issues?

Critics may argue that a perceived absence of family involvement forces schools to offer only limited and direct opportunities, but perhaps it is the very nature of these simplistic involvement rituals that contribute to the marginalization of low-income families. Research suggests that more meaningful and authentic forms of engagement have the potential to not only transform schools, but also the communities that they serve (Schutz, 2006). Anderson (1998) offers a conceptual framework of “authentic” participation that includes the following criteria: “broad inclusion,” “relevant participation,” “authentic local conditions and processes,” “coherence between means and ends of participation,” and “focus on broader structural inequities” (p. 587). These are among the characteristics that have been cited in successful community-based approaches to school reform that have resulted in a broad array of positive outcomes for both students and communities (Hong, 2011; Mediratta et al., 2009). This is a framework that stands in stark contrast to current models of participation that conceive of families as consumers and involvement practices as a form of public relations (Knight-Abowitz, 2011).

The inherent funds of knowledge (accumulated social capital and skills used to navigate everyday life) that each family can offer are of the utmost importance to creating authentic partnerships, but—as this study indicates—they remain untapped resources in most schools (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Instead, the focus remains on what families are not contributing based on schoolcentric models of involvement. This deficit model approach further marginalizes parents and can result in mutual distrust between home and school (Jeynes, 2012). Families grow increasingly frustrated with narrow education reforms that seem to miss the big picture, while simultaneously feeling inadequate about their own abilities to support their children. Meanwhile, teachers come to see families as obstacles that must be overcome instead of partners with the capacity to help improve the quality of education for all students in a school (Evans, 2014).

Are the school–family compacts worth the trouble? Are genuine conversations taking place involving a diverse representation of stakeholders, or are these documents perceived as another piece of paperwork in an ocean of bureaucratic responsibilities? What are the limits of mandated measures for family engagement, and how might the requirement of such metrics potentially corrupt the social process they are intended to enhance (Campbell, 1976)? We argue that despite the current state of Title I compacts, they do possess transformative potential as a starting point for more meaningful and authentic educational policy dialogues (Winton & Evans, 2014). To achieve this goal, stakeholders must first consider how compacts are created at the school level. Limited research suggests that current compacts are primarily the products of school

leaders (Stevenson & Laster, 2008), so changing the discourse of these documents will require increased relational work with families and communities.

The leadership role of building administrators is important, as are the contributions of teachers and other staff members, but not to the exclusion of families and communities (Gordon & Louis, 2009; Rapp & Duncan, 2011). Part of the challenge is the lack of educator preparation related to family engagement on how to create meaningful relationships with families (Ferrara, 2009). It is a challenge that is further compounded by the immense pressures that are placed on school leaders to meet state and national standards (Shirley & Evans, 2007). Yet, new models of leadership are emerging that encourage more democratic decision-making by extending participation beyond school professionals (Anderson, 2009; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). These models share an appreciation for the competing demands that are placed on both schools and communities by emphasizing multilevel approaches that simultaneously address short-term and long-term goals in combination with an awareness of broader social issues. Community-based organizations can play an integral role in supporting these models by serving as intermediary organizations that can help facilitate communication between schools and communities (Lopez, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005). By engaging in authentic dialogue centered around the development of school–family compacts, educators and families can begin a process that both improves schools and the communities that they serve.

Conclusion

Schools and districts have struggled to meet the parental involvement requirements of Title I (Stevenson & Laster, 2008). This study provides insights regarding the potential impact of this failure on family, school, and community partnerships. Our research revealed a hegemonic discourse that dominates school–family compacts threatening to further marginalize low-income and minority families by undermining self-efficacy and authentic engagement opportunities (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). However, the outliers in this study, the few compacts that did call for equitable participation and collaboration, speak to the potential of this legislation and suggest that additional implementation support could be a worthy investment. Resources to improve the creation and use of the compacts are starting to emerge. For example, Connecticut's Department of Education recently hired experts in family–school relations to act as consultants and design a new training curriculum entitled, "A New Vision of Title I School–Parent Compacts." The curriculum was implemented in five urban districts, with preliminary research from three participating schools suggesting that revised compacts can help increase both parent engagement

and student achievement (Henderson et al., 2011; see also <http://ctschoo-parentcompact.org/>). Of course, we must also remember that compacts are only one piece of the family engagement puzzle. Experts are increasingly advocating for comprehensive family engagement plans in lieu of “random acts of family involvement” (Weiss et al., 2010, p. 1). In one study focused on the implementation of a comprehensive set of parent engagement strategies (Solid Foundation®) in 129 high poverty schools, student achievement scores in participating schools improved on state standardized tests. The improvement was statistically significant, and students enrolled in the project schools demonstrated more growth than their peers from matched schools across the state. Included among the parent engagement strategies employed by participating schools was a focus on having explicit discussions about the roles of parents, teachers, and students that were centered on the compacts (Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004). Trust and mutual respect were developed in these schools through efforts to have direct communication with all parents and families. The key is to use the compact as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue targeted at enhancing the education of all students. While these limited examples are promising, it is clear that more research is necessary before compacts will be able to live up to their transformative potential.

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TITLE I SCHOOL–FAMILY COMPACTS

Appendix A. Percentage of Compacts Including the Codes “Give Care” (to help, support, or assist)

Code	Total % of Compacts <i>N</i> = 175	Elementary School <i>N</i> = 120	Middle School <i>N</i> = 18	High School <i>N</i> = 37	Caucasian <i>N</i> = 134	Black <i>N</i> = 25	Hispanic <i>N</i> = 11
Parents to Teachers	94.86%	94.17%	100.00%	94.59%	94.78%	96%	90.91%
Parents to Students	90.86%	90.83%	94.44%	89.19%	90.30%	96%	81.82%
Students to Parents	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Students to Teachers	21.14%	19.17%	22.22%	27.03%	23.88%	12%	18.80%
Teachers to Parents	65.71%	63.33%	61.11%	75.68%	65.67%	56%	90.91%
Teachers to Students	77.71%	79.17%	88.89%	67.57%	76.87%	72%	90.91%

Appendix B. Percentage of Compacts Including the Codes “Give To” (to impart, inform, bestow, or allow)

Code	Total % of Compacts containing codes	Elementary School <i>N</i> = 120	Middle School <i>N</i> = 18	High School <i>N</i> = 37	Caucasian <i>N</i> = 134	Black <i>N</i> = 25	Hispanic <i>N</i> = 11
Parents to Teachers	5.71%	1.60%	11.11%	16.22%	5.22%	8%	9.09%
Parents to Students	89.14%	89.17%	94.44%	86.49%	88.81%	96%	72.73%
Students to Teachers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Students to Parents	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Teachers to Parents	76.00%	74.17%	77.78%	81.08%	75.37%	80%	72.73%
Teachers to Students	65.14%	61.67%	77.78%	70.27%	64.18%	68%	72.73%

Appendix C. Percentage of Compacts Including the Codes “Give In” (to obey, defer, or submit)

Code	Total % of Compacts <i>N</i> = 175	Elementary School <i>N</i> = 120	Middle School <i>N</i> = 18	High School <i>N</i> = 37	Caucasian <i>N</i> = 134	Black <i>N</i> = 25	Hispanic <i>N</i> = 11
Students to Teachers	81.14%	80.00%	100.00%	75.68%	80.60%	76%	90.91%
Students to Parents	53.72%	52.50%	61.11%	54.04%	50.75%	68%	54.55%